

# THE TWO DOORS OF SÁNDOR SCHEIBER

*The Scholar Rabbi Born A Hundred Years Ago*<sup>1</sup>

## Enikő Bollobás

**H**ungary's Jewish history is rich in scholar rabbis. Perhaps the first was the Moravian-born Lipót Löw (1811–1875), erudite and dignified, and considered one of the greatest Hungarian orators of all times. As a proud Hungarian Jew, Löw broke with long tradition and gave his sermons in Hungarian. He wrote extensively on Jewish history, *Halachic* literature and Jewish education, among other topics, and also took part in both the 1848–49 Hungarian revolution and the struggle that led to the emancipation of Hungary's Jews in 1867. His first born son, Immanuel Löw (1854–1944), the revered rabbi of Szeged in southern Hungary – at that time a booming town with a thriving Jewish community – excelled not just as a scholar of Oriental languages and religions, but also as a botanist, with many publications gaining international recognition. Lajos Blau (1861–1936), the worldly director of the Budapest Rabbinical Seminary, professor of the Bible and the Talmud, as well as of Hebrew and Aramaic, was also a prolific scholar of Judaism, writing some 50 books and over 700 articles. The legendary rabbi of Budapest's Great Synagogue on Dohány utca (street), Simon Hevesi (1868–1943) was a historian of philosophy and religion (and of the philosophy of religion); his books on the enigmatic Job and the prophet Jeremiah, medieval Jewish philosophy and Kant are still relevant today, a hundred years after their first publication. The renowned rabbi of Nagyvárad (Oradea, Romania, today), Lipót Kecskeméti (1865–1936) was admired unanimously by Jews and non-Jews alike (among the latter, the language-proud poet Endre Ady), and was probably the most famous orator of his age, as well as a literary scholar and historian of religion. His brother, Ármin Kecskeméti (1874–1944), the beloved rabbi of the southern Hungarian town of Makó, was an outstanding literary scholar who also ventured into intellectual, social and economic history.

The list above of eminent scholar rabbis of the Neolog (Reform) wing of the Hungarian Jewish community culminates with one name, that of Sándor (Alexander) Scheiber (1913–1985), the ultimate scholar rabbi. He was everything his predecessors had been: erudite, dignified, revered, worldly, prolific, legendary, renowned, beloved. Hungarian and international Jewish scholarship has long recognised his unsurpassed achievements, while everybody who knew him

personally was aware of his extraordinary humanity.<sup>2</sup> And also humility. Speaking on his 70th birthday to a crowd of several hundred gathered to celebrate him, he said he was “not a great scholar, just a lone survivor”. And he added, “Those who were better than me either did not return [from the death camps] or else left us”<sup>3</sup>. Of course, this was incomprehensible to us in the audience – that anybody was or could be better than him – but the words weighed heavily upon our historical sense. He offered a particular perspective we had not considered before: the losses perpetuated by the Holocaust and communism, where the former decimated many of the best scholars, while the latter forced some highly trained rabbis to leave the country or abandon their Jewish identity by leaving the faith. I believe this was his intention too: to evoke our historical sense and give this joyous occasion a tragic, yet proper historical perspective.

Rabbi, scholar, teacher, Sándor Scheiber was the director of the Rabbinical Seminary (Jewish Theological Seminary) of Budapest – the only such school east of Paris, he was fond of saying – for over 30 years, from 1950 until his death in 1985 (in yearly rotation with Ernő Róth between 1950 and 1956). Here he received students from all over the Eastern Bloc, including the Soviet Union, and taught them Bible and Bible exegesis, Hebrew literature, Jewish folklore, as well as philology and bibliography. There were never too many students, seven or eight at most, so they could all study together in a one-room Jewish schoolhouse of sorts. Those who graduated became rabbis in communities all over the world – Moscow, Bern, Brooklyn, Sao Paolo, to name but a few.

I had the good fortune of meeting the man himself in 1967 in Cambridge, England, where he was researching the manuscripts of the Cairo Geniza in the University library and was staying with Alexander and Ibi Lax, a Hungarian Jewish family who had moved to England from Nyitra (Nitra, then Czechoslovakia, now Slovakia) in the 1930s. As it happened, I too had a room in their sprawling modernist house built in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright, and spent long weekends there during my time as a boarder in a local convent. Since the Lax’s were extremely busy at the time, their most revered guest often had to make do with just me for company, a Catholic girl of 15. But somehow he did not mind. He sat with me for hours each night, telling fascinating stories about writers, scholars and scientists, making the lives of these intellectuals seem terribly attractive. And he was interested in everything I could speak about: my family, my readings, plans and dreams. Scheiber offered literary manuscripts for good answers to his many questions on Hungarian literature. And although I felt I knew nothing, I managed to “win” autograph texts by such Hungarian writers as Mór Jókai, Gyula Juhász and Mihály Babits. (Over the years I have come to treasure these gifts more for who gave them than for who wrote them.) And when his brother, Leopold (Titi) flew over from New York, we would all go to the Fitzwilliam Museum or punting down on

the river Cam. In spite of the differences in age and religion, our friendship was instant, and lasted until his death.

