

Gábor Schweitzer

## Scholarship and Patriotism: Research on the History of Hungarian Jewry and the Rabbinical Seminary of Hungary—the First Decades

### Introduction

I would first like to recall an anniversary held eighty-five years ago to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Budapest Rabbinical Seminary [Országos Rabbiképző Intézet] in 1927. A special volume was published to mark the jubilee. Lajos Blau (1861–1936), rector of the Rabbinical Seminary, contributed a paper that reviewed the history of the Rabbinical Seminary. He made the following remark regarding its scholarly activities: It is to the merit of the Rabbinical Seminary that “Jewish learning received a Hungarian voice.” Among the various periodicals and serials published with the collaboration of other professors, he noted that *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* [Hungarian Jewish Review], first published in 1884, not only advanced universal Jewish learning, but also tackled Hungarian Jewish history, which was a unique approach at the time since “the rest of the world” did not study this subject. When the German, French, and American Jewish communities already maintained forums for Judaic Studies, the cultural strength and national identity of Hungarian Jews prompted the Rabbinical Seminary to establish a new scholarly publication. According to Professor Blau, the professors and graduates of the Seminary constituted the body of “Hungarian Jewish scholarship and literature,” bringing new color to Hungarian national and scientific life.<sup>1</sup> The study of Hungarian Jewish history was closely connected to the Rabbinical Seminary in the five decades invoked by Lajos Blau. I would like to reflect on this period in the present paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Lajos Blau and Miksa Klein, *Emlékkönyv a Ferenc József Országos Rabbiképző Intézet ötven éves jubileumára 1877–1927* [Jubilee Volume of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Francis Joseph Rabbinical Seminary of Hungary 1877–1927] (Budapest: n.p., 1927), 25–27.

## The Pioneers

Research on the history of Hungarian Jewry started in the mid-nineteenth century amidst the struggle for emancipation, thanks to the works of Leopold Löw (1811–1875) and Mayer Zipser (1815–1869).<sup>2</sup> Both were rabbis and scholars. With reference to the connection between Jewish historiography and emancipation, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi noted that modern Jewish historiography was conceived overnight through the struggle for equal rights. Modern Jewish historiography “originated, not as a scholarly curiosity, but as an ideology, one of the gamut of responses to the crisis of Jewish emancipation and the struggle to attain it.”<sup>3</sup> In the Hungarian context, this connection is only partially valid. By the time Hungarian Jewish historiography developed within the walls of the Rabbinical Seminary, Hungarian Jews were emancipated unconditionally under Act XVII of 1867. Emancipation in Hungary was successful not so much because of historical arguments, but rather by the values and interests of liberal politics. Concerning the Hungarian conditions, Yerushalmi’s view is pertinent to the extent that Jewish historiography was instrumental in the struggle for social emancipation and later in the struggle against political antisemitism. In affirming the patriotism of Hungarian Jews, Hungarian Jewish historiography fulfilled both legitimizing and apologetic functions. It is interesting to note that in the second half of the nineteenth century there were a few Christian scholars who were engaged in medieval Hungarian Jewish history, such as Imre Hajnik (1840–1902), the outstanding legal-historian at the Legal Academy in Pressburg,<sup>4</sup> and Ágost Helmár (1847–1912), a professor at the Roman Catholic high school in Pressburg.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel Katzburg, “Hungarian Jewish Historiography,” in *The Rabbinical Seminary of Budapest 1877–1977: A Centennial Volume*, ed. Carmilly-Weinberger (New York: M. Sepher-Hermon Press, 1986), 215–216.

<sup>3</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1996), 85.

<sup>4</sup> Imre Hajnik, *A zsidók Magyarországon a vegyesházbeli királyok alatt* [The Jews in Hungary in the Age of Elected Kings], Magyar Akadémiai Értesítő. V. kötet, szerk.: Antal Csengery (Pest: n.p., 1865), 202–249.

