

A CHARMING, LEARNED, GAY LITVAK

Elliott Horowitz

Writing home to London from Jerusalem on the first day of Rosh Hashanah 1934, Isaiah Berlin, who had recently become the first Jew elected to a fellowship at All Souls College, provided his parents with a long list of the people he had met during his first three days in the Holy City. These included “Dr. Scholem the Kabbalist” and Scholem’s Hebrew University colleague D. H. Baneth who had shown Berlin the “library of the University, which is splendidly equipped,” and in which works of philosophy were even “more numerous than at Oxford.” (Those were the days!) On the first night of Rosh Hashanah the young Oxford don had met the Volozhin-born Meir Berlin (no relation), whom he described as a “clever cunning man with an unpleasant son-in-law, who teaches the Yerushalmi at the University.”

Henry Hardy, the dutiful editor of most of Isaiah Berlin’s writings, including his 2004 collection of letters (published in England under the title *Flourishing: Letters 1928–1946* and in the United States under the subtitle of the British edition), provides information concerning Scholem, Baneth, Berlin (later Bar-Ilan), and almost every other person mentioned in the 1934 letter, including “a Syrian anti-semite called [George] Antonius,” with whom Berlin had lunched. Uncharacteristically, however, Hardy fails to identify Berlin’s “unpleasant son-in-law,” whom many readers (especially those who have seen my post at the

Seforim blog) have already identified as Saul Lieberman. After studying at the Slobodka yeshiva (where he was ordained at the age of eighteen), Lieberman completed his MA at the Hebrew University in 1931 and married the former Judith Berlin in the following year. By 1940 Lieberman was in New York, serving as Professor of Palestinian Literature and Institutions at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

As fate would have it, the year 1940 also saw the arrival, albeit more briefly, of Isaiah Berlin in the United States, to which he had sailed in the company of his (then) friend Guy Burgess, both of whom were then affiliated with British Intelligence Services. (Berlin, who

was born in Riga in 1909, was famously fluent in Russian.) Although the job in Washington that Berlin believed to be awaiting him never materialized, he returned to the U.S. in early 1941 as a “specialist attached to the British Press Service,” which was located at Rockefeller Center. During his wartime years in New York, Berlin met almost everyone worth meeting and befriended many American Jews, including Governor Herbert Lehmann (“a very nice comfortable man, like a little brown bear”) and Rabbi Stephen Wise who headed both the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR) and the American Jewish Congress. Of the latter, a fellow Zionist who had been born in Budapest, educated at Columbia,



Portrait of Louis Ginzberg. Image provided by The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary.

and ordained in Vienna, Berlin wrote to his parents in January of 1941: “Wise is very lovable. Absurd, unbalanced, erratic, noisy, unreliable, he is also generous, large, clever, understands who is who and what is what, has imagination, courage, and a golden heart.”

Although Berlin, not surprisingly, did not seek out Saul Lieberman during his early months in New York, he did meet Lieberman’s older colleague Louis Ginzberg, who had been instrumental in bringing his fellow Slobodka alumnus to the seminary. In fact, it is possible that the meeting was facilitated by Stephen Wise, whom Ginzberg (as may be learned from the 1966 biography by his son Eli) had first befriended in the 1920s, while soliciting funds for the publication of Benjamin Lewin’s multivolume *Otzar Ha-Geonim*. Wise had later been instrumental in convincing the faculty and board of the (Reform) JIR to confer an honorary degree upon Ginzberg, who, in his letter of thanks to Wise, humbly belittled his own considerable achievements. “If I have ever rendered any service to Jewish learning, there is no reason whatever for me to be proud,” he wrote in 1932. “A descendant of a long line of Jewish intellectuals [including the Gaon of Vilna], brought up in Lithuanian yeshivot and educated at German universities, could not help contributing something to Jewish learning.”

Writing to his parents shortly after Passover of 1941, Berlin mentioned having met both Ginzberg, whom he described as “very modest,

scholarly, learned, and sweet,” and his “terrible” wife, the former Adele Katzenstein. Berlin’s divergent opinions regarding the two Ginzbergs are also reflected in a letter written several months later, in which he informed his parents that he would soon be dining “with

translate the fourth volume of *Legends*, or any of the subsequent ones, something for which, as Ginzberg’s son Eli later wrote, he “would bear the author a lifelong grudge,” though it was evidently the Jewish Publication Society which was responsible for his

removal from the project.

Why Radin was brought in to replace Szold (1860–1945) is well known, and may also be easily inferred from Hardy’s note on the “terrible” Adele Katzenstein, to whom Ginzberg became engaged

during a brief visit to Germany in 1908. “The shock of this engagement led Ginzberