

## *The Memoir of Menachem Mendel Frieden*

### An Introduction

Central to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history of the Jewish People are the experience of life in the shtetl, the mass migration of East European Jews to America, and the creation of a modern Jewish homeland in Palestine. Indeed, these are arguably the three most significant elements of the story of the Jews in the century leading up to the era of the Shoah and the founding of the State of Israel. In exploring these three fundamental aspects of the modern Jewish experience, students of East European Jewish life, of the immigrant encounter with America, and of Zionist activity in the Land of Israel have relied on a wide variety of sources and among these have been the autobiographical writings of those who were themselves products of the shtetl, or immigrants to America, or Zionist pioneers.<sup>1</sup> Seldom, however, have students of modern Jewish history had access to an autobiographical account written by an individual who was involved in all three of the principal facets of the modern Jewish experience in their three different settings. The Hebrew memoir completed over half a century ago by my maternal grandfather, Menachem Mendel Frieden, is, however, just such a document.<sup>2</sup> It is presented here in translation, edited slightly, and with chapter introductions and notes.

1. On the general issue of using autobiographies as sources for the writing of history, see, for example, Jeremy D. Popkin, *History, Historians, and Autobiography* (Chicago, 2005), esp. chapt. 1; and David Carlson, "Autobiography," in Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann, eds., *Reading Primary Sources* (New York, 2009).

2. One of the few other autobiographies available in English by an East European immigrant to both America and Palestine is Golda Meir's *My Life* (New York, 1975), but Meir's work devotes only three of its fifteen chapters to Eastern Europe and America, and even these chapters are focused on Meir's developing Zionism.

Menachem Mendel Frieden stands as a representative of a noteworthy generation of East European Jews who grew up in a world whose distinctive character was already fading at the turn of the twentieth century and whose destruction came with the Shoah. His was a generation that matured at a time when the United States was emerging as a great center of Jewish life and that approached old age just as the tragedy of the Shoah was unfolding and as the State of Israel was coming into being. Nonetheless, my grandfather was most unusual in that he not only spent many years in each of the three major centers of Jewish life before and after the turn of the twentieth century, but also in that he penned a memoir that recounts his experiences in all three environments. My grandfather's memoir reviews several generations of family history and covers his life from the time of his birth in 1878 until the middle of the twentieth century. It tells of his early years in a Lithuanian village; of his schooling, courtship, and marriage in Eastern Europe; of his migration to America and his exploits in the country early in the twentieth century; and, finally, of his settlement in Palestine in 1921 and his involvement in Jewish life there up until the establishment of the State of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

In covering so much crucial chronological and geographic territory, Menachem Mendel Frieden's memoir is a rare and invaluable resource for the study of a tumultuous era during which the Jewish world was dramatically transformed by the encroachment of modern ideas into a traditional society, by great streams of migration, and by the project of nation building in Palestine. After all, as one guide to the methodology of history has observed, "at the heart of an historian's work is [the] reading and interpretation of texts."<sup>4</sup> The historian Michael Stanislawski has called autobiographical writings "inherently problematic texts as historical sources,"<sup>5</sup> and, as we shall see, the reading of Frieden's memoir does raise some important questions about its subjective nature. Nonetheless,

3. Compare what Hebrew University professor Yosef Klausner once wrote about *Sins of My Youth*, the autobiography of the Hebrew Enlightenment writer Moshe Leib Lilienblum: "even though we have here an autobiography and confession of an individual, whose sufferings and struggles take on a central part of the story, this book is in essence a reflection of the lives of entire generations of Jewish Lithuania in particular and Russian Jewry as a whole." Klausner is quoted in Michael Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews: Essays in Jewish Self-Fashioning* (Seattle, 2004), 59.

4. Dobson and Ziemann, *Reading Primary Sources*, 2.

5. Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews*, 9.

autobiographical writing, no less than the work of trained historians, “claims to tell true stories about past events,”<sup>6</sup> and, as such, it should certainly be exploited as a source of evidence. Frieden’s reminiscences do, in fact, shed light on a wide range of subjects, from the tension between Hasidism and its opponents to the workings of chain migration, from the impact of the Haskalah on impressionable youths to the challenges of peddling in the American South, and from the experience of travel at the turn of the twentieth century to the vicissitudes of business arrangements among Jews in Eastern Europe, in America, and in Palestine. So too, the memoir lays bare the tribulations that Jewish men, women, and children faced in adjusting to new circumstances as they transplanted themselves from one place to another. When it comes to some specific subjects, Frieden’s memoir provides intimate details simply unavailable elsewhere. It affords a vivid account of the day-to-day life of East European yeshiva students, for example, and it reveals much about the inner workings of the Palestine Economic Corporation, an agency that played a central role in the creation of a modern Jewish society in the Land of Israel.

