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A Child of the Time

I have never in my life 'loved' any people or collective – neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love 'only' my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons.

JW, 466–7

Between the wars

It was the period following the 'Great War'. Ireland had, in the words of its then foremost poet, seen the birth of 'a terrible beauty' in the Easter Rising of 1916; the people of Russia had witnessed the revolutions of 1917, the ensuing civil war, the death of the imperial Romanov family and the victory of the Red Army; and the geopolitical and economic map of Europe had been redrawn as a result of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and the ensuing Treaty of Versailles. John Maynard Keynes, the foremost economist of his generation, had pronounced his verdict on what he saw as the dire consequences of 'the peace'. 'The policy of reducing Germany to servitude for a generation, of degrading the lives of millions of human beings, and of depriving a whole nation of happiness should,' he wrote, 'be abhorrent and detestable – abhorrent and detestable – even if it were possible, even if it enriched ourselves, even if it did not sow the decay of the whole civilized life of Europe' (Keynes, 2007, 127).

One way of thinking about the implications of all this is, as Tony Judt put it, that

it took until the mid-1970s for even the core economies of prosperous Western Europe to get back to where they had been in 1914, after many decades of contraction and protection. In short, the industrial economies of the West

(with the exception of the United States) experienced a sixty-year decline, marked by two world wars and an unprecedented economic depression.

Judt with Snyder, 2012, 26–7

That, for Judt, constituted the background and context for the history of the last century. Europe had embarked upon what in retrospect can be seen as the years that led inexorably to World War II and to an economic decline that persisted well into the period of post-war reconstruction.

But at the time of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference no one in Europe could have known that they were living in the parenthesis between two ‘wars to end all wars’ – the years of *l’entre de guerres*. Nevertheless, some had strong intimations to that effect and the prevailing mood was far from cheerful. Three of the now classic texts of literary modernity were published in 1922: T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room*. These works marked the emergence of a new sensibility: elegiac in its evocation of the pre-World War I past, anxious regarding the economic, social and political uncertainties of the present, and apprehensive in its presentiment of fear and violence lurking in the future. That presentiment found expression in W. B. Yeats’ chilling image of ‘the second coming’: the ‘rough beast’ of the anti-Christ ‘slouch(ing) towards Bethlehem to be born’ (Yeats, 1967, 211).

In Germany – which is where our story starts – reality was already aligning itself with Keynes’ prophetic analysis. The Spartacus Group, formed as a radical leftist opposition to World War I, had been quashed. Rosa Luxemburg, who had opposed Germany’s involvement in the war and was a leading figure in radical socialist democratic circles, had been brutally murdered in 1919 by members of the Freikorps – forerunners of the Nazis – and her body flung into Berlin’s Landwehr Canal. She had, as it was later revealed, been knocked down with a rifle butt by Otto Runge and then shot in the head by Hermann Souchon. She was forty-seven years of age at the time. Her murder – and that of many of her comrades – ended all hope of a social democratic politics in and for Germany and ushered in the ‘rough beast’ of fascism (Hudis, 2011; Hudis and Anderson, 2004).

In Königsberg, then the regional capital of the German province of East Prussia, a widowed mother and an ardent admirer of Rosa Luxemburg took her young teenage daughter onto the streets in support of the general strike that erupted in the first week of 1919. She shouted to her daughter: ‘You must

pay attention, this is a historical moment!’ The daughter would go on to write a serious appraisal of Luxemburg’s life and work and to locate her as a crucial figure in the creation of what she termed ‘spaces of freedom’ (OR, 256). However, at the time this headstrong, intelligent and independent daughter – all of fourteen years of age – was about to define for herself her own ‘historical moment’. She was about to *act* – to exercise her agency – and to do so in a way that was characteristically spontaneous, impetuous, risk-taking, infuriating and unconditionally generous. She was about to lay claim to friendship.

At the time she was living with her recently remarried mother in the house of her newly acquired stepfather and his two older daughters by a previous marriage. The remarriage offered some measure of financial and emotional stability, but assigned the young Hannah Arendt to a household that was conservative in its domestic routines and conformist in its social expectations. Its taken-for-granted homeliness no doubt intensified her feelings of estrangement and difference. A young Königsberger called Ernst Grumach, who was five years older than her, told her about his girlfriend Anne Mendelssohn who lived in a town to the west of Königsberg called Stolp. The young Arendt was forbidden to visit Anne because her father, who was a doctor, had been accused by one of his patients of improper behaviour – a charge which the doctor denied and attributed to the anti-Semitism of the accuser. Arendt, however, was not to be thwarted.