Back in Budapest, this friendship embraced our families as well. Sándor and Lili Scheiber would come to our home for dinner, and then would invite my parents to their house. The meals may have been different but the thinking was very much alike. My father proudly recited the Hebrew prayers he picked up in the 1920s from his classmate Karcsi Héber – and another Jewish classmate, Paul Erdős – in Tavaszmező Grammar School. (Erdős of course would later go on to become an internationally celebrated mathematician – as well as my brother’s mentor.)

I often went to the Rabbinical Seminary to visit Scheiber – *Sándor bácsi* (“Uncle Sándor”)

for me. He would take me around, again and again, telling me the history of the school, and about the tragic events that had taken place in the building in 1944. As we climbed the narrow winding stairs of the library, he would give long histories of the most valued books and manuscripts. They were still in a very sad state of disorder; it would take decades, he knew, to catalogue what was left of this once glorious collection, to store and restore it properly. I liked to sit in for the Bible classes of the professor – unanimously called *Főnök* (“Boss”) by everyone else in the



*Sándor Scheiber saying the Aleinu at the closing of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) services, 1983. Photo by András Villányi*

building – and listen to the lectures which he always gave without notes. (I was also learning Hebrew from István Berger, our beloved *Csuló*, so that I could attend the Hebrew literature classes too; but unfortunately my Hebrew never advanced very far.) And of course, I spent many long hours in Scheiber's office, filled with heavy furniture and valuable books (the irreplaceable ones were stored in the inner chamber, which I always looked on as a sanctuary of Jewish learning). He was never too busy to receive me or give me his precious time. Sometimes he would have other visitors in the room too; most often perhaps he would sit with his close friend, Samu Szemere, the Hungarian translator of Hegel and Spinoza; they did not seem to mind my presence, often including me in their conversations. Scheiber found many ways to make clear that he wanted me to visit him regularly. Once, when I was at university, I arrived home one evening, when my parents told me they had a surprise visitor in the afternoon: *Sándor bácsi* had dropped in, just to ask how I was doing. I phoned him right away; "If you cannot bring Mohammad to the mountain, bring the mountain to Mohammad", he said with an audible grin.

He had invited me many times to attend the services in the synagogue when one Friday night in 1968 I entered that sacred place for the first time in my life. I had never been in a synagogue before, and was so embarrassed that I just stood by the back wall, awed, hoping to remain invisible. But upon noticing me, Rabbi Scheiber got up in the middle of the service, came all the way to the back, took me by the arm and walked me to the first row. From that time on, I spent many Friday nights in this small synagogue, always staying for the *Kiddush* afterwards. This was a social event he introduced in the Seminary, the weekly *Oneg Shabbat* celebrations after the Friday night services. First the event took place in the ground floor cafeteria, later – when it became clear that the cafeteria could not accommodate the number of people wanting to attend – they were moved to the first floor upstairs, the great ceremonial hall of the Seminary, large enough to seat probably two hundred people and take in an additional one hundred standing. These informal gatherings served his commitment to connect people in two ways: they provided occasions for Jews, especially the young, to meet fellow Jews – to socialise *as* Jews – and they offered food for thought via the presentation of Jewish cultural topics. Scheiber would talk about a book recently published in Hungary or abroad; he would have visitors – the rabbi of Vienna or St Gallen, the professor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York or the first cellist of the Chicago Symphony – speak of their work.

He happily received visitors I took along whether they were Jewish or not. Among others, those who accompanied me were my favourite linguistics professors György Szépe and Ferenc Kiefer, as well as my brother's beloved mathematics professor from Moscow, Israel Gelfand. Professor Gelfand, then 60, spent his first ever foreign visit in Budapest in the early 1970s; since he was a most valuable asset

for the Kremlin, he was guarded day and night by his two students lest he would emigrate. The two young men had been ordered not to leave him for a minute. They even shared the same hotel room for sleeping. Scheiber's Rabbinical Seminary was certainly a prohibited site for Gelfand; but since he and Scheiber really wanted to meet, we had to devise an elaborate plot (involving a serious heart condition my father supposedly diagnosed) to free him from the grip of his two watchdogs. We knew we were followed at all times, but were not stopped, and the two great minds did meet in the privacy of Scheiber's office. Later I also took along two well-known American poets who were visiting Hungary at the time to the *Oneg Shabbat* gatherings: Allen Ginsberg in 1980 and Jerome Rothenberg in 1982. Both read their poetry in English, while I read my Hungarian translations. Both were terrific performers, bringing the audience to tears with their poems on Jewish topics.