<sup>5</sup> Ágost Helmár, *A magyar zsidótörvények az Árpád-korszakban* [Jewish Laws in Hungary in the Árpadian Age] (Pozsony: n.p., 1879).

## The Rabbinical Seminary and the Concept of Jewish History

The founders of the Rabbinical Seminary were aware of the importance of historiography as a national discourse. Under the guidance of Rabbi David Kaufmann (1852–1899) and later Lajos Blau, courses and exercises on Jewish history, which were primarily focused on universal Jewish history, became part of the curriculum.<sup>6</sup> At the opening ceremony of the Rabbinical Seminary, Heinrich Graetz, the outstanding Jewish historian representing the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau, the parent institute, addressed the new Budapest Rabbinical Seminary.<sup>7</sup> It must have been no coincidence that the first scholarly paper published in the *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* was written in 1884 by Chief Rabbi Sámuel Kohn (1841–1920), a well-versed scholar of medieval Hungarian Jewish history, under the title *A honfoglaló magyarok és a zsidók* [Conquering Hungarians and the Jews].<sup>8</sup> Sámuel Kohn, who delivered his sermons in Hungarian at the Dohány Synagogue, demonstrated the connection between history, emancipation, and patriotism. In a celebratory sermon delivered on January 12, 1868, hailing the passage of the Emancipation Act in 1867, he recalled that since the time when Jews had lost their ancient homeland, they did not set foot in a land “as sweet and welcoming” as Hungary during their long wandering. Just as it was in the past, Hungary continued to be sweet, patient, and truthful in the present.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, it is not surprising that erudite students and graduates of the Rabbinical Seminary at the turn of the twentieth century were very enthusiastic about research on Hungarian Jewish history. The main research orientation based on positivist methods—that is, primarily the careful examination and publication of sources—typically does not result in synthetic works spanning centuries, but rather in the examination of shorter periods or research into the local history of specific Jewish communities. One of the few exceptions is the work of Sámuel Kohn, a professor of homiletics at the Rabbinical Seminary, whose historiograph-

<sup>6</sup> Katzburg, “Hungarian Jewish Historiography,” 218–219.

<sup>7</sup> *A budapesti Országos Rabbiképző-Intézet X. értésítője az 1886/87-i tanévről* [Annual Report No. 10 of the Rabbinical Seminary of Hungary of the Academic Year 1886/87] (Budapest: Athenaeum Rt. Könyvnyomdája, 1888), 14–15.

<sup>8</sup> Sámuel Kohn, “A honfoglaló magyarok és a zsidók” [Conquering Hungarians and the Jews], *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* (1884): 3–10.

<sup>9</sup> Sámuel Kohn, “Hogyan fogadjuk és hogyan háláljuk meg az egyenjogúsítást?” [How Should We Receive and Repay for Emancipation?] in *Zsinagógai szónoklatok* [Preachings in the Synagogue.] (Budapest: Rosenberg Testvérek, 1875), 131.

ical achievement was very inspiring to his younger colleagues.<sup>10</sup> His monograph, entitled “The History of the Jews in Hungary: From the Ancient Times through the Battle of Mohács,” was published in 1884.<sup>11</sup> In the preface of the book, he writes about his doubts as a historian whose thoughts stray into the past, but who nevertheless lives in the present. He wrote that in order to remain objective he had avoided any parallelism between the past and the present: “... I refrained from highlighting the new Jewish question with the old history of Hungarian Jews.”<sup>12</sup> His dilemmas are understandable as the book was published in the “pre-blossoming” period of Hungarian political antisemitism, only a few years after the blood libel trial of Tiszaeszlár. In order to avoid the accusation of actualization, the author resorted to delivering moral justice for recent grievances through the uncovering of past events and historical sources. He did not idealize the past, but was more eager to prove continuity and organic development.