She left her house by her bedroom window at night and made her way to Stolp in time to awaken Anne by throwing a pebble against her window. We know nothing of the ensuing conversation, but the immediate effect on Arendt’s family was predictably unsettling not least because it seemed to follow a pattern – Arendt was deemed to be headstrong, independent and sometimes highly temperamental. The long-term effect of Arendt’s determination to act upon her impulse was, however, deeply settling – the friendship with Anne Mendelssohn was close and enduring, lasting until Arendt’s death fifty-five years later. Moreover, the pattern of Arendt’s adolescent behaviour never seriously breached her mother’s intuitive and sympathetic understanding of her daughter’s complex personality. Her mother was instinctively – but not uncritically – on her side.

This episode is in many ways emblematic of Arendt’s life and thought: impulsive and quixotic, serious and single-minded, confrontational and uncompromising, generous and magnanimous. Always, she impelled herself

into situations in such a way that the impulsion allowed no get-out: the consequences were irreversible. In spite of, or because of, being expelled from school at the age of fifteen – for leading a boycott of lessons taught by a teacher who had offended her – Arendt was fearsomely well read and capable from an early age of prolonged isolated study. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl (1982, 32) quotes Anne Mendelssohn as saying that the young Arendt had ‘read everything’ and comments that ‘this “everything” covered philosophy, poetry, particularly Goethe, many, many romantic novels, German and French, and the modern novels considered inappropriate for the young by school authorities, including Thomas Mann’s.’

We may not know what Arendt and Mendelssohn talked about, but we can be fairly sure that it was the urgent need for a particular kind of talk that prompted the young Arendt to transgress the cultural, familial and social mores of her tribe. It is difficult *not* to read back from the later essay she wrote on Socrates insights into what the meeting with Mendelssohn meant for Arendt: ‘To have talked something through, to have talked about something, some citizen’s *doxa*, seemed result enough. It is obvious that this kind of dialogue, which doesn’t need a conclusion in order to be meaningful, is most appropriate for and most frequently shared by friends’ (PP, 15–16).

‘Goodbye to philosophy’

For Arendt, friendship had its origins in the need she felt for a particular kind of dialogue. Among the papers and lectures she was working on during the 1950s is an essay on Socrates in which she writes that this kind of dialogue ‘doesn’t need a conclusion to be meaningful’. It focuses on ‘something the friends have in common’ and in so doing constitutes ‘a little world of its own which is shared in friendship’. Friends ‘become equal partners in a common world’. This does not mean that they become the same or equal to each other, but ‘that they together constitute a community’. In what she calls the ‘truthful dialogue’ that constitutes friendship, ‘the friends can understand the truth inherent in the other’s opinion’. They can understand the world from the other person’s point of view. Moreover, she insists, it is this kind of understanding that yields ‘the political kind of insight par excellence’ (PP, 16–18).

From an early age Arendt sought this kind of understanding in and through philosophy. In 1964, shortly after her fifty-eighth birthday, she told the journalist Günter Gaus during a televised interview: 'I always knew I would study philosophy. Ever since I was fourteen years old . . . I read Kant . . . Jaspers' *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* [*Psychology of World Views*] . . . I was fourteen. Then I read Kierkegaard, and that fit together' (EU, 8–9). Arendt does not say that she always knew she would *be* a philosopher, but that she always knew she would *study* philosophy. The distinction is important since at the very beginning of the interview she emphatically rejects Gaus' introductory remarks regarding 'her role in the inner circle of philosophers': 'I neither feel like a philosopher, nor do I believe that I have been accepted in the circle of philosophers, as you so kindly suppose. In my opinion I have said goodbye to philosophy once and for all. As you know, I studied philosophy, but that does not mean that I stayed with it' (EU, 1–2).

That is a very emphatic 'goodbye.' Yet, Arendt had studied philosophy, had, as we have seen, known from the age of fourteen that she would study philosophy, and, when she died eleven years after that interview took place, left behind an unfinished manuscript that was deeply philosophical in its content and its intellectual aspirations. So, one is left wondering why, given that she continued to engage with and draw inspiration from philosophy, she felt it necessary to bid such an emphatic farewell to it. It is highly unlikely that she was displaying false modesty – hardly her style – and, although her rejoinder is characteristically combative, she was too serious a thinker to be combative for the sake of it. To what, then, was she saying goodbye? And what did she think she was taking forward through her thought and writing, if not a living tradition of philosophical thought?

By 1964, when the interview was conducted, Arendt knew what she had left behind and why she had left it. In 1920, when on 14 October she had her fourteenth birthday, she could have had no such foreknowledge. But she did know what she wanted to carry forward: the kind of dialogue in which each can understand the inherent truth in the other's opinion. It was a kind of dialogue that she could have with herself, as if 'herself' were another. Indeed, only insofar as she was willing to have that inner dialogue could she be part of the world that was constantly speaking back to itself. 'I have to put up with myself', she wrote in that earlier essay, 'and nowhere does this I-with-myself

show more clearly than in pure thought, which is always a dialogue between the two-in-one' (PP, 20). That was why she was reading, at the age of fourteen, Kant, Jaspers and Kierkegaard: not, as it turned out, in the hope of taking a role within 'the inner circle of philosophers', but with a view to joining an ongoing conversation about 'the truth inherent in the other's opinion'. It was truth as dialogue that she desired.