The atmosphere was always vibrant, verging on the chaotic, at least while food was being brought out and the meal was going on. People, happy to catch up with old acquaintances, were constantly on the move; small children, including my own (for after my two children were born, I took them along too), were crawling under the long tables. Food was always the same: challah with hot chocolate, the former broken into pieces and delivered personally to each guest by the rabbi himself (who sometimes, unable to approach every member of a large crowd, had to throw the pieces to the persons far away). He used these occasions for short but substantial private conversations, remembering every name, every grandparent's name, every problem the person was struggling with. What is more extraordinary: even in his public pronouncements he had a personal rapport with everyone; people had the feeling that his words were meant *for them only*. Like the rebbe in the Hasidic legend whose audience nearly gets into a fight when they cannot agree on who the Master was really speaking to: they all felt they were being directly and personally addressed. So this great hall was packed after Friday night services, for Seder dinners, after weddings and the inductions of rabbis. The synagogue nearly burst on Kol Nidre evenings with so many people trying to get inside. Above all else, Scheiber was a practising rabbi, the spiritual leader of his national community; and as such, he was responsible for all kinds of religious events, which he performed wholeheartedly and with the utmost personal attention. This is what he lived for: to bring people together, to revive the spirit and rekindle the flame of Judaism. He was a matchmaker on the grand scale, whose "matches" included not just marriages and lifelong friendships but recoveries of long-lost identities as well. He wanted every Jewish person to face the troubled past and embrace his or her often deeply buried heritage.

Indeed, as all reminiscences<sup>4</sup> concur, after the Second World War, Sándor Scheiber devoted his energies to reviving the spirit of Judaism in Budapest. He felt it was his duty to serve the surviving Jewish community, to rebuild

the Rabbinical Seminary, to teach new generations of rabbis, and to pass on the tradition and thereby preserve it. “Refusing the most tempting offers I stayed at home”, he explained in that 70th birthday speech. “What kept me here was my love of Hungarian language and literature. A sense of mission that it is my duty to help locate and preserve Judaica found here.”<sup>5</sup> He knew that his task was, as later tributes put it, to “revive the spark under the ashes”<sup>6</sup>, to “single-handedly revive Jewish learning and scholarship after the Second World War in Hungary”<sup>7</sup>. He became the man, indeed, who “built on the ruins”, who would “heal the wounds of war and [would] bring a new renaissance to the institution”<sup>8</sup>, the Rabbinical Seminary. Due to his tireless efforts, Hungary’s Jewish culture did indeed survive under the ashes, to be later resuscitated after the collapse of communism in 1990. Were it not for Sándor Scheiber, who kept that flame burning despite constant surveillance and persecution by the communist authorities, there would probably not have been a Jewish culture to revive.

He would welcome visitors all day in his first floor office overlooking the Nagykörút, the busy *grand boulevard* of Pest. Somehow everybody was able to have his or her private time with him, when he had ears only for the visitor. Most often these were one-on-one private conversations; as suggested by the two stately armchairs: the room was set up for a meeting of two, a *tête-à-tête*. Given the flow of visitors, he had to set aside time for serious work elsewhere. So he left the Rabbinical Seminary at the latest 3:30, and by 4 p.m. he was settled in his comfortable study at home which was lined with books to the ceiling. He used a ladder with wheels to pick books off the top shelves. He still engaged in six to eight uninterrupted hours devoted only to scholarship, a time he used with relentless energy.

“*Ein Leben ohne Arbeit ist ein früher Tod*”, he would insist. A life without work is an early death. He always urged his students to keep creating scholarly work. There was always so much to find, to uncover, to record, he would say. He was full of ideas which he generously gave away to others: ideas on topics, thematics, source material, critical literature, methodology – all to be worked out, drawn up. His recurring question whenever he saw me (or anyone else, I presume) was, “What are you working on?” For me he suggested several Jewish topics, some of which I took and wrote up into publications. One on the performativity of blessings in the Bible appeared in the Seminary’s yearbook. In writing he demanded utmost precision; for precision was, he would say, the human equivalent of the divine capacity for truth. But he also believed that no truth was ever worth proclaiming if it hurt someone.

He was never pompous or sentimental. His sermons were always short, constrained, prudent.<sup>9</sup> There were no superfluous words in what were almost puritanical

speeches; they were governed equally by compelling logic and impassioned yet unassuming poetry. Their power came from the concentration of ideas and the force of the argument – as well as the speaker’s compassion and granite-strength convictions. And the general impression was, indeed, that he was speaking to each member of the audience directly and personally.