As remarked above, Hungarian Jewish historiography focused on research on shorter periods, specific local history and the history of Jewish communities. The young rabbi of the Jewish congregation of Szombathely, Béla Bernstein, argued for the importance of research on local history in the 1894 volume of the *Magyar Zsidó Szemle*. He was convinced that the recent history of Hungarian Jews should be based on monographs exploring the history of individual Jewish communities.<sup>13</sup> These works would serve as valuable points of reference in discussing general aspects in addition to local considerations. He was also convinced that rabbis should cultivate historical literature, insofar as they use available written and oral sources conscientiously. Decades later, Lajos Blau shared the same view: “Primarily it is the duty of the rabbis to write up the history of their communities, with the help of county, city and Jewish archives, epitaphs and other sources.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> József Schweitzer, “Kohn Sámuel és a magyar zsidó történetírás két évszázada” [Sámuel Kohn and Two Centuries of Hungarian Jewish Historiography], in “*Uram, nyisd meg ajkamat*: Válogott tanulmányok és esszék [“Lord, Please Open my Mouth:” Selected Studies and Essays] (Budapest: Universitas Kiadó – Judaica Alapítvány, 2007), 209–221.

<sup>11</sup> Battle of Mohács: in the battle of Mohács (1526), the army of the Kingdom of Hungary was defeated by the army of the Ottoman Empire. As a consequence of this battle, the medieval Hungarian state soon collapsed.

<sup>12</sup> Sámuel Kohn, *A zsidók története Magyarországon. I. kötet. A legrégebb időktől a mohácsi vészig* [The History of the Jews in Hungary. Vol. 1. From Ancient Times through the Battle of Mohács] (Budapest: n.p., 1884).

<sup>13</sup> Béla Bernstein, “A székesfehérvári zsidók története” [The History of Jews in Székesfehérvár], *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* (1894): 460.

<sup>14</sup> Lajos Blau, “A magyar zsidók története” [The History of the Hungarian Jews], *Zsidó Évkönyv az 5689. bibliai évre* [Jewish Yearbook for Biblical Year 5689], ed. Vilmos Kecskeméti (Budapest: n.p., 1928), 162.

The golden age of Hungarian Jewish historiography began with the graduation of the great generation of rabbi-historiographers from the Rabbinical Seminary in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Besides pursuing rabbinical studies, they also graduated from the Faculty of Humanities at Budapest University (today Eötvös Loránd University). That is the reason why these rabbis and scholars may be called “doctor-rabbis.” When reviewing personal achievements in Hungarian Jewish historiography, we must mention the name of Miksa Pollák (1868–1944), the rabbi of Sopron, who published a monograph in 1896 on the history of the Jewish congregation of Sopron from the Middle Ages through his present time.<sup>15</sup> One must also mention Sándor Büchler (1870–1944), the rabbi of Keszthely, who wrote a thick monograph (1901) on the history of the Jews in Budapest from the beginnings through 1867.<sup>16</sup> For decades, Rabbi Béla Bernstein (1868–1944) researched Jewish participation in the revolution and freedom fight of 1848/1849.<sup>17</sup> He published two monographs on the subject: the first in 1898 and the second in 1939, the year when the Hungarian legislature adopted the so-called second anti-Jewish law, or Act IV.<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Mózes Richtmann (1880–1972), a professor at the Jewish Teachers’ Seminary in Budapest, was preoccupied with the study of the eighteenth century. On the basis of his studies in responsa literature, he revealed the Hungarian connections of Ezekiel Landau of Prague, and his monograph on the history of Hungarian Jews in the eighteenth century was published in parts in *Magyar Zsidó Szemle*.<sup>19</sup> Zsigmond Groszmann (1880–1945), chief rabbi in Budapest, meticulously studied the political and social history of Hungarian Jews in the mid-nineteenth century and published fundamentally important papers on the constitutional development of the Pest Jewish com-

<sup>15</sup> Miksa Pollák, *A zsidók története Sopronban a legrégebb időktől a mai napig* [The History of the Jews in Sopron] (Budapest: Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat, Budapest, 1896).