Frieden’s memoir is also helpful as a primary source that can prompt us to rethink some of the perceptions we may have in connection with the modern Jewish experience. In telling the story of Frieden’s life, the memoir reminds us, for example, that even those who were highly influenced by the Haskalah could maintain a traditional religious lifestyle. The memoir reminds us, as well, that not all East European immigrants who crossed the Atlantic ended up in America’s great cities. As we shall discover, when Frieden came to America, he made his home in the relatively small Southern city of Norfolk, Virginia. Similarly, Frieden’s memoir alerts us that, while the Zionist pioneers who involved themselves in farming and collective living have attracted most of the attention of those studying Zionist history, not all who came to build a Jewish homeland in Palestine took up agricultural endeavors. Frieden was, in fact, part of the small cohort of Zionist pioneers who established the urban and entrepreneurial infrastructure of the Yishuv, the pre-state Jewish community of Palestine.<sup>7</sup>

6. Popkin, *History, Historians, and Autobiography*, 11.

7. On the relative lack of attention to urban Zionist pioneers, see, for example, Zohar Shavit, review of Gur Alroey, *Immigrants: Jewish Immigration to Palestine in the Early Twentieth Century*, *Ha’aretz*, June 4, 2004.

The Frieden memoir is also valuable for the way it makes evident that, not only for its author, but for hundreds of thousands of his contemporaries, the modern Jewish experience was transnational. Because most of the Jewish memoir literature available today focuses on a life in one specific milieu and because most of the scholarship in modern Jewish history has related to one specific country or region, the intense interconnectedness of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Jews in various places is sometimes obscured. Frieden's memoir, by contrast, highlights the crucial interrelatedness of the world's various Jewish communities. The Jews of Eastern Europe who took flight to places such as Western Europe, South Africa, America, or Palestine did not lose touch with their roots in the Old Country, and Jews both in the Diaspora and in the Land of Israel remained bound to each other through ties of ethnic identity, common origins, language and kinship. Moreover, Frieden's memoir reveals some of the ways his early life in Jewish Lithuania influenced his encounter with America and how, in turn, his nearly two decades in the United States colored his experience in the Land of Israel.

Further enhancing the value of Frieden's memoir is the fact that it is an example of an autobiographical work produced by a rather obscure participant in the Jewish world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although, as the student of Jewish autobiography Marcus Moseley has pointed out, there seems to have been a "disposition toward the autobiographical" among the Jews of Eastern Europe in this period, those who recorded their life histories were primarily prominent personalities with a sense that their stories were important ones, and it is the autobiographical writings of those people that historians have most often consulted.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, historians have had fewer opportunities to turn to the autobiographical writings of more ordinary individuals, since not only were these people less likely to have recorded their life stories in the first place but, if these stories were written, they are less likely to have been published. Still, the autobiographies and memoirs of more obscure individuals such as Menachem Mendel Frieden contain a wealth of information, especially about the

8. See Marcus Moseley, *Being For Myself Alone: Origins of Jewish Autobiography* (Stanford, Calif., 2006), 412ff. (quotation from p. 422).

experiences of ordinary people. As the literary scholar Alan Mintz has said in reference to Hebrew memoirs of the nineteenth century, the autobiographical writings of the less well known “ask to be taken seriously for the intrinsic truth of the experience they portray rather than for their association with the . . . authors who wrote them.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the English theorist Roy Pascal has reminded us that “one can take delight in the records of quite trivial people, not only because of what they tell us, but even because of themselves as human beings.”<sup>10</sup>

It is true that the autobiographical writings of little-known individuals are likely to be less elegantly composed than those of prominent politicians, authors, artists, and other public figures, but this may also help them avoid what the theorist Georges Gusdorf has called the “original sin” of autobiographers, that is, rationalizing their lives and making “the line linking past and present far too exactly continuous and logical.”<sup>11</sup> In the end, what the historian David Assaf has said about the memoirs of the Yiddish writer Yekhezkel Kotik could be said about the reminiscences of Menachem Mendel Frieden as well: It is not their “striking artistic level” that makes them important, but “rather, their strength lies in their being an authentic cultural document, which preserves, along with significant data on all aspects of life, a gallery of images, flavors, and smells.”<sup>12</sup>

In recent decades, scholars who have studied autobiographical writings, sometimes called ego documents, have attempted to categorize their various types and especially to distinguish between works that should be considered true autobiographies and those that should be considered memoirs. Roy Pascal, for example, has suggested that “in the autobiography proper, attention is focused on the self, in the memoir or reminiscence on others,” and the great French authority on ego documents, Philippe Lejeune, has similarly posited that autobiographies focus primarily on reconstructing the life story of the author, and especially the story of the development of the author’s personality,

9. Alan Mintz, *Banished from Their Father's Table: Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989), 14.

10. Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960; rpt. New York, 1985), 179.