He had a tremendous sense of humour, ready with a new *Witz*, as we call these not always humorous parables in Hungary, for every occasion. I remember two vividly, since he told them often. Making a mockery of vanity and narcissism in general, the first one is about the famous dramatist, who, after talking about himself endlessly, turns to his friend, “Now, let’s hear from you: how did you like my last play?” The other one makes fun of the Soviet understanding of philosemitism. It is about the conductor of the Moscow Symphony proudly proclaiming to the conductor of the New York Philharmonic that anti-Semitism is unknown in Moscow: “Out of the 16 woodwind players six are Jewish; four out of the 19 brass players, 12 out of the 32 string players” – and so on. “How is it with you in New York?” “Heaven knows”, answers his New York counterpart, puzzled, not even understanding the question, let alone having an answer.

He was a man of contradictions. He radiated serene optimism and yet was of the deeply stricken: sombre, despairing, grieving even. He had reasons to be both: for on the one hand, he had a deep trust in the ever-victorious power of the mind, yet on the other, he was carrying the burdens of many deaths, including his own mother’s, who died in his arms after being shot by an Arrow-Cross militia member. Also, he was saddened by not being able to bring more Jews back into the faith. “Judaism is not a proselytising religion”, he would say half-joking; “I cannot even convert the Jews”.

He was tormented by a dilemma that could not be solved while Hungary was still a Soviet-type dictatorship, even if a supposedly “soft” one. He wanted a more prosperous, more open, more vibrant Jewish community, which he knew would be in the interest of everyone. Yet he and his small community – like other religious leaders and communities – were under constant surveillance. The bureaucrats of the State Office for Church Affairs (*Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal*) – the arm of the Kádár administration policing and controlling religious institutions – were trying to keep him on a tight leash, harassing him and intimidating his students, regularly interrogating some and imprisoning others for alleged anti-communist and Zionist activities. The authorities were ready to crack down on anyone who they considered *too Jewish*. Jewish studies was not a recognised academic discipline; books with openly Jewish content could not be published. For example, for years Scheiber was telling Európa Publishing House they should publish Elie Wiesel; “he is a Nobel laureate in waiting”, he would argue; but to no avail – Wiesel was

also *too Jewish* for the Hungarian authorities, alas, and Scheiber died the year before the American writer received his Nobel Peace Prize. In this climate of official anti-Semitism, how could he persuade people to openly practice their Jewish heritage? His premature death was early in historical terms too: if only he had lived another five or six years, he could have seen communism crumble, making space for a Jewish community revival that he himself had worked so hard for.

There was another reason for his sombre disposition: while he was clearly the most prolific scholar of Judaism in Hungary, he was never offered a university chair nor given a proper academic recognition. Only in the very last years of his life was he invited to lecture at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest; only at that late stage was an academic title bestowed upon him by the Hungarian Academy, an honorary position offered by Szeged University and an honorary degree from Debrecen University – all arranged by close friends, a fact that Scheiber was aware of. Even these recognitions came much too late; the harm had already been done. Yet he also knew that no matter how much the communist authorities might resent and punish him personally, his life's work had been accomplished: with or without the official stamp, Hebraica and Judaica had become established academic disciplines in Hungary. It was this accomplishment, this certainty of a *future in the past*, so to speak, that he considered his most lasting legacy.<sup>10</sup>

There was yet another reason for his heavy heart: he knew he would be unable to carry out the most important tasks he had set himself decades earlier. The *big book* would never be written. Instead, as he told his friend Rafael Patai, he “chopped up” his scholarly work and “dissipated” his ability on little things, small issues and minor details<sup>11</sup>. And dilution left no room, he thought, for the one comprehensive work. Of course, posterity has proved him wrong, for the supposedly little things, small issues and minor details amount to – as will be obvious from what comes below – a magnificent whole, a *grande oeuvre* indeed.

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Sándor Scheiber was a world-renowned scholar of Judaism, with an unsurpassed and unsurpassable scholarly output. His honorary degrees (from the Baltimore Hebrew College, the Cincinnati Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York) – although very prestigious – do not come close to properly measuring his accomplishments. For he was a historian of Jewish culture, a preserver of monuments, a folklorist, a Geniza scholar and a noted commentator of Hungarian literature, fields which all required a lifetime commitment. He spoke and wrote in Hungarian, Hebrew, German, English and French, and was not at a loss when having to give a talk in Italian either. He has over 50 voluminous books and over 1,650 scholarly articles to his name.