As we shall see, the *philosophical* turning point of Arendt's intellectual trajectory is its turn away from 'the inner circle of philosophers'. That turning away was partly a matter of circumstance, in that as a Jewish exile she necessarily crossed and re-crossed national, professional and academic boundaries. But it was also a matter of choice. Faced with what she saw as the necessary contingency of human life, do we turn inward to the world of self or outward to the world of others? Arendt was resolute in rejecting what she saw as the inward turn implicit in Heidegger's and Kierkegaard's reworking of the philosophical tradition and equally resolute in embracing a world of relationality, mutuality and reciprocity; a world characterised, that is, by forms of human interchange organised around values such as cooperation and conditional altruism. She saw the inward turn – associated in her mind with the work of Heidegger and Kierkegaard – as a manifestation of 'the withering away of everything *between us*'. It was a denial of the human world: 'the spread of the desert' as she called it (PP, 201). While the philosophers had recognised that we live and move in a desert world, they had assumed that the desert is in our selves. They had internalised it. In so doing they had in her view reduced philosophy to a kind of consolatory escapism.

Arendt was convinced that 'the withering away' must be confronted and resisted. The renewal of 'everything *between us*' – the flourishing of relationality, mutuality and reciprocity – was, for her, the prime end and purpose of politics. However, because we live in 'desert' conditions, we need what she called 'oases' within which to regroup and sustain ourselves. These oases are under constant threat from, for example, the all-engulfing 'sandstorms' of totalitarianism and the ceaseless drift of the desert into our private lives and public spaces. Both collectivism and isolationism encroach upon and erode the political grounds of our being: namely, 'everything *between us*'. '[I]t sometimes seems', as she put it, 'as though everything conspires mutually to generalize the conditions of the desert' (PP, 203). However, the oases can also be life-giving. 'Without the

intactness of these oases', claims Arendt, 'we would not know how to breathe'. It is these oases that 'let us live in the desert without becoming reconciled to it' (PP, 202–3).

The life-giving oases include art, love and philosophy, but when and only when these are outward looking and magnanimous in their reaching out to the world: a world that, as Arendt conceived it, is neither a natural product nor the creation of God or of gods. Art, love and philosophy can, as Arendt knew, all too easily turn inward and become self-consuming. Friendship, for Arendt, was the most enduring and sustaining of the oases, with the resources necessary to withstand the deeply anti-political impulses that inform modernity: the despair of isolation and the anonymity of collectivism. Fragile and vulnerable, friendship is nevertheless an expression of the betwixt and between of the human world. As such it is emblematic of what Arendt understood by politics.

Politics, for Arendt, is concerned with the kinds of problems that will never have perfect solutions and that require people to think on their feet, to argue beyond the seeming end-point of disagreement, and to engage in critical discussion about the world as they see it and as they would like it to be. Politics so conceived requires us to converse freely and respectfully with each other as responsive citizens willing to negotiate all differences on the basis of complete equality. It depends on an open-hearted care for people not in the mass or in the abstract, but in the idiosyncrasy of their lives and the distinctiveness of their perceptions. That is why Arendt sees friendship as allied to politics: not as a substitute for politics, nor as a way of doing politics, but as a condition necessary for the survival of politics as she understood it. Friendship is what lies between the private world of familial, tribal and religious affiliation, and the political world of institutional and associative affiliation based not on family, tribe or religion but on equality.

Continuities across boundaries

In an address she gave on accepting the Lessing Prize of the Free City of Hamburg in 1959, Arendt spoke of Lessing's capacity for friendship not 'as a phenomenon of intimacy, in which the friends open their hearts to each other unmolested by the world and its demands', but as a relationship that 'makes

political demands and preserves reference to the world' (MDT, 24–5). This idea of 'the political relevance of friendship' was, for her, part of what the modern world owes to the ancient Greeks: 'They held that only the constant interchange of talk united citizens in a *polis*. In discourse the political importance of friendship, and the humanness peculiar to it, were made manifest' (MDT, 24). She distinguishes friendship both from the 'intimately personal' and from the familial (what she termed 'fraternity'). Lessing, in her view, was exemplary in the practice of friendship because he 'wanted to be the friend of many men, but no man's brother' (MDT, 30). Friendship, for Arendt, was a distinct category that could not and should not be confused with the intimacy of erotic love or the bonds of kinship.