11. See *ibid.*, 15–16.

12. David Assaf, ed., *Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl: The Memoirs of Yekhezkel Kotik* (Detroit, 2002), 75.

while memoirs are more concerned with public events as they are recalled by the author.<sup>13</sup>

Marcus Moseley, too, the expert on Jewish texts, has argued that autobiography “functions primarily as an introspective, self-reflective mode of literary discourse” and that it is concerned mainly with the “perceptions and emotional responses of the self,” while memoir is concerned more with “deeds and events in the life of the other.”<sup>14</sup> Along the same lines, Alan Mintz has contended that, unlike memoirs, true autobiographies are “acts of self-reflection displaying genuine inwardness” and that they often combine the story of the author’s life with “the subjective confession of personal deficiencies and the subjective expression of lament.”<sup>15</sup>

Menachem Mendel Frieden himself at one point mused about the different ways of recording life stories. He wrote that biographies and autobiographies “have always been read by the multitudes as suspense novels,” arguing that “biography is, in effect, a novel built and based on factual information, especially when it is about someone famous.” “It makes no difference,” he continued, if the interest in the subject “is for his good and agreeable qualities or because of his sins and deceit.” On the other hand, memoirs, according to Frieden, “take an individualistic-subjective approach” and “don’t interest the general public, but rather the family circle and the friends of the writer.” However, “it’s different if the writer of his personal memoirs widens his view and includes the times and the environment in which he lived and functioned, and thus describes the general lifestyle in that time and place, which perforce influenced him for good, or otherwise.” In this case, Frieden said, if the writer “is able to provide an accurate, true and objective description, an individualistic historical portrait will be created, very important for the future historian.”<sup>16</sup>

While some of those interested in autobiographical writings have immersed themselves in the debate over the distinctions to be made

13. Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, 5. Lejeune’s ideas are discussed in Colin Heywood, *Growing Up in France: From the Ancien Régime to the Third Republic* (Cambridge, 2007), 27.

14. Moseley, *Being For Myself Alone*, 7–8.

15. Mintz, *Banished from Their Father’s Table*, 7, 8. In making the latter statement, Mintz is discussing specifically Leon Modena’s seventeenth-century autobiography *Life of Judah*.

16. The passages quoted here appear in a brief note composed by Frieden concerning “the Greats on History,” not included in this edition.

between different types of ego documents, others working on these writings have found such a debate to be of little use. The American theorist of autobiography James Olney, for example, has not bothered much with the distinctions to be made between autobiography and memoir and has used these two terms more or less interchangeably, along with terms such as confessions or life-writing.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Michael Stanislawski, who has studied “autobiographical Jews” specifically, has also proclaimed that he is “not at all interested in revisiting the question of the genre distinctions between autobiographies, memoirs, life-stories, and the like. The taxonomic question is not only moot,” he adds, “it is circular.” Even the theorist Roy Pascal admits that “no clean line can be drawn” between the genres of memoir and autobiography and that “there is no autobiography that is not in some respect a memoir, and no memoir that is without autobiographical information.” More pointedly, Marcus Moseley has asserted that the exhaustive literary criticism of the genre of autobiography has led it “to be locked in a pattern of chasing its own tail.”<sup>18</sup>

Obviously, the line between the two genres of memoir and autobiography is a vague one, if it exists at all, and the life story penned by Menachem Mendel Frieden, which he himself called his *zichronot*, his memoirs, certainly bears witness to this fact. As we shall see, Frieden’s memoir contains elements often associated with each of these two genres. While the Frieden memoir seeks to describe events in the author’s life, it also aims to place those events in a larger historical context, and it contains elements of introspection and self-reflection as well.

As might be expected, Frieden’s memoir is first and foremost an account of his personal history. In his memoir’s introductory Apologia, a sort of justification for his decision to write, Frieden explains that he had always had a certain curiosity about his roots and a pride in his heritage, and that his desire is to provide future generations of his family with information about the family’s past and about the course of his own life. This seems to have been his prime motivation for producing the document we have.