He believed it was in the interest of Jewish scholarship worldwide that the monuments, material and spiritual, of Hungarian Jewry be collected and published. Since the authorities would not allow such publications, he used donations from foreign Jewish sources to publish and thereby preserve these monuments. First he turned to tombstones in *Magyarországi zsidó feliratok a III. századtól 1686-ig* (published in English as *Jewish Inscriptions in Hungary from the 3rd Century to 1686*), and described altogether 154 inscriptions speaking of Jewish life in the Carpathian Basin between the 3rd century and 1686, the liberation of Buda from Turkish rule.<sup>12</sup> He gave detailed introductions to each, explaining how the earliest show the influence of Hellenised Roman culture, those dating from the Middle Ages bear the marks of Rhineland, Austrian and Bohemian-Moravian Jewish communities, while those from the era of Hungary's Turkish occupation show ties with German and Balkan Jewish culture. His archival research led to the identification of four old synagogues, two in Buda and two in Sopron. He gave detailed descriptions of the material testimonies of medieval Jewish life in Hungary.

Scheiber was also a preserver of the spiritual monuments. He searched archives of the region, identified 15 centres of Jewish “book culture”, as he called them, in the Middle Ages. He discovered a new, formerly unrecognised place of Hebrew codices: in Hungarian book-bindings, where a whole new world of Central European palimpsest of cultures opened up for him. The result was a landmark publication, *Héber kódexmaradványok magyarországi kötetáblákban. A középkori magyar zsidóság könyvkultúrája* [Fragments of Hebrew Codices in Hungarian Book Bindings – The Book Culture of Medieval Hungarian Jewry]<sup>13</sup> still not published in English. He collected source materials of the utmost significance in the magisterial series *Magyar Zsidó Oklevéltár (Monumenta Hungariae Judaica)*, publishing in all 14 substantial volumes of primary documents. He managed to relaunch the yearbooks that had been banned in 1948, the year of the communist takeover, and from 1970 until his death, every year he brought out these collections of essays, memoirs, poems and other writings by Jews and non-Jews alike. He published several facsimile editions, among them, the *Codex Maimuni* and the *Kaufmann Haggadah*. Driven by his interest in Jewish manuscript illumination, he oversaw the publication of some otherwise unavailable Jewish texts: the spectacularly illustrated copy of Megillat Esther, as well as the beautiful facsimile editions of the Haggadah illustrator Asher Anshel, the calligrapher Lezer Ben Yeshaya and the book artist Marcus Donath.

In the mid-1980s, when a general thaw was spreading out over the Eastern bloc, the Hungarian authorities slowly began to give a green light to Scheiber to go ahead with the publication of some projects he had been pushing for. One such break-through event was the publication of the very sensitive diary – in Scheiber's private possession – of Ignác Goldziher, the world-renowned scholar of Islam. At



*Sándor Scheiber in his private office in the Rabbinical Seminary, 1982. Photo by András Villányi*

this time he also wrote several forewords and afterwords to books that brought Judaism to a wider audience, explaining and popularising Jewish traditions and customs. Scheiber's texts always lent authenticity and validity to their content. Examples include the album of the photo artist Tamás Féner on the various aspects of Jewish tradition and the posthumously published collection of cemetery photography done by Péter Wirth – both with Scheiber's afterword<sup>14</sup>.

Scheiber was a bridgebuilder not only as a rabbi but as a scholar too: he brought ideas together. As a folklorist, he saw connections and parallels where other readers could only see dots, letters and pages. He identified Biblical motifs in literature, Jewish sources for phrases and proverbs, Old Testament origins of New Testament topoi, and the international connections of Hungarian tales and legends. Always paying “particular attention to concurrences between ways of thought and literature”,<sup>15</sup> his interest was diverse: he traced folktale motifs

back to Jewish customs, collected the names of Jewish musicians in 18th century Hungary, and identified Jewish motifs in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. In some cases his attention was microscopic, often following just one line or phrase back to its origins. In other cases his vision was macroscopic: he was taking it all in, so to speak, when, for example, he gave a full presentation of the Golem tale or the legend of the Wandering Jew as it appears in Hungarian literature. Three bulky volumes of *Folklór és tárgytörténet* [Folklore and Motif History] contain his most important Hungarian articles on folklore and motif history;<sup>16</sup> the essays written in English, French, German and Hebrew were collected in his *Essays on Jewish Folklore and Comparative Literature*, published in Budapest in 1985.