Arendt's own bonds of kinship were far from straightforward. She had neither brothers nor sisters, and, in October 1913, when she was only seven years old, her father died after having been admitted to Königsberg psychiatric hospital over two years earlier. A few months prior to that, her much loved grandfather, with whom she had enjoyed a Sunday morning ritual of storytelling walks in the park near his home, had also died. As an only child of a single parent she had an exceptionally strong relationship with her mother. When Arendt was thirteen, her mother married a local businessman and widower, Martin Beerwald, who had two teenage daughters, Clara and Eva, both of whom were older than Hannah. Arendt seems not to have established a close relationship with either her stepfather or her stepsisters, although during her university days she became closer to Clara who had severe mental health problems and finally committed suicide in April 1932.

Given the comparative paucity of 'given' relationships in her early life, it is hardly surprising that Arendt relied heavily on 'chosen' relationships. Of course, not all such relationships ripen into friendship. If Arendt was clear regarding the distinction between 'friendship', 'intimacy' and 'kinship', she was equally clear in distinguishing 'friendship' from relationships that were based solely on utility or pleasure. Friends could be and often were useful to one another and invariably found pleasure in one another's company, but neither utility nor pleasure constituted what Arendt saw as the *raison d'être* of friendship. Friendship was based on mutuality of respect and therefore on equality. People are unequal in countless ways, but within the context of their friendships they attain equality. In wanting the best for one another and wanting each

to live up to the best in her or himself, friends ensure their mutual growth and flourishing. In that sense – the sense invariably employed by Arendt – friendship is virtuous.

That explains in part why, for Arendt, friendship involved lifelong commitment. If we respect what is good in the other and they respect what is good in us, and each wants that goodness in the other to grow and flourish, then there can be no equivalent in friendship to the ‘one night stand’ or ‘the brief fling’. It was extremely difficult to be accepted into Arendt’s circle of friends, but having been accepted it was virtually impossible to exit except by one’s own determined volition. There are well-documented instances of Arendt’s friends breaking off their friendship with her, sometimes quite publicly, but none of her initiating a break-up. Continuity was supremely important, even in the face of betrayal or behaviour that she found morally reprehensible; which is why, as we shall see, ‘promise’ and ‘forgiveness’ are ideas that she seeks to reclaim and, through that process of reclamation, locate at the centre of her understanding of ‘the human condition’.

However, the longevity and variety of her friendships can also be explained by the precarious instability of her life. Prior to 1951, when she gained US citizenship, she had spent much of her adult life as a stateless person, initially in France (to which she migrated via Prague and Geneva in 1933) and then in the United States (to which she migrated in 1941). Her friendships tended to be formed within the artistic and intellectual cadre of the migrant communities within these localities. Given the importance Arendt placed on talk as a constitutive element of friendship, her widening circles of friendship necessarily required an expansion of her linguistic and cultural repertoire: from German (her mother tongue), to French (her language of first exile), to American English (her language of second exile). Because her friends were in the main located in minority and migrant groups within their adopted countries, she and they were often operating across these complex linguistic divides.

After having been arrested and interviewed by the Gestapo, Arendt fled Germany and settled in Paris with her first husband, Günther Stern, who had fled several months before. While in France she worked for organisations that helped Jewish refugees emigrate to Palestine and supplied legal aid to anti-fascists. She was part of a peer group that was largely German speaking, but cosmopolitan in outlook. Its members were acutely aware of the threat

of fascism and its increasingly overt use of anti-Semitic propaganda and of violence directed towards Jews. The group – one of whose members, Heinrich Blücher, was to become Arendt's second husband – dispersed at the outbreak of World War II: some, like Arendt herself, were interned briefly in French camps; some fled to unoccupied territory; all began an urgent search for visas and exit routes; some never made it. The group was never re-formed in its entirety, but the bonds of friendship and loyalty that had been established were to have a lasting influence. For Arendt – and Heinrich Blücher – this group, together with earlier friendships formed in Germany, were to form the basis of the inner circle of friends that they would later refer to as their 'tribe'.

One member of the group who never made it out of France was Walter Benjamin, who committed suicide on 26 September 1940, at the Franco-Spanish border, at the age of forty-eight. He was attempting to emigrate to the United States via Spain. He had secured an emergency USA visa in Marseilles and obtained a Spanish transit visa. These would have allowed him to travel to Lisbon in Portugal and board a ship there for the United States. However, he also required a French exit visa. Travelling by foot over the mountains to a point on the border that was not usually guarded by French border police, he and the small group of refugees with whom he was travelling learnt that Spain had closed the border that same day and that the border officials did not honour visas issued in Marseilles. During the night Benjamin – no doubt suffering from physical exhaustion as a result of a serious cardiac condition – took his own life. The following day the border officials re-opened the border crossing thereby allowing his fellow refugees to proceed to Portugal. A few weeks later the embargo on visas was again lifted.