<sup>16</sup> Sándor Büchler, “A zsidók története Budapesten a legrégebb időktől 1867-ig” [The History of the Jews in Budapest from the Oldest Times until 1867] (Budapest: Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat, 1901).

<sup>17</sup> It is important to mention that as a result of their participation in the freedom fight against the Habsburg Empire, Hungarian Jews were emancipated by the revolutionary legislation of Hungary in July 1849.

<sup>18</sup> Béla Bernstein, *Az 1848/49-iki magyar szabadságharc és a zsidók* [The Hungarian War of Independence of 1848/49 and the Jews] (Budapest: Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat, 1898). Furthermore, Idem. *A negyvennyolcas magyar szabadságharc és a zsidók* [The Hungarian War of Independence of 1848 and the Jews] (Budapest: Tábor-kiadás, 1939).

<sup>19</sup> Mózes Richtmann, *Landau Ezekiel prágai rabbi (1713–1793) és a magyar zsidók: adalék a magyar zsidó községek és rabbijaik történetéhez a XVIII. században* [Ezekiel Landau, Rabbi of Prague and the Jews of Hungary] (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1905); and *A régi Magyarország zsidósága (1711–1825)* [The Jews of Ancient Hungary 1711–1825] (Vác: Kohn Mór Könyvnyomdája, 1913).

munity in the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Izidor Goldberger (1876–1944), rabbi first in Sátoraljaújhely and later in Tata, was a diligent researcher of local archives and published many historical sources on the history of his congregations.<sup>21</sup> There were countless monographs on the history of Jewish communities, local history papers, and primary sources published at the turn of the century mostly, but not exclusively, by graduates of the Rabbinical Seminary. Typically, works on the history of congregations explored processes of social integration at the local level. Studies generally reviewed the settlement history, occupational structure of the Jewish population, changes in the institutional order of the congregation, and local characteristics of the process of social emancipation and cultural assimilation. With this concept of Jewish history, according to Kinga Frojimovics, the great generation of “doctor-rabbis” played an important role in establishing Neolog-Jewish identity in Hungary.<sup>22</sup> Ármin Kecskeméti (1874–1944), the rabbi of Makó, also belonged to this circle and was interested in literary history. Lajos Venetianer (1867–1922), the chief rabbi of Újpest, acclaimed for his works on religious philosophy, was the doyen of the interwar generation of historians and published his work on the “History of Hungarian Jewry” in 1922, at the dawn of a new era. Venetianer was an ardent Hungarian patriot who wanted to show to the educated public the extent to which Jews contributed to Hungary’s economy and culture “on the basis of historical continuity.”<sup>23</sup> In the wake of rising antisemitism following the political shifts of 1919–1920, his work was admittedly apologetic and was not intended to be strictly scholarly-historiographical in nature. The book cannot be considered a general history of the Jews in Hungary, and this shortcoming was expressed also by a contemporary reviewer who called it a “one-sided,

<sup>20</sup> Zsigmond Groszmann, *A magyar zsidók V. Ferdinánd alatt 1835–1848* [The History of the Jews under Ferdinand V, 1835–1848.] (Budapest: Az Egyenlőség Könyvkiadóvállalata, 1916); and *A magyar zsidók a XIX. század közepén (1849–1870)* [The History of the Jews in the Mid-Nineteenth Century, 1849–1870.] (Budapest: Az Egyenlőség Könyvkiadóvállalata, 1917).

<sup>21</sup> Izidor Goldberger, *A tatatóvárosi zsidóság története* [The History of Jews in Tatatóváros] (Budapest: Neuwald Nyomda, 1938).