17. See Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews*, 4; and Moseley, *Being For Myself Alone*, 3.

18. Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews*, 8–9; Pascal, *Design and Truth*, 5; Moseley, *Being For Myself Alone*, 2.

It is unlikely that Frieden consciously set out to imitate earlier autobiographical writings, although he may nonetheless have been influenced by some of these. As his memoir reveals, Frieden was early exposed to the Haskalah, and so he may have come across some of the Hebrew and Yiddish novels that influenced East European Jewish autobiographical writing. It is also possible that he was at least aware of important Jewish autobiographical works such as Solomon Maimon's *Lebensgeschichte* (considered the first true autobiography by a Jew), Moshe Leib Liliensblum's *Sins of My Youth*, and Mordecai Aaron Gunzburg's *Aviezer*, all works that were themselves influenced by Jean Jacques Rousseau's seminal *Confessions*, published in 1782. Frieden may well have read the autobiographical writings of some of his contemporaries as well. Certain passages in Frieden's memoir are strikingly similar to parallel passages in the autobiography of the Zionist activist Shmaryahu Levin, for example, and Frieden was definitely familiar with the autobiographical reflections of the English author and playwright W. Somerset Maugham, whose lifespan, 1874 to 1965, was almost identical to Frieden's own.<sup>19</sup>

In any case, whether consciously or unconsciously, when he put pen to paper, Frieden followed certain universal patterns of organization that have characterized nearly all autobiographical writings. For example, most such accounts are built around a series of turning points in the life of the author. As the British expert on childhood Colin Heywood has suggested, "the very act of writing an autobiography encourages people to put a shape on their existence, and even to dramatize it a little." So too, nearly all ego documents address many of the same key subjects. It is quite common for autobiographers and memoirists to record their very earliest memories and to recall images of their parents, their early home life, and perhaps their first sexual experiences.<sup>20</sup> Of course, even as it follows certain familiar patterns of life-writing, Frieden's memoir, like all other autobiographical works, is the story of one specific person and describes the particular course that person's life took. Thus it is that Frieden's memoir serves not only as a portal

19. For Levin's autobiography, see Maurice Samuel, trans. and ed., *Forward from Exile: The Autobiography of Shmarya Levin* (Philadelphia, 1967). Versions of this work were available in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English by the 1930s. Frieden's familiarity with Maugham's writings is revealed in a brief reflection on old age not included in this edition of his memoir.

20. Heywood, *Growing Up in France*, 90, 103.

through which readers can pass in order to explore a great many aspects of modern Jewish history, but also as an account of a fascinating personal saga.

Although in its Hebrew original, the writing in the Frieden memoir is not always polished, readers will find Frieden's account of his life and times highly readable and often engrossing. Some of the descriptive passages in the memoir are vivid and almost lyrical. Telling of the way the men and boys of his childhood village prepared for the Sabbath, for example, he writes: "Their excursion to the bathhouse is all bustle and noise, every household together, the father leading and the children following, each with his belongings under his arm, a change of underclothing and the bath attendant's fee." Other elements of the story Frieden tells are heartrending. Describing the way he and his wife experienced the death of their first child, he recalls: "Our heartbreak and sorrow swelled as we saw the tiny, guiltless infant breathe his last and die in my arms." And flashes of humor appear in the text as well. Relating how he was welcomed by his Southern customers when he peddled in North Carolina, for instance, Frieden writes that "they used to call me 'Jesus' because I had a small beard at the time and to them I bore a striking resemblance to their Lord." Describing the hotel where he stayed when he first arrived in Palestine with his family, he recalls that the kosher food there "may have been 'kosher' but it was not 'food.'"

Although Frieden wrote his memoir primarily in order to record his own life story for the benefit of his family, he frequently sought to use his composition as an explicitly pedagogic tool as well. The memoir contains numerous digressions, some longer and some shorter, in which Frieden seems simply to be providing information in a straightforward and objective manner. Although he touches upon a variety of subjects when he assumes his pedagogic voice—subjects ranging from the development of mail order sales in America and the magnificence of the World's Fair of 1939 to the proper technique for fishing—he most often expounds upon various elements of Jewish practice and various aspects of Jewish history.<sup>21</sup> For example, he offers explanations of

21. In this sense, Frieden's memoir replicates a feature of Solomon Maimon's *Lebensgeschichte*, which includes explanations of subjects such as Hasidism and Kabbalah intended for outsiders, including Christian readers. See Mintz, *Banished from Their Father's Table*, 10–13; Moseley, *Being For Myself Alone*, 57.

diverse religious rituals and customs, especially in the chapter of his memoir dealing with holiday celebrations, and he elaborates upon certain aspects of the history of Jewish life in Palestine, such as the workings of charity organizations in nineteenth-century Jerusalem and the impact of the Arab riots of 1929. By the time Frieden completed his memoir, he was aware that his children had not acquired the depth of Jewish learning that he himself possessed, and he must have anticipated that later generations of the family would know even less of Jewish lore and Jewish history. Thus, writing about such subjects in his memoir was his way of passing on information he might have preferred his heirs had pursued on their own.