The significance of Benjamin's death for those who knew him is captured in Elaine Feinstein's (1984) fictionalised account of events following Benjamin's reported death on the Franco-Spanish border. In Feinstein's novel a young Jewish couple – Inge and Hans Wendler – escape from Vienna to Paris following the *Anschluss*. They are subsequently forced to flee Paris, and – with a small group that includes Hans' friend, Walter Benjamin – make their way to the Spanish border. It is not until the morning after Benjamin's suicide that news reaches his travelling companions that Benjamin has died under suspicious but as yet unexplained circumstances. In the novel Inge recalls over

forty years later the impact of this news: 'Hans and I knew at once he had *chosen* to die . . . It spelled out the bleakness of our own chances. The Europe to which we might be forcibly returned rang with the cries of the damned' (95–6). The novel records the terrible strains and tensions of being refugees in hostile France – and the desperate choices facing those who grasped the enormity of the Nazi threat and the irresistible logic of the Third Reich's programme of terror.

On the last occasion when Arendt had seen Benjamin he had entrusted to her and Blücher's care a collection of manuscripts to be delivered to the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, which in 1935 had relocated to New York. On arrival in New York Arendt delivered the manuscript in person. However, it was not until 1945 that any of Benjamin's articles appeared in print in the Institute's journal, by which time Arendt had – along with Gershom Scholem, the German-born Israeli Jewish philosopher and historian and a friend of both Arendt and Benjamin – spent four years lobbying strenuously for their publication. In 1968 she edited an English volume of Benjamin's writings, *Illuminations*, and at the time of her death, in 1975, was still seeking to secure Benjamin's reputation. In the introduction she wrote for *Illuminations*, she likened Benjamin to a 'pearl diver' delving into the past to resurface with entirely new and original insights and saw the circumstances of his death as signifying the contingency of the human condition: 'One day earlier Benjamin would have got through without any trouble, one day later the people in Marseilles would have known that for the time being it was impossible to pass through Spain. Only on that particular day was the catastrophe possible' (MDT, 171).

Arendt and Blücher escaped France via Marseilles and Lisbon – thanks in part to Varian Fry, Albert O. Hirschman and others who, through the Emergency Rescue Committee, maintained an escape route through Marseilles as the Nazis swept across Europe (Adelman, 2013). They arrived in New York in May 1941. Arendt's mother followed in June. The situation in France had become increasingly dangerous and was becoming more so day by day. Earlier that year the Front National of the Resistance had been set up and had established a military wing with the express aim of hitting railway lines carrying men and material to the eastern front, punishing traitors and collaborators, sabotaging factories working for the Germans and executing

soldiers of the occupying forces. A series of coordinated attacks by the Front National – in Rouen on 19 October, Nantes on 20 October and Bordeaux on 21 October – met with extreme and disproportionate retaliation by the Germans. The most notable of the mass reprisals took place in Chateaubriand where on 22 October twenty-seven ‘hostages’ were taken to a nearby quarry and ‘executed’ by firing squad. The youngest of the victims was still a schoolboy. On their way to the quarry and knowing their certain fate, the men sang the Marseillaise and kept singing as they were led before the firing squad in three separate batches. As Caroline Moorehead (2012) notes in her ‘story of resistance, friendship, and survival’: ‘not one accepted a blindfold’ (69). Arendt, Blücher and Arendt’s mother were extremely fortunate to escape before the worst horrors of the occupation descended upon the French people.

In New York, Arendt became active in the German-Jewish community, writing a column for the German language Jewish newspaper *Aufbau* (1941–1945), working for the Commission for European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (1944–1946) and visiting Europe on behalf of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (1949–1950). She also accepted the senior editorial post at the New York headquarters of Schocken Books, an appointment which together with her freelance writing brought her into contact with an ever widening and increasingly cosmopolitan circle of academics, artists and intellectuals. Far from being sidelined by or excluded from this widening network, Arendt’s former friends gained pre-eminence within it. Anne Mendelssohn, who took French citizenship and settled in France with her husband, remained one of Arendt’s oldest and closest friends. It was to her friend from Königsberg that Arendt dedicated her first book, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, with the inscription ‘To Anne, since 1921’ (RV).

In her frequent visits back to Europe, Arendt was punctilious in maintaining earlier relationships – such as those with Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers – and ensuring that their potential for friendship was sustained and as far as possible realised. That was far from easy given the deep mistrust that had been generated throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. She believed that the human world, unlike the world of inanimate objects, does not decay with time but gains in significance and vitality through time. New friendships and loyalties are enriching but can never supersede old friendships and loyalties; on the contrary, for Arendt, continuity increases the value of friendship and its

potential for constant renewal. Time crystallises and distils. Many of the new relationships formed in New York developed into enduring friendships and had a significant influence on Arendt's life and thought. In time they, too, crystallised and distilled. Mary McCarthy was one such friend, but the New York circle also included, among many others, Waldemar Gurian and Randall Jarrell. These two friendships deepened Arendt's understanding of what it means to be a friend.