He was also a scholar in search of connections in his *Geniza Studies*<sup>17</sup>, which he pursued tirelessly for 45 years and published ultimately in 1981. He was generally interested in Geniza: the tattered manuscripts which Jews, not permitted to throw away any documents that contained God's name, stored in the depositories of synagogues or buried in cemeteries. But Scheiber's particular interest focused on the scattered texts of the Cairo Geniza, and he pieced together fragments, some dating back to the 10th century, as he found them in various libraries of the world. He did most of his Geniza research in Budapest, studying the manuscripts collected by Dávid Kaufmann, the young scholar of the newly opened Rabbinical Seminary in Budapest in 1877. Kaufmann managed to purchase nearly 600 Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic manuscripts and manuscript fragments of the Cairo Geniza right after it was excavated in 1896. After his death, his family donated the Kaufmann collection to the Hungarian Academy of Letters and Sciences, where it has been safely kept ever since. Following in the footsteps of such renowned scholars as Ignác Goldziher, Miksa Weisz and David Kaufmann himself, Scheiber deciphered and transcribed the various manuscripts and prints, catalogued and interpreted them. He then continued his systematic research in the libraries of Cambridge, Oxford, London, New York, Cincinnati and St Petersburg (then still Leningrad) to see what belonged where. He put together the missing pieces of hymns and poems and established the buried links in the private and official papers of Jewish communities all around the Mediterranean.

Due to his perseverance, prodigious memory and amazing eye for small details, he made important discoveries. For example, he identified a piece of handwriting by *remembering* – because Xerox machines were not in use at the time – the minutest details on three different documents which he had seen in Budapest, Cincinnati and Cambridge. He recognised that they had been written by the same hand: Obadiah, the Norman Proselyte from southern Italy in the 11th century. Moreover, among Obadiah's manuscripts, he found Hebrew music notes, the oldest Jewish melody found to date. Having put together the threads, Obadiah's music sheets were reunited after nine centuries, and the music came alive during

the performances of the choir of the Rabbinical School, led by the conductor Emil Ádám, in 1972.

There was one discovery which he considered the crowning achievement of his life's work: in St Petersburg he found a signature which he authenticated as that of Maimonides, the Sephardic philosopher of the 12th century. For 800 years the signature was misidentified. Such were the thrills he lived for, thrills known only to a person of his learning and devotion.

Hungarian literature also belonged within his scholarly scope. His scholarship on Hungarian literature – which made up less than one-tenth of his total output – would in itself make him a recognised authority. Here too he was primarily interested in connections: how biblical or other Jewish motifs are used, often as if they were of Hungarian origin, by Hungarian writers. Scheiber wrote on a whole range of authors, among them Bálint Balassi, Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, Kálmán Mikszáth, József Kiss, Lajos Hatvany, Endre Ady, Jenő Heltai, Ferenc Karinthy, Ágnes Gergely to name just a few. But it was his beloved 19th century poet János Arany to whom he devoted most of his scholarly attention. “An idea that you cannot find in Arany is not worth having”, he would say. He identified Yiddish humour in Arany, traced formerly unconnected lines of descent throughout the Arany *oeuvre*, showed connections between elements of Arany's narrative and those of Transylvanian stories, and offered convincing proofs to scholarship's dilemmas concerning authorship.

Scheiber, the scholar for whom gravestone inscriptions were of the utmost significance, chose a stanza from a poem by Arany to be inscribed on his own tombstone. This wish surprised some people; but for those who knew him, it was no surprise. Here are the eight lines from the famous poem “Széchenyi emlékezete” [Széchenyi remembered] as translated by John M. Ridland and Peter V. Czipott:

He lives, who spends on millions the treasures of  
His abundant life, although his days unwind;  
Still, when all earthliness is shaken off,  
To a vital *principle* he is refined,  
Which will persist, and growing, grow more bright,  
Though he himself departs in time and space;  
Posterity guides its virtue by his light:  
As it desires and hopes, believes and prays.

Read as a tombstone inscription on this grave, it is the rabbi scholar who spent the treasures of his abundant life on others: Jews primarily. He will endure as a

“principle”, and a complex one too. First, given Scheiber’s scholarly and religious commitment, it should be translated as Jewishness, Judaism, Jewish tradition or Jewish studies. But the fact that it is Arany’s poem – originally written to honour the memory of the 19th century Hungarian statesman István Széchenyi – that is engraved on the tombstone of a 20th century Jewish priest adds another dimension to this idea. As if expanding the trope of prolepsis – because it places *future in the past* – the inscription celebrates the 20th century scholar rabbi in the words of a great 19th century poet, thereby interlocking the memory of János Arany and István Széchenyi together with the memory of Sándor Scheiber. So the “principle” gets expanded to encompass Jewish and non-Jewish thought and history, as well as statesmen, poets and rabbis. And future generations will measure themselves according to this principle as represented by Széchenyi, Arany and Scheiber, who are joined together in the great chain of being, where past and future meet.

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His soul was joyously integrated; his faith in Judaism was not diminished by his commitment to Hungarian culture. On the contrary, he was a man who recognised hidden affinities and believed in building bridges. Determined to gather people and cultures of diverse roots, Sándor Scheiber always opened two doors: with one hand, the door of Judaism for non-Jews and with the other, the door of non-Jewishness for Jews, thereby making the point that the two are inclusive. While welcoming non-Jews in the Rabbinical Seminary, he sent his own students to institutions of Hungarian culture; while offering the accomplishments of Jewish culture to non-Jews, he conveyed the appreciation of Hungarian culture towards his Jewish students, friends and readers.