Even though Frieden employed his memoir partly as a pedagogic tool, in his doing so there is a certain lack of consistency in the nature of his relationship with his intended readers. Although he seems to have supposed that his readers would be unfamiliar with many aspects of the world in which he lived, and especially with much of the Jewish tradition that was so central to his being, he often seems to have lost sight of that likelihood. Thus, in many passages of his memoir, he abandons his initial assumption about his readers' lack of background and takes for granted that they will be able to identify various rather obscure individual personalities, geographic locations, sacred writings, and the like. More often than not, when he cites a verse of biblical or Talmudic text, for example, he provides only a few words and adds an abbreviation for the phrase "and so forth," presuming that his readers will be able to complete the reference. In other words, Frieden frequently seems to assume that his readers will be quite comfortable in what the expert translator Jeffrey Green calls "the realm of intramural Jewish discourse."<sup>22</sup>

This, of course, is not a fair assumption, since even Frieden's own children did not develop the kind of familiarity with classic Jewish texts and with Jewish lore that would allow them to easily recognize random citations or to understand many of their father's other references. Even a mere half century after Frieden's death, it is unlikely that any of his intended readers would be able to picture the location of East European towns such as Zemin or Gorodets, nor would most be able to identify individuals such as the Maharsha (an early modern rabbinic

22. Jeffrey M. Green, *Thinking Through Translation* (Athens, Ga., 2001), 152.

commentator) or Shomer (a nineteenth-century Yiddish novelist), personalities well known in Frieden's circle but no longer familiar figures even to most Jews. All this suggests that Frieden did not think systematically about exactly who the readers of his memoir were likely to be and that he did not edit his memoir carefully. At times, one gets the sense that Frieden actually was writing for himself more than for others. Nonetheless, despite the inconsistencies in Frieden's assumptions about his potential audience, the sections of his memoir in which he adopts a pedagogic tone remain valuable for what they can teach, and they nicely complement those elements of this document that can educate in less direct ways about the period in which Frieden lived.

Of course, no commentator is ever completely objective, and if Frieden's memoir often allows its author to assume the role of educator, it also gives him an opportunity to express his opinion on a wide range of issues. When he assumes a pedagogic stance, sometimes Frieden's judgments are relatively muted, but at other times his prejudices and opinions are quite explicit. He writes derisively, for example, about the Yom Kippur ritual of *kaporet*, an expiation rite involving chickens, and he forcefully denounces the British administration in Palestine. Nor does he hold back in recording his positive or negative feelings about the various people he encountered in the course of his long life on three continents. He evaluates Rabbi Pinchas Lintup, with whom he studied in Lithuania, as "a great scholar" and "a very good-natured person" who was "full of ideas," even though he "had trouble expressing them orally." He judges Emanuel Mohl, with whom he worked closely for over a decade in Palestine, as "an uncultured individual" who was "easily angered and grumpy, mean and miserly, lacking propriety in his speech and actions" and who was "not fit for his position," but who nonetheless "did great things for the Land of Israel." He characterizes the Jews in post-World War II America as ignorant of their heritage and generally unsophisticated and shallow: "Their minds are occupied primarily with business and, in their leisure time, with card games, movies, and making love," he writes, "or they spend their time sitting idly, dozing off or maybe not, burping and yawning, until they go to bed." Perhaps imprudently, Frieden does not hide his frank opinions even where his relatives are concerned; it was they, after all, who were intended to be the primary readers of his memoir.

Finally, there is the third major element in Menachem Mendel Frieden's memoir. In the tradition of classic autobiographical writings, besides telling a story and offering instruction, Frieden's memoir serves as a vehicle for self-reflection, often with what the theorist Roy Pascal calls a "didactic intention."<sup>23</sup> That is, Frieden not only bares his soul intermittently throughout his memoir, but sometimes he does so in the hope that others will learn from his experience. Indeed, already in his *Apologia*, Frieden explains that, besides wanting to leave his family a record of its collective past, a second motive behind his writing is to evaluate his own life, to consider both his triumphs and his failures, and thus "to give coming generations of my family an opportunity to learn from my mistakes so that they can avoid making them."