Gurian was, as Arendt wrote after his death in 1954, 'a man of many friends and a friend to all of them, men and women, priests and laymen, people in many countries and practically all walks of life. Friendship was what made him at home in this world and he felt at home wherever his friends were, regardless of country, language, or social background' (MDT, 251). He was a Russian Jew who had converted to Catholicism and had studied jurisprudence under Carl Schmidt, who later became a Nazi. Gurian's 'Jewishness' and his 'Russianness' were, for Arendt, defining features of his authority as an intellectual and his authenticity as a human being. The former committed him to becoming a historian of German anti-Semitism; the latter to becoming 'an outstanding expert in Bolshevism because nothing attracted him more deeply than the Russian spirit in all its ramifications' (MDT, 253). What she termed 'the crime of oblivion' was completely alien to him; 'faithfulness to his friends' was the dominant note to which his life was tuned (MDT, 254)

Jarrell, whom she met through her work at Schocken Books, was a poet and literary critic (see Burt, 2002). He met the world 'head-on', as she put it, through his 'marvellous wit' and 'the precision of his laughter'. She found his laughter 'so exactly right'. Although different in temperament and background, Gurian and Jarrell had both preserved what Arendt saw as a kind of innocence. She viewed that preservation of innocence as an exercise in moral courage. Jarrell, as she put it, 'had nothing to protect him against the world but his splendid laughter, and the immense naked courage behind it' (MDT, 266–7), while Gurian 'needed all the courage he could muster to keep his original innocence alive and intact. He was a very courageous man' (MDT, 259). To keep faith with one's origins, while acknowledging the need for new beginnings, requires both innocence and courage: the courage to gather the past into the future. Friendship, for Arendt, is one of the spaces within which that gathering can be enacted and constantly renewed.

Eichmann and evil

If Arendt had a genius for gaining friends, she also had a talent for winning enemies. Nowhere was that talent on better display than in her coverage of the trial of the former Gestapo officer Adolf Eichmann. On 9 April 1961 Arendt checked into the Hotel Maria on King George V Street in West Jerusalem to cover the trial for *The New Yorker*. The trial was a highly significant supplement to the Nuremberg War Tribunal of 1945, since it brought to justice a man alleged to have organised the murder of 6 million Jews. In so doing, it also established the enormity of the Holocaust and the immense scale of the Nazi regime's project of anti-Semitic genocide. Arendt – a Jewish public intellectual and by this time one of the most prominent political thinkers of her time – was, on the face of it, an inspired editorial choice by William Shawn, the then editor of *The New Yorker*. (Margarethe von Trotta's 2013 film *Hannah Arendt* focuses primarily on this period of Arendt's life. See Lilla, 2013.)

In order to grasp the significance of Arendt's appointment to this journalistic assignment, we need to bear in mind the following biographical facts: Arendt fled Germany in 1933 after having been held and questioned by the police; in France, from 1934, she began work with Agriculture et Artisanat, an organisation that helped train young émigrés to Palestine, and later became director of another Jewish organisation, Youth Aliyah, with a similar mission; in 1941 she escaped Vichy France, after being held with her mother as an 'enemy alien' in an internment camp, and arrived in New York; from 1944 she directed research work for the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction and in 1949 became executive director of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction; in 1951 she published *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the tripartite structure of which is informed by an analysis of anti-Semitism as providing the basis of both imperialism and totalitarianism. Although she had become increasingly critical of the Zionist Movement's focus on events in Palestine rather than Europe, her reputation as a leading spokesperson for the Jewish diaspora was by the late 1950s internationally acknowledged.

Arendt's account of the trial was published as a five-part article entitled 'A reporter at large: Eichmann in Jerusalem' in *The New Yorker* during the spring of 1963. (Revised, it was published in book form in the same year as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.) It immediately provoked bitter

controversy among intellectuals in the United States and Europe and among her wide circle of friends. Within the UK, Isaiah Berlin was one of her most influential critics, who used his pre-eminence within the Oxford academic establishment to undermine her reputation and denigrate her work: a use – or abuse – of influence which as Cauter (2013) has shown was not uncharacteristic of this Russian-born icon of liberalism.