And he had blessings for both. In his address to the graduating student, when he blessed the new rabbi and conferred the Biblical blessing – “*The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace*” – he never failed to include his own imperative, “*Be a Hungarian rabbi*”<sup>18</sup>. At the same time, he bestowed the blessing “*I bless those who bless you and I curse those who curse you*” on non-Jewish friends as well, protecting them from all future harm.

His openness towards non-Jewish Hungarians might explain why he spent so much care on his ever-growing manuscript collection. These were letters, notes, note cards and other papers written by famous Hungarian writers, scholars, politicians, painters and musicians – among them, Lajos Kossuth, Sándor Petőfi, Mihály Munkácsy, Endre Ady, Mihály Babits and Béla Bartók. Hungarian literature was a lived experience for him. That is why in his speech given at the wedding of his daughter, Mari, he cited one of the first Hungarian poems, written in Latin still,

from the 14th century, from *The Legend of Saint Gellért*. Gellért (980–1046) was a Venetian priest, who became the first Hungarian bishop and martyr of Christianity. According to the legend written of his life, Gellért's philosophy rests on two pillars, work and art. This is what Rabbi Scheiber offered to the young Jewish couple to build their lives upon, the wisdom of an early Hungarian Christian.

In the fall of 1984 he spent his time at home, already too weak to go to his office. He told me to visit him often. My regular time was Tuesday mornings, and although I tried to keep these visits religiously, I had to skip some Tuesdays. At such times his wife Lili called, "Sanyi wants to see you, come over soon". One Tuesday morning, already in December, he phoned as I was just getting ready to leave, and told me to dress warm. He had a *plan*, he said mysteriously. When I rang their doorbell, he was already dressed, ready to go. He still did not tell me where, just gave me instructions to turn right here and left there. We entered the gate of the Kerepesi Cemetery, the national graveyard where famous historical figures are buried. This was not my first time with him in a cemetery, for he had often asked me to accompany him to funerals in Kozma utca Jewish Cemetery. But this time was different: this was neither a Jewish cemetery, nor a rabbinical function. He directed me to a particular spot, and told me to park the car. We got out. We were at the grave of János Arany.

It was a cold winter day, bright, piercing. Holding on to my arm, he wanted to spend some time at the grave of Arany. The two were engaged, I sensed, in an imagined dialogue under the famous oak tree planted there from Margaret Island – the great Hungarian poet in the grave and the great Hungarian rabbi on the bench. In the tradition of the kabbalists and the Hasidic rebbes, Scheiber was speaking with the dead; here with his beloved dead poet. I knew that I was witnessing a meeting between a "principle", as the Arany poem calls mortality transfigured into immortality, and a human being soon himself entering immortality and turning into a principle. I recalled a moment of similar gravity from July 1973, when we, a small group of friends, were celebrating Sándor Scheiber's 60th birthday in the synagogue. A fearful thunderstorm was raging outside, thumping the beat to Glinka's Mozart variations, the harp solo piece performed by my sister on the balcony. In that hour we all sensed that the elements outside the synagogue responded to our celebrations inside.

But at Arany's grave, Scheiber interrupted my musings of the human and the supernatural: he was ready to continue his cemetery visit. He walked me to the two grand mausoleums nearby, that of Lajos Kossuth and Ferenc Deák. Kossuth was the passionate revolutionary and later Governor-President of Hungary in 1849 (the revolution which, for the first time in Hungarian history, granted citizenship, equality and the franchise to Jews in 1849 by a decree which was to

lose its validity after the revolution was crushed by Austria and Russia). Kossuth was a fierce defender of Jewish rights, who later famously denounced “anti-Semitic agitation” with these words: “as a man of the 19th century, I find it shameful; as a Hungarian, I deem it contemptible; as a patriot, I hold it blameworthy”<sup>19</sup>. Deák was the moderate politician who forged the historic Compromise (*Ausgleich*) between Austria and Hungary in 1867, which paved the way finally for Jewish emancipation in the same year.

We continued our walk to the graves of the widows of the generals executed in Arad in 1849, then on to other 19th century notables: the composer Ferenc Erkel, the minister of culture Ágoston Trefort, the sculptor János Fadrusz, the actress Mari Jászai, the family of the poet Petőfi. Sándor Scheiber said good-bye to each of them.

Finally, we found ourselves back at Arany’s grave. We got into my car and I drove to his house in Kun utca. That was the last time he left his home.