With some of the turns his life had taken and with some of the choices he had made, Frieden was completely content, even delighted. He titled the chapter of his memoir in which he describes his decision to marry his second wife, Ray, "I Found the Best Woman," and he was never sorry about his decision to make *aliya*, that is, to settle in the Land of Israel. On the other hand, he had many regrets as well. Writing, for example, about the way his first wife had concealed from him the illness that eventually caused her death, he exclaims, "Oh how I wish she had told me the truth" so that "we would have known that she should not become pregnant." Most of all, it seems, Frieden bemoans those choices that steered him away from a life of complete immersion in traditional Jewish practice and strict adherence to Jewish law. Even though the modernizing culture of the *Haskalah* had a profound influence on the person he became, when he writes about the occasion on which he first came in contact with that culture in Lithuania, he declares that "deep in my heart, I regret what transpired still today." Later, recalling how he had declined an offer to lead one of Norfolk's congregations when he first arrived in America, he laments his decision to do so. Had he accepted the offer, he writes, "perhaps my family would have been educated differently. . . . I can't forgive myself for being so neglectful." Reflecting in old age upon how he had kept his businesses open on the Sabbath, he chastises himself: "It was an unpardonable sin, especially for a learned person from a pious family. . . . It is a sign of pettiness,

23. Pascal, *Design and Truth*, 37.

meekness, and weakness of character for which there is no justification. To this day, I'm ashamed of myself."

What we see, then, is that Frieden's memoir actually fulfills several related goals, and it is worthwhile reflecting a bit further upon these goals as we approach the use of this rich document as a source for the study of modern Jewish history. The memoir's intent, to use Pascal's terminology is "to chronicle, to confess, [and] to expound" and in its focus, it is, in fact, able to strike something of a balance "between the self and the world, the subjective and the objective."<sup>24</sup> Put another way, to use historian Jeremy Popkin's formulation, the memoir manages largely to "unite the stories of external circumstances and internal thoughts and feelings."<sup>25</sup> Of course, whether we read the Frieden memoir primarily as the story of a life, or as a pedagogic text sometimes colored by prejudices and opinions, or as a sort of soul-searching confessional, we must keep in mind that, when it comes to memories, precision is always elusive. As my annotation of the memoir reveals, the work is not always correct where specific facts are concerned, and even if my grandfather was attempting to provide a completely accurate account of his life from infancy until old age, that account could only be partial and incomplete. The French author Stendhal once described the mental image he had of his past as being "like a fresco, large parts of which have fallen away," and William James once wrote that "the processes of memory involve so much selecting, editing, revising, interpreting, embellishing, configuring, and reconfiguring of mnemonic traces . . . that it is almost impossible to think of memory as a trustworthy preserver of the past."<sup>26</sup> The autobiographer Mary Antin, herself an East European Jewish immigrant to America and Frieden's contemporary, once admitted that she had misremembered things from her past and observed that "we often build our world on an error, and cry out that the universe is falling to pieces, if any one but lift a finger to replace the error by truth."<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, as students of history, we must keep in mind that what Frieden has recorded in his memoir is at least as much a product of

24. *Ibid.*, 180.

25. Popkin, *History, Historians, and Autobiography*, 4.

26. Stendhal is quoted in Heywood, *Growing Up in France*, 23. James is quoted in Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews*, 14–15.

27. Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (New York, 1997), 66.

his feelings and preoccupations at the time he was writing as it is an accurate report of what he had experienced and felt as the events he describes were transpiring. As Pascal has observed, autobiography is “an interplay, a collusion, between past and present; its significance is indeed more the revelation of the present situation than the uncovering of the past.” He goes so far as to refer to autobiographical writing as a “record of illusion.”<sup>28</sup>