Three issues were crucial in the often acrimonious debate that ensued: Arendt's obvious antipathy towards the chief prosecutor, Gideon Hausner, whom she saw as a showman concerned less with establishing the specific case against Eichmann than with documenting every wrong that had been suffered by the Jews; her insistence on the collusion of the Jewish leadership – the Jewish Councils – in the deportation of the Jews to the concentration camps and death camps of Eastern Europe; and her characterisation of 'evil' as 'banal' and of Eichmann as the personification of 'the banality of evil'. These three elements combined to produce an explosive reaction. The community that had contributed so much to Arendt's sense of public identity and moral authority was riven by outrage, incomprehension and disappointment by what it saw as her betrayal.

Four decades and a new millennium later, Seyla Benhabib (2000, 65), a writer sympathetic to Arendt, still found it necessary to point to what she saw as 'an astonishing lack of perspective, balance of judgement, and judicious expression' in Arendt's report on the trial. Arendt's attitude towards Attorney General Hausner was perhaps the least controversial issue, but it was bound to annoy the government of the Israeli state and all its friends. Some also perceived an element of intellectual snobbery in Arendt's attitude. Indeed, Leora Bilsky seems to hint at a kind of inverted anti-Semitism: 'She was a German from a family that was very educated, middle-class, and Hausner represented to her the "Ostjuden" – the Jews from the East – who talked with great pathos and sentimentality ... and she could not stand it; she wanted calmness and objectivity ... It was a personal disliking there' (quoted in Rée, 2003).

This impression of Arendt being, at the very least, 'off-side' was reinforced by her discussion of the second crucial issue in the debate: the role of the Jewish Councils in the deportation of the Jews. Any suggestion that the Jewish leadership had been willing to collaborate with the Nazi authorities was anathema to those who saw the trial as a means of placing on record the

enormity of the crimes perpetrated by the Nazi regime, not only against the Jewish people but against humanity. From this perspective the Jews were unequivocally the representatives of suffering humanity, just as Eichmann was the archetype of undeniable evil. So, when – and here we come to the third crucial issue – Arendt presented that evil as ‘banal’ and characterised Eichmann as the personification of that ‘banality’ she crossed an invisible line that led to what Amos Elon has described as her ‘excommunication’ (EJ, vii–xxiii). ‘It seemed’, comments Benhabib (2000, 68), ‘as if Arendt was accusing her own people and their leaders of being complicitous in the Holocaust while exculpating Eichmann and other Germans through naming their deeds “banal”.’

Susan Neiman (2002, 302), in her powerful study of evil in modern thought, has argued that Arendt’s reference to banality was ironic: ‘[C]alling evil banal is a piece of moral rhetoric, a way of defusing the power that makes forbidden fruit attractive ... The ironic tone she took toward Eichmann was entirely calculated ... To call evil banal is to call it boring. And if it is boring, its appeal will be limited.’ What Arendt was struggling with was not only the sense that Eichmann was ‘normal’ according to his own distorted world view, but that his ‘normality’ carried with it no awareness whatsoever of the criminal – and amoral – nature of his acts. Tony Judt, speaking more recently, argues that ‘[Arendt] gets one thing absolutely right’. In using the phrase ‘the banality of evil’, he argues, ‘Arendt is writing in terms that reflect a Weberian grasp of the modern world: a universe of states governed by administrative bureaucracies themselves subdivided into very small units where decisions and choices are exercised by, so to speak, individual non-initiative’. Inaction thereby becomes action and ‘the absence of active choice substitutes for choice itself’ (Judt with Snyder, 2012, 34).

What nobody could fully acknowledge at the time was that it was the norms by which Eichmann had operated, and which he had so thoroughly and unquestioningly internalised, that were monstrous. Half a dozen psychiatrists had certified him as ‘normal’. Yet, the prosecution preferred to conclude from occasional lies that he was a liar. In so doing, they had missed, according to Arendt, the moral and legal challenge of the whole case: ‘Their case rested on the assumption that the defendant, like all “normal persons”, must have been aware of the criminal nature of his acts, and Eichmann was indeed normal

insofar as he was “no exception within the Nazi regime” (EJ, 25–6). Ironically, the prosecution had, according to Arendt’s analysis, failed to grasp the moral and political significance of Eichmann’s ‘abnormality’: namely, the unshakeable belief he had in his own ‘normality’.

Ironical or not, Arendt’s reportage of the trial caused a firestorm. ‘She suffered enormously’, claims Neiman in a later interview: ‘She lost . . . many and deep friendships. She was the subject of one of the most violent smear campaigns in the history of twentieth-century intellectual life. And it was enormously painful for her’ (quoted in Rée, 2003). Moreover, the break-up of some of these friendships was a public – and highly publicised – affair; none more so than her break with Gershom Scholem whose tireless work on behalf of Walter Benjamin and his legacy had complemented her own. Scholem found *Eichmann in Jerusalem* shocking and unacceptable. In a letter dated 23 June 1963 he dismissed the phrase ‘the banality of evil’ as no more than a ‘catchword’ or ‘slogan’. He charged Arendt with irresponsibility, with misreading the role of the Jewish agencies under Nazi occupation and with lacking a ‘love of the Jewish people’ – *Ahabath Israel*. In her reply to Scholem, she said (as quoted at the head of this chapter) that she had never in her life ‘loved’ what she called ‘any people or collective’, but only her friends: ‘[T]he “only” kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons’ (JW, 466–7). But as far as Scholem was concerned, the charge of *Ahabath Israel* disqualified Arendt from any worthwhile insights into either the Holocaust or the Zionist vision. From his standpoint Arendt was henceforth an irrelevance. A handful of letters followed, but the friendship had ended (Arendt and Scholem, 2010).