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the Hungarian born American writer Charles Fenyvesi for his valuable comments on the text, especially for clarifying terms and concepts relating to Judaism. Special thanks are due to Alfréd Schőner, Rector of the Budapest University of Jewish Studies, for specifying historical facts and data relating to the Rabbinical Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the following collections of tributes: *Occident and Orient – A Tribute to the Memory of Alexander Scheiber*. Ed. Robert Dán. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó – Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988; *Seven Tributes in Memory of Alexander Scheiber (1913-1985)*. Publ. Leopold Scheiber. New York, 1995; *A könyvek hídjá – Emlékfüzér Scheiber Sándorról* [A Bridge of Books – A Garland of Reminiscences about Sándor Scheiber]. Ed. Péter Kertész. Budapest: Urbis Könyvkiadó, 2005 [2nd ed. 2013].

<sup>3</sup> „... én nem vagyok nagy tudós, csak egyedül maradtam. Akik nálam különbek voltak, nem jöttek vissza, vagy elhagytak.” “Summa vitae”. In: *Folklor és tárgytörténet* [Folklore and Motif History]. Vol. III. Budapest: MIOK, 1984. p. 585.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, all the contributors (Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger, Curt Leviant, J. Paal, Raphael Patai, Hermann I. Schmelzer, Menahem Schmelzer, Joseph Schweitzer) of *Seven Tributes in Memory of Alexander Scheiber (1913-1985)*.

<sup>5</sup> „Sokszori és csillogó csábítással szemben itthon maradtam. Marasztalt a magyar nyelv és irodalom szeretete. Marasztalt a hivatástudat, hogy a helyben található anyag feldolgozása az egyetemes zsidó tudomány érdeke.” p. 585.

<sup>6</sup> Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger, “The Last High Priest”. In: *Seven Tributes in Memory of Alexander Scheiber (1913-1985)*. Publ. Leopold Scheiber. New York, 1995. pp. 1–5.

<sup>7</sup> Curt Leviant, “Alexander Scheiber”. In: *Seven Tributes in Memory of Alexander Scheiber (1913-1985)*. Publ. Leopold Scheiber. New York, 1995. pp. 7–10.

<sup>8</sup> J. Paal, “The Man Who Built on the Ruins”. In: *Seven Tributes in Memory of Alexander Scheiber (1913-1985)*. Publ. Leopold Scheiber. New York, 1995. pp. 11–13.

<sup>9</sup> His sermons and speeches given on religious occasions came out in one 400+ page volume, *Scheiber Sándor könyve – Válogatott beszédek* [The Book of Sándor Scheiber – Selected Sermons and Speeches]. New York – Budapest – Jeruzsálem, Múlt és Jövő Könyvek, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> See “Summa vitae”, p. 586.

<sup>11</sup> Rafael Patai, “I Remember Sanyi”. In: *Seven Tributes in Memory of Alexander Scheiber (1913–1985)*. Publ. Leopold Scheiber. New York, 1995. 15–17.

<sup>12</sup> *Magyarországi zsidó feliratok a III. századtól 1686-ig*. Budapest: MIOK, 1960; *Jewish Inscriptions in Hungary from the 3rd Century to 1686*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó – Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983.

<sup>13</sup> *Héber kódexmaradványok magyarországi kötéstáblákban – A középkori magyar zsidóság könyvkultúrája* [Fragments of Hebrew Codices in Hungarian Book Bindings – The Book Culture of Medieval Hungarian Jewry]. Budapest: MIOK, 1969.

<sup>14</sup> Féner Tamás – Scheiber Sándor, “... és beszéld el fiadnak” – *Zsidó hagyományok Magyarországon* [“... and tell it to your son” – Jewish Traditions in Hungary]. Budapest: Corvina, 1984; Wirth Péter – Scheiber Sándor – József László, “Itt van elrejtve” – *Tokaj-begyűljai zsidó temető* [“Here It is Hidden Away” – Jewish Cemeteries of the Tokaj Region]. Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1985.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Scheiber, *Essays on Jewish Folklore and Comparative Literature*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1985. p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Folklór és tárgytörténet* [Folklore and Motif History]. Budapest: MIOK, 1977 (vols. I–II), 1984 (vol. III).

<sup>17</sup> See Alexander Scheiber, *Geniza Studies*. Hildesheim – New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1981.

<sup>18</sup> “Légy magyar rabbi!” See, for example, the inauguration of Alfréd Schőner (1974) and István Zucker (1977). *Scheiber Sándor könyve – Válogatott beszédek* [The Book of Sándor Scheiber – Selected Sermons and Speeches], pp. 213, 215.

<sup>19</sup> “az antisemitikus agitációt mint a XIX-ik század embere szégyellem; mint magyar restellem, mint hazafi kárhoztatom.” *Kossuth Lajos iratai* [The documents of Lajos Kossuth]. Ed. Ferenc Kossuth. Vol. X. Budapest: Athenaeum, 1904. 117–118.