In the end, then, there can be no doubt that as much as Frieden was constructing a narrative of his life and defining his identity as he moved through time, he was doing so, as well, in recalling the past and composing his memoir. For Frieden, as for other authors of autobiographies and memoirs, the process of writing was also, in large part, a process of self-fashioning. Put another way, there are really two individuals represented in the Frieden memoir: Menachem Mendel Frieden, the subject of the memoir, and Menachem Mendel Frieden, its author, or, as Alan Mintz styles these two individuals, “the narrator as retrospective analyst and the narrator as experiencing character.”<sup>29</sup> Still, it is unlikely that Frieden was conscious of the fact that in composing his memoir he was creating a past as much as remembering it, and it is thus reasonable for us, as contemporary readers, to acknowledge what Philippe Lejeune has called “the autobiographical pact,” an unspoken understanding that an author is making a sincere effort to convey an accurate account of his past.<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, our ability to judge the distance between the events in Frieden’s life and his recounting of those events is complicated by the fact that we do not know exactly when Frieden composed the various parts of his life story. In the Apologia that introduces his memoir, Frieden reports that he began recording the story of his family in 1923, soon after he arrived in Palestine, and that he completed the work in the months after he and his wife arrived for an extended visit to the United States in the middle of 1947. However, it is clear that Frieden did not simply write the story of his life up until 1923 in the early 1920s

28. Pascal, *Design and Truth*, 11, vii. See also Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews*, 68.

29. Mintz, *Banished from Their Father’s Table*, 22.

30. On the “autobiographical pact,” see, for example, Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), 24ff.; and Popkin, *History, Historians, and Autobiography*, 28–30.

and then bring that story up to date in 1947 and 1948. Frieden himself states that he began by recording only “fragmentary notes” and he obviously returned to his memoir more than once, adding material (sometimes only a sentence here and there) and perhaps doing some editing. In a brief section toward the end of the memoir, in which he describes how he resumed the study of Jewish texts after his heart attacks in 1943 and 1944, for example, he refers to his being in his seventy-third year, indicating that he wrote that section around 1951. Similarly, in providing brief accounts of the lives of his brothers in the third chapter of the memoir, Frieden appends a sentence at one point indicating that his brother Sam and Sam’s wife both died in 1960. The coherence of Frieden’s text is further complicated by the fact that as he worked on his memoir in 1947, he also began keeping a journal whose contents overlap with the final section of the memoir and whose entries continue beyond it. Entries from the journal form the basis for the Afterword to this volume.

Despite lingering questions about exactly when various parts of the Frieden memoir were written, it is possible to conclude, however, that the text actually reflects Frieden’s concerns and mentality in the late 1940s more than it does his persona at any other period of his life. Although I knew my grandfather when I was a child—I last saw him in the year of my bar mitzvah, three years before his death in 1963—and although my feelings toward him are warm ones, it is really only through his memoir that I, and now others, can get a sense of who he was as a person, at least in the final decades of his life.

So, at his core, who was this man whose memoir is such an exceptional and valuable historical document? As Pascal reminds us, “autobiography means . . . discrimination and selection in the face of the endless complexity of life,”<sup>31</sup> and so the mere fact that Frieden decided to write extensively about some topics and little or nothing about others already indicates a great deal about who he was. It is revealing, for instance, that among the topics that dominate Frieden’s memoir are the dream of the Jewish People’s return to the Land of Israel and the realization of that dream. Of course, the prominence of this theme makes a certain sense, since Frieden began work on his memoir just after he

31. Pascal, *Design and Truth*, 10.

arrived in Palestine as a Zionist pioneer and he more or less completed it just as the State of Israel was coming into being. Nonetheless, the recurrence of this theme suggests that Frieden's ardent Zionism was an essential component of his identity. Indeed, even Frieden's self-image as an American, based upon his sojourn in the United States as a young man in his twenties and thirties, did not conflict with his identity as a Zionist. If anything, his American identity may even have enhanced his sense that, by bringing American know-how to the Land of Israel, he was making a major contribution to the Zionist enterprise.

Other elements of Frieden's memoir reflect fundamental aspects of his identity, as well. For instance, throughout the memoir Frieden continually returns to the matter of religious observance. Clearly an engaged participant in Jewish religious life, he seems to have found something to value in several camps within the world of traditional Judaism. It is intriguing to notice how he navigates between Hasidic and anti-Hasidic factions within his own family, for instance, and how he retains his view of himself as a learned and observant Jew even as he succumbs to the lure of the Haskalah. In this respect, Frieden is unlike most East European Jewish autobiographers who became caught up in the Haskalah, for most of them adopted the movement's anti-traditionalism. As Marcus Moseley's research has revealed, "autobiography in Jewish Eastern Europe remains almost the exclusive domain of those who have either broken with religion entirely, or whose faith in the verities of revealed religion has become considerably eroded."<sup>32</sup>

