

Isaiah Sonne

1887-1960

Together with the rest of the world of Jewish scholarship the Conference on Jewish Social Studies and the editors of this journal mourn the passing of Isaiah Sonne, one of the most penetrating and informed Jewish historians and bibliographers. Our Editorial Council has lost in him one of its genuinely interested and helpful collaborators.

Born in Moscisko, Galicia, on February 26, 1887, Dr. Sonne received his advanced education in Swiss and Italian schools of higher learning and, although he subsequently taught in Lodz for a short time, he returned to Italy in 1925 to serve as Professor of Talmud and rabbinic literature at the Collegio rabbinico in Florence. He soon became an indefatigable researcher in the history of Jewish life and letters in that country.

For some two years, (1936-38) he served as director of the Jewish Theological Seminary on the island of Rhodes whose main function, from the standpoint of the Italian government which subsidized it, was to help spread Italian culture throughout the Middle East with the cooperation of its alumni serving in various rabbinic posts in the area. To Sonne, however, its great mission consisted in infusing Levantine Jewry with the spirit of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and thus helping to bridge the gap between the intellectual developments in the Western and Eastern Jewries. His career there ended when Mussolini joined the ranks of racial antisemites which was speedily followed by the outbreak of the Second World War. Sonne was invited to come to the United States where he performed significant services as teacher and library official at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.

Isaiah Sonne's prolific scholarly output still is a living testimony to his insatiable intellectual curiosity. Always an opponent of labels and clichés, he often decided to reexamine anew some of the most widely accepted theories in Jewish scholarship. He submitted, for instance, the long-known and much debated chronicles pertaining to the sufferings of the Jews during the First Crusade to a searching reinvestigation which opened up new vistas on the dates and authenticity of these basic sources for the history of one of the greatest and far-reaching tragedies in Jewish history (*Revue des études juives*, XCVI, 1933, 113-56; and *Zion*, XII, 1946-47, 74-81). With equal zest he reviewed the difficult textual problems in Rashi's *Commentary* on the Pentateuch (*Hebrew Union College Annual*, XV, 1940, Hebrew section, pp. 37-56); rejected the charges of forgery leveled against Maimonides' Letter of Resurrection (*Proceed-*

ings of the American Academy for Jewish Research, XXI, 1952, 101-17); came to grips with the moot problem of the original language of Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'Amore* and its traces in later Hebrew letters (*Simboni Memorial Volume*, 1928, 142-48; *Tarbiz*, III, 1931-32, 287-313; and *Intorno alla vita di Leone Ebreo*, Florence, 1934); shed some new light on the intriguing personality of Solomon Molkho (*Monats-schrift*, LXXV, 1931, 127-35; and *Annuario di studi ebraici*, I, 1934, 183-204); and had something new and noteworthy to say on such other unusual Jewish personalities as Uriel da Costa, Leon de Modena, and Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (*Jewish Quarterly Review*, XXII, 1931-32, 247-93; *The American Hebrew Year Book*, 1935, 218-25; and *H. U. C. Annual*, XXI, 1948, 1-28).

His usually unorthodox views concerning these intriguing personalities and their roles in history were buttressed by many new documents which, with his uncanny sense of the extraordinary, he often discovered in out-of-the-way places. He was always ready generously to share such new materials with other scholars. If I may be allowed a personal reminiscence, when my wife and I unexpectedly visited him at his home in Rhodes, we found him perusing a recent article of mine relating to the Jewish community of Verona. Since he had in his possession much unpublished documentary material concerning that community, he immediately offered to write supplementary notes to my essay. It was only when I received these notes that I realized that his was a major contribution in its own right and persuaded him to publish it as an independent study. (It appeared in *Zion*, III, 1938, 123-69 and in *Kobez 'al yad*, XIII, 1939, 145-91.) He made equally significant contributions to the history of such other Italian communities as sixteenth-century Bologna (*H. U. C. Annual*, XVI, 1941, Hebrew section, pp. 35-98) or the Marranos of Ancona (*Revue des études juives*, LXXIX, 1930, 360-80) and, likewise with the aid of new documentation, presented the picture of "The General Council in Italy—Model for the Council of Four Lands in Poland" (*Hatekufab*, XXXII-XXXIII, 1948, 617-89). Another fascinating find consisted in his discovery of a Hebrew chronicle which revealed the Jewish reaction to the Counter-Reformatory popes whose reigns marked the anti-Jewish turn in the Catholic Church's attitude to Jews and Judaism during the second half of the sixteenth century (*Mi-Pavlo ba-rev'i 'ad Pius ba-hamishi*, Jerusalem, 1954). It is small wonder, then, that when the Union of Italian Jewish Congregations decided shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War to prepare an inventory of the Jewish communal archives throughout the country it entrusted Isaiah Sonne with this important task.

All along Sonne's curiosity led him to many other areas of Jewish scholarship. He was particularly attracted to rare books and the history

of Hebrew printing. His article "Druckwesen" (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, VI, 1939, 39-81) still is the best summary of this subject. He also felt the eternal fascination of both Bible and Talmud, contributing such studies as "The Second Psalm" (*H. U. C. Annual*, XIX, 1945-46, 43-55), or "The Schools of Shammai and Hillel Seen from Within" (*Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume*, New York, 1945, 275-91). Nor could he remain silent when such recent discoveries as those of the second-century synagogue of Dura Europos or the Dead Sea Scrolls stirred the imagination of students all over the world. In a lengthy study he suggested, with great ingenuity, some novel interpretations of "The Paintings of the Dura Synagogue" (*H.U.C. Annual*, XX, 1947, 255-362); discussed "A Hymn Against Heretics in the Newly Discovered Scrolls" (*ibid.*, XXIII, Part 1, 1950-51, 275-313); and drew noteworthy parallels between "The Zodiac Theme in Ancient Synagogues and in Hebrew Printed Books" (*Studies in Bibliography and Booklore*, I, 1953, 3-13). Quite unexpectedly, moreover, he joined forces with Eric Werner in reviewing in considerable detail "The Philosophy and Theory of Music in Judaeo-Arabic Literature" (*H.U.C. Annual*, XVI, 1941, 251-319; XVII, 1942-43, 511-72).

While he was thus deeply involved in textual and other details, he never lost sight of the broader approaches to, and understanding of, history. In his noteworthy critique of Yitzhak Fritz Baer's Hebrew *History of the Jews in Christian Spain* he, by indirection, presented so-to-say his own historical credo:

Theoretically at least [he wrote] no historian ignores the elementary truth that his real task consists in the interpretation of documentary material, an interpretation which obviously transcends the particular factual data. Theoretically there is a common agreement among historians that mere accumulation of a great mass of facts will never become history, unless the given material is utilized for the purpose of reconstructing some phase of human history. In other words, the gathered facts must be presented under the form of a certain unity. It is about the nature of this unity that historians are at variance. Some of them content themselves with a unity of pattern; others prefer to think of an organic unity. ["On Baer and His Philosophy of Jewish History," *JEWISH SOCIAL STUDIES*, IX, 1947, 61-80, esp. p. 53.]

Perhaps it was this very ambitious quest for what he liked to call the "insertion" approach emphasizing the "vigorous and creative Jewish resonance to the general vibration of the human mind in a given cultural climate" (*ibid.*, p. 71) whose difficulty he fully recognized and which may have deterred him from undertaking some major work of historical synthesis. But even his most minute monographic investigations are permeated with that sense of "organic unity" which he demanded from others.

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