Equally upsetting for Arendt was the reaction of Kurt Blumenfeld. He was one of her earliest and most influential mentors in Berlin and, in the ensuing years, had become one of her oldest and dearest friends with whom she had sustained a lively correspondence (Arendt and Blumenfeld, 1995). Although Blumenfeld was more than twenty years older than Arendt, they enjoyed one another’s company and shared a similar sense of humour. There were many issues on which he and Arendt disagreed – relating, in particular, to his deep commitment to Zionism – but these did not adversely affect the intellectual respect and admiration each had for the other. He had been in close contact with Arendt during her stay in Jerusalem covering the trial, and she returned to Israel in early May 1963 to visit him when he was hospitalised with the

illness from which he died later that month. Although he had not read Arendt's articles as they appeared in *The New Yorker*, he had been given reports of these from other sources and was outraged. Arendt felt she had been completely misrepresented and tried to explain to Blumenfeld that her critics were in her view seriously misreading her work. Blumenfeld remained unappeased; Arendt was devastated. As Arendt's biographer, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, comments: '[T]his end to a friendship of so many years was dreadful. She was very shaken after the visit' (Young-Bruehl, 1982, 353).

What her critics and many of her advocates missed at the time was Arendt's contribution to what Leora Bilsky (2010) has termed the 'legacy of jurisdiction' bequeathed by the Eichmann trial. Although Arendt recognised the jurisdiction of the Israeli court, she had serious misgivings regarding the justification offered by the court in support of its jurisdiction. The issue, for her, was the nature of the crimes committed by Eichmann. She argued that these crimes were primarily 'crimes against humanity' and only secondarily 'crimes against the Jewish people'. 'It was,' she maintained, 'when the Nazi regime declared that the German people not only were unwilling to have any Jews in Germany but wished to make the entire Jewish people disappear from the face of the earth that the new crime, the crime against humanity – in the sense of a crime "against the human status," or against the very nature of mankind appeared'. A 'crime against humanity,' she argued, 'is an attack upon human diversity as such, that is, upon a characteristic of the "human status" without which the very words "mankind" or "humanity" would be devoid of meaning.'

It was not the choice of victims, but the nature of the crime itself, that for Arendt was the crucial point. Had this point been acknowledged, she argued, it would have become clear that 'the supreme crime' with which the court in Jerusalem was confronted 'was a crime against humanity, perpetrated upon the body of the Jewish people, and that only the choice of victims, not the nature of the crime, could be derived from the long history of Jew-hatred and anti-Semitism' (EJ, 268–9). Bilsky provides a crisp summary of Arendt's position: 'An attempt to annihilate one group should be understood as an attack on the condition of human plurality' (Bilsky, 2010, 206). Since, for Arendt, plurality is the defining feature of humanity, any attempt to annihilate an integral element of that plurality is not only a crime against the body of the people comprising that element but a crime against humanity itself. Far from belittling the crime,

Arendt was – by focusing on the nature of the crime itself rather than the choice of victims – highlighting its enormity. It was, in her view, a crime that should and must be addressed not only by the Jewish people, but collectively by the whole of humanity.

Arendt's friendships constituted the one sure line of continuity throughout her early life. As she fled across Europe – and from Europe to the United States – her circle of friends broadened and individual friendships deepened. Some of her Jewish friends failed to make it out of Europe or escaped by a different route and were reunited years later. All were deeply affected by the experience of living through the Nazi years and experiencing the full force of anti-Semitism. The break-up of some of her lifelong friendships that followed her reporting of the Eichmann trial was a bitter blow from which she never fully recovered. But the continuity of friendship was also a theme that threaded its way through Arendt's work, knitting together the evolving patchwork of ideas into a complex pattern of political theory. The following two chapters relate the theme of friendship to two of those ideas: plurality and promise. The former, as we shall see in Chapter 2, was her defiant rejoinder to what she saw as the unique phenomenon of totalitarianism; the latter, as discussed in Chapter 3, was her response to the uncertainty inherent in the plurality she embraced. The notion of friendship was unthinkable without an acknowledgement of the plurality of the world and unsustainable without the promise of binding commitments within the world.