



Leo Spall

LEO SHPALL (1903–1964)

In the passing of Leo Shpall on October 10, 1964, American Jewry lost a fine scholar who contributed immeasurably to our knowledge of contemporary Jewish history, particularly American Jewish history, as historian, translator and bibliographer.

Leo Shpall was born in Kremenicz, Volhynia, in 1903, and came to the United States in May of 1922. In September of 1922, he left with his family for New Orleans where he lived until June of 1936 when he returned to New York City.

Leo's father, Aaron S. Shpall, was a Hebrew journalist and teacher of distinction and dedication who taught in the New Orleans Talmud Torah under the principalship of the distinguished Hebrew poet and educator, Ephraim E. Lisitzky. It was from his father, as well as from Ephraim E. Lisitzky and other private tutors that Leo and his sisters — Mrs. Edith Pearlstein, Mrs. Deborah Citron and Mrs. Gila Lantz — received a thorough Jewish education. All of the members of the Shpall family have raised their own children bilingually, and have each of them made significant contributions to Jewish life and Jewish education.

Leo Shpall was graduated from the Government Gymnasium in Kremenicz, and received both his B.A. and M.A. from Tulane University in New Orleans (1926 and 1927). In 1927, he was appointed a teacher of German and English in the New Orleans secondary schools, and soon thereafter a teacher of history. He was the first Jew there to receive such an appointment.

From 1936 until the end of his life, Leo served professionally as teacher, head teacher or principal in various Jewish schools in New York City, except for a two-year stint as Educational Director of the Stamford Jewish Center from September 1942 to June 1944. From 1952 until the day of his death, Leo was with the Brooklyn Jewish Center, in 1952–53 as Principal of the Hebrew Department in the Center Academy and the rest of the period as head teacher in the Religious School. He was a dedicated teacher who gave unstintingly of his time and energy not only in the classroom, but to every aspect of school life: the Junior Congregation, club activities, and the school curriculum. He served as a member of the Executive Committee of the National Council for Jewish Education, and was the Council's historian and archivist. His principal affiliations were with the American Jewish Historical Society, the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, Histadruth Ivrit, and the Zionist Organization of America.

Leo Shpall wrote with equal facility in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English, and his knowledge of languages, particularly Russian, enabled him to translate into English important source materials, for which all students of modern Jewish history owe him a debt of gratitude.

Living and teaching as he did in New Orleans, he had an early and abiding interest in the history of the Jews not only in Louisiana but in all of the South. Among the articles he wrote for the *Jewish Forum* are: "The Jews of the South and the Independence of the United States," "The First Synagogue in Alabama," "Some Anti-Semitic Incidents in South Carolina," "The Jews of the South and the Civil War," "The Galveston Experiment — Spreading the Jewish Migrant in America," "Early Jewish Philanthropy in New Orleans." In the *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* there appeared his "Some Judaica in State and Other Regional Historical Publications," "The Sheftalls of Georgia," "The Texel Affair" (with A. P. Nasatir) and other articles.

He published a whole series of articles in the *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, among them "The First Synagogue in Louisiana," "Rabbi James Koppel Gutheim," "Adah Isaacs Menken," "Louis Moreau Gottschalk," "The Jews in Louisiana," and "A Jewish Agricultural Colony in Louisiana."

He did extensive translations from the Russian, into Hebrew and Yiddish as well as into English. His translation of George M. Price's "The Russian Jews in America" appeared in vol. XLVIII nos. 1-2 (Sept.-Dec. 1958) of the *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* [= *PAJHS*], of David Feinberg's "Historical Survey on the Colonization of the Russian Jews in Argentina," in *PAJHS*, vol. XLIII, no. 1 (Sept., 1953), and of Isaac Max Rubinow's "The Jewish Question in New York City (1902-3) in *PAJHS*, vol. XLIX, no. 2 (Dec., 1959). He translated into Hebrew (for *Hadoar* and *Bitzaron*) "The Letters of Sholom Aleichem to Mendele," "Memoirs by Various Writers on the 40th Anniversary of Mendele's Death," "Memoirs of a Member of Bilu," and "Herzl and the First Zionist Congress," and others.

He prepared extensive bibliographies. In 1964, there appeared a special *Hadoar* publication in Hebrew in which were listed all the articles on American Judaism and American Jewish history which had appeared in *Hadoar*. He completed, on the eve of his death, a similar bibliography of articles on American Judaism appearing in *Bitzaron*.

He was fascinated by anything and everything having to do with American Jewish life and history, and he wrote any number of

articles and reviews in Hebrew (*Hadoar* and *Bitzaron*), Yiddish (*Yivo Bletter*) and in English. He prepared filmstrips for the Jewish Education Committee of New York on "The Jews in the Civil War," "HIAS" and "ORT." He wrote commemorative articles on "Fifty Years of the Beilis Trial" [Hebrew], "Eighty Years of Jewish Immigration into the United States," and "The 120th Anniversary of B'nai B'rith."

The range of his interests was wide — from "Jewish Religious Movements in the United States," a special brochure published in 1935 to "Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the United States," published in the July, 1950 issue of *Agricultural History*.

He likewise had a perennial interest in the interrelations of Russian and American Jewish history. The Beilis Trial, Herzl, Bilu, the Zionist Congresses, the great writers of the Hebrew Renaissance — he wrote about all of these and more.

Leo Shpall was modest and unassuming in his bearing, passionately dedicated to Jewish learning and scholarship, a patient and untiring researcher and bibliographer, in love with his adopted land, and the sage of American Jewish history. We cherish his memory.

SAMUEL DININ

*University of Judaism,
Los Angeles, California*