<sup>22</sup> Kinga Frojimovics, “A ‘doktor-rabbik’ nagy nemzedéke Magyarországon: a neológ identitás kialakítása a történetíráson keresztül” [The Great Generation of “Doctor Rabbis” in Hungary: The Development of Neolog Identity through Historiography], in *Széfer József: A tanítványok tanulmányköte a tanítómester, Rabbi, Prof. Dr. Schweitzer József tiszteletére, 80. születésnapja alkalmából* [Sefer Yosef: Essays of Students in Honor of their Master, Rabbi Prof. Dr. József Schweitzer, for his Eightieth Birthday], ed. József Zsengellér (Budapest: Open Art, 2002), 237.

<sup>23</sup> Lajos Venetianer, *A magyar zsidóság története a honfoglalástól a világháború kitöréséig* [The History of the Hungarian Jews from the Beginnings until the Outbreak of the World War] (Budapest: n.p., 1922), 5.

tendentious propaganda work,”<sup>24</sup> where the author was eager to justify that Jews were worthy of emancipation.

*Magyar-Zsidó Oklevéltár* [Monumenta Hungariae Judaica], a series of collections of Hungarian Jewish medieval historical sources, was launched at the end of the nineteenth century. The initiators and first editors of *Magyar-Zsidó Oklevéltár* (Sámuel Kohn and Ármin Frisch/Friss [1866–1948]) were associated with the Rabbinical Seminary. The first volume was published in 1903 with a foreword by Ignác Acsády (1845–1906), a “lay” Jewish historian. Acsády wrote that *Magyar-Zsidó Oklevéltár* will prove convincingly that Jews have lived here since the foundation of Hungarian statehood and always remained loyal. He also added that “inhabitants of the Jewish faith” continued to perform their duties vis-à-vis their homeland even in the darkest periods of persecution. He finally concluded that Jews in Hungary had earned the right to be considered part of the Hungarian nation through their contributions and suffering.<sup>25</sup>

## The Reception of Jewish Historiography in Hungary

At the turn of the twentieth century a new feature appeared in Hungarian historiography: Jewish historiography. Reviews on Jewish historical monographs presented a fairly diverse picture: the new publications were often controversial and were either well received or heavily criticized. Sámuel Kohn’s 1884 monograph met with a cold reception in a review published in *Századok* [Centuries], a periodical of the *Magyar Történelmi Társulat* [Hungarian Historical Society]. According to the reviewer, the author set up hypotheses, misunderstood some of the sources, and wrote the book in a very boring style.<sup>26</sup> Béla Bernstein’s book on the Jewish implications of the 1848/1849 revolution was received in a similarly critical vein by *Századok*. The reviewer reproached the author for his examination of matters of national importance from denominational aspects. According to the reviewer, this approach was biased and brought distorted results. “Strict

<sup>24</sup> Pál Török, “A magyar zsidóság története a honfoglalástól a világháború kitöréséig” [The History of the Hungarian Jews from the Beginnings until the Outbreak of the World War], *Századok* 1–6 (1923): 179–182.

<sup>25</sup> *Magyar-Zsidó Oklevéltár I. (1092–1539)* [Monumenta Hungariae Judaica I. 1092–1539], ed. Ármin Friss. Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat (Budapest: Wodianer F. és fia, 1903), XXVI–XXVII.

<sup>26</sup> Gyula Nagy, “A zsidók története Magyarországon” [The History of Jews in Hungary], *Századok* (1884): 884–894.



objectivity,” as a major prerequisite of historiography, was missing: it would have required an evaluation of past events in their own context, and not in light of later developments.<sup>27</sup> A review of a completely different tenor appeared in *Budapesti Szemle* [Budapest Review], a journal of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The reviewer praised Bernstein’s work for providing many useful details on political, social, and cultural issues, in addition to denominational considerations of the period under discussion. “Only the subject is of a denominational character, the work itself has an importance in terms of public history.”<sup>28</sup> The reviewer of *Budapesti Szemle* was very approving of Sándor Büchler’s monograph on the history of the Jews in Budapest:

... the reader may think that he deals with a narrow monograph. This is not the case. Büchler is a scholar who researches every tiny detail of his subject, and he is not only very careful in studying those details, he pays equal attention to connecting those particles with the general development. In studying the history of the congregations in the capital city, he studied the history of the entire Hungarian Jewry from the beginnings through the outbreak of the freedom fight.<sup>29</sup>

Sándor Büchler was an acclaimed scholar of his time who became a *Privatdozent* in Hungarian Jewish history at Budapest University in 1914.<sup>30</sup> One and a half decades later, Ármin Kecskeméti became a *Privatdozent* at the University of Szeged in universal Jewish history.<sup>31</sup> These were not only individual recognitions of merit, but also recognition of an academic discipline becoming integrated into university education.

27 J. I. [János Illésy], “Az 1848/49-iki magyar szabadságharcz és a zsidók” [The 1848/9 Revolution and the Jews], *Századok* (1899): 455–460.

28 a-i [sic], “Az 1848/49-iki magyar szabadságharcz és a zsidók” [The 1848/9 Revolution and the Jews], *Budapesti Szemle* 98, no. 268 (1899): 471–474.

29 f. [sic], “A zsidók története Budapesten a legrégibb időktől 1867-ig” [The History of the Jews in Budapest until 1867], *Budapesti Szemle* 106, no. 292 (1901): 309–311.

30 Gábor Schweitzer, “Rabbi a katedrán: Büchler Sándor magántanári habilitációja 1914-ben” [Rabbi on the Cathedral. The Habilitation of Sándor Büchler in 1914], *Történelmi Szemle* 1–2 (2002): 135–143.

31 Péter Miklós, “Kecskeméti Ármin magántanári habilitációjáról” [On the Habilitation of Ármin Kecskeméti], in *Sztribik Miklós léptein... Tanulmányok Halmágyi Pál 60. születésnapjára* [In the Footsteps of Miklós Sztribik ... Essays Presented to Pál Halmágyi on His Sixtieth Birthday] (Makó: Szeged Múzeumi Tudományért Alapítvány, 2008), 125–132.



## Conclusion

World War I spelled the end of an era for research on Hungarian Jewish history. Researchers lost their momentum. The older generation of historians became weary, while the younger generation became interested in other problems. The concept of historiography called for reform. Fülöp Grünwald (1887–1964), an erudite teacher at the Jewish Secondary School in Budapest, published the following thoughts in 1934, urging for a new approach: “The idea of emancipation has lost its former luster. We are forced to seek new ideas, and set new objectives. We turn away from the path of our ancestors, and we will have a different view of our past and the journey covered thus far by Judaism.”<sup>32</sup> The patriotic approach to historiography hailing emancipation, a practice ardently pursued by the professors and graduates of the Rabbinical Seminary, became obsolete. The incubation process of modern ideas and new objectives was set back by the increasingly unfavorable political climate. After the Shoah, a young professor and later the director of the Rabbinical Seminary, Sándor Scheiber (1913–1985), took stock of the scientific duties of the remaining Hungarian Jews in 1947. In connection with the history of Hungarian Jewry, he stressed the importance of synthesizing research on minute details, such as the history of congregations.<sup>33</sup> The completion of this work is no longer the responsibility of the professors and graduates of the Rabbinical Seminary alone.

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<sup>32</sup> Fülöp Grünwald, “A magyar zsidó múlt historikusai” [Historians of the Hungarian Jewish Past] (Budapest: Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat Évkönyv, 1935), 225.

<sup>33</sup> Sándor Scheiber, “Zsidó tudományos tennivalók Magyarországon” [Jewish Scientific Agenda in Hungary], in *Szolgaságból – szabadságba: Az Országos Rabbiképző Intézet Hallgatóinak Ünnepi Kiadványa* [From Serfdom to Liberty: Celebratory Papers of the Students of the Rabbinical Seminary of Hungary] (Budapest: Országos Rabbiképző Intézet, 1947), 5–6.