That Frieden chose to write his memoir in Hebrew indicates something about his self-identification, as well. Frieden was certainly capable of writing competently in Yiddish or in English, but Hebrew was the obvious choice for him because the Hebrew language was linked both practically and symbolically not only to religious and cultural traditionalism, but also, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, to modernist enlightenment and Zionism as well. As Alan Mintz has observed, "writing in Hebrew makes available to the writer—and creates a connection with—the great classical literary tradition and its repertoire of sources and allusions," but at the same time "to write in Hebrew was also a contemporary ideological choice." It was, Mintz elaborates, "an act of

32. Moseley, *Being For Myself Alone*, 377.

identification with and participation in a movement for cultural and social reform . . . and, later in the [nineteenth] century, in a more actively nationalist movement for Jewish revival."<sup>33</sup>

Given Menachem Mendel Frieden's multifaceted connection with Jewish affairs, one of the striking things about his memoir is how little attention it pays to the Shoah, even though the memoir was completed only a few years after the end of World War II. This is particularly striking because such a large proportion of the existing Jewish memoir literature relates to the era of the Holocaust and the horrendous experience of those who survived it. Although Frieden does not ignore the Shoah (it comes up, for instance, when he writes about members of his family murdered by the Nazis), it is given very little notice. One might speculate that at the time he was working on his memoir Frieden was so focused on other matters, particularly the struggle for Israel's independence, that the Shoah, which he had not experienced directly, simply receded into the background. Or, although the idea that there was a predilection toward silence about the Holocaust in its immediate aftermath has recently been challenged,<sup>34</sup> perhaps Frieden's lack of attention to the Shoah is nonetheless a manifestation of a reluctance to freely discuss this most painful chapter in modern Jewish history so soon after it occurred.

Concerns of an essentially Jewish nature aside, it is revealing that Frieden wrote so much about his working life. This suggests that his search for a proper livelihood was a constant concern of his and that his identity as an individual was tied intimately to his career decisions. It is remarkable how often he had to make crucial decisions about employment, and how each of the decisions he made had lasting implications. His decision to abandon his yeshiva studies, for example, meant that he would not become the learned rabbi he had assumed he would be from the days of his youth. His decision to abandon peddling after a short while led to his establishment as an entrepreneur in Norfolk. His acceptance of a job offer working with the Loan Bank in Palestine associated him for many decades with the business of banking in the Land of Israel.

33. Mintz, *Banished from Their Father's Table*, 12–13.

34. See Hasia R. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York, 2009).

That Frieden wrote so much about his family relationships also suggests something about his image of himself. From what he wrote, we can deduce that he thought of himself as a devoted family man: a dutiful son, a loving husband, and a concerned father. On the other hand, Frieden's memoir also reveals a certain self-centeredness and self-importance. Some of this may be explained by the fact that my grandfather was, after all, telling the story of his own life and not of someone else's. But there is more to it than that. Frieden emerges from the pages of his memoir as an individual with a marked sense of pride and superiority. In comparing himself with the other suitors of the young woman who would become his second wife, for example, he asserts that none of them "could compare to me in those things that make a person stand out: looks, learning, family background, and a fine reputation," and it is telling that, as much as Frieden professes his love for both of the women to whom he was married—and his writing about them is perhaps the tenderest in his memoir—he discusses most of the events of his life in the first person singular, even when they involve his wife (and often his children) as well.

Ultimately, however, understanding that Menachem Mendel Frieden was selective about what he wrote, that his memory was inevitably compromised, and that his life-writing was to some extent an exercise in identity formation, does not diminish the value of his memoir as a vehicle for learning about him as a person and gaining entrée into the worlds in which he lived. Even if some of what Frieden reports about his past is distorted or erroneous, his memoir still provides us a good sense of who he was, this child of the shtetl, this immigrant to America, this pioneer in the Land of Israel. As Pascal observes, even if what autobiographers tell us "is not factually true, or only partially true, it always is true evidence of their personality."<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps even more importantly, the Frieden memoir also remains a marvelous source document for the study of the modern Jewish experience more broadly. Although, as Michael Stanislawski reminds us, given everything we now know about the nature of memory, "we—as historians or quite simply as readers—can no longer read autobiographies as factual first-person accounts," if we approach these works with a

35. Pascal, *Design and Truth*, 1.

measure of skepticism, we can still read them “with great profit, as well as much pleasure.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, we might think about my grandfather’s memoir in terms of what Alan Mintz has said about certain other autobiographical texts: “The signal service performed by these texts . . . lies in their giving us a window into the interior experience of the generation of Jews who lived through the great transformation of Jewish life in the modern era.”<sup>37</sup>

36. Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews*, 176–77.

37. Mintz, *Banished from Their Father’s Table*, 23.

