WALTER BENJAMIN: THE STORY OF A FRIENDSHIP
By Gershom Scholem
Translated from the German by Harry Zohn
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Friendship is not the same as Freundschaft. We have many friends in our lifetimes, but a Freundschaft is a rare and intimate thing.

The Story of a Friendship is the story of such a relationship. It is the story of the lifelong friendship between Gershom Scholem, “the great exegete of Kabalash and Jewish mysticism and arguably the reigning sage of Israel” (Publisher’s Weekly) and the enigmatic Walter Benjamin, “perhaps the most supreme, intuitive and creative critic of the age” (Kirkus Reviews).

Many members of the St. Louis Jewish community will remember, as this writer does, the visit Scholem paid to St. Louis in 1977, when he spoke before a capacity crowd at Washington University’s Graham Chapel. Scholem spoke at the social psychology of German Jewry. A topic that he had spent a lifetime contemplating. He began his talk by saying that he had found certain aspects of German Jewish psychology “inexplicable, despite all attempts at explanation.” Jews, especially German Jews, were known for their ability to think critically and objectively. Why then were they so blind to the truth of their own situation? This question applies especially to Scholem’s dearest friend, Walter Benjamin. Despite repeated pleas, he refused to leave Europe until it was too late.

Walter Benjamin took his own life in 1940. He was 48 years old. Fleeing from Paris with the Gestapo in possession of all his manuscripts, letters and precious books, he and a small group of Jewish refugees were stopped by Spanish border guards and threatened with extradition to Nazi-occupied France. During the night Benjamin took his life, whereupon the border guards, shocked by the suicide, let his companions proceed.

Bertolt Brecht remarked upon hearing of Benjamin’s death that this was the first great blow Hitler had struck against German literature. Yet from his death until 1955 his name was thoroughly forgotten. “At best,” Scholem remarked, “he was the subject of an esoteric whispering campaign that some of us assiduously promoted.” Today, Benjamin is widely recognized as one of the great literary critics of the age. Following in the tradition of Rashi and Rambam, Benjamin wrote commentaries and translations of such writers as Proust, Kafka and Kraus. Indeed, one prominent historian comments, “Benjamin’s examination of cultural phenomena resembled that of a biblical scholar probing a sacred text.” He probed modern texts for truth, a transcendent reality, which he firmly believed in, but believed had been lost. The allegories of modern literature, he said, pointed only to the “metaphysical homelessness” of “lonely creatures in despair about transcendence.”

Benjamin and Scholem quickly became friends. They had this much in common: they were both intensely interested in language and truth. For two years they studied Jewish mysticism, history and theology with Scholem (1915-1917). In 1917 he married Dora Kellner, an active Zionist and in 1922 he was seriously considering leaving Germany with Scholem for Palestine.

Why didn’t he leave? To some extent it was marital problems, a love affair with the fiery Russian actress, Asja Lacis; his friendship with Bertolt Brecht, and finally his flirtation with Marxism. But even his Marxist friends were begging him to leave Europe and come to America.

Benjamin refused to leave Europe. He refused to choose between New York or Jerusalem, between Marxism and Judaism. He described himself as a man on a sinking ship, “on the top of a mast that is already crumbling” a survivor among the ruins. He settled down in Nazi Europe “in order to denature” his own writings ‘like methyalted spirits . . . at the risk of making them unfit for consumption by anyone alive but with the chance of being preserved all the more reliably for an unknown future.”

The Story of a Friendship is a readable and fascinating story about two of the most complex Jewish thinkers of modern times. It contains a rich history of two very real people who struggle to survive and write and find truth in the midst of chaos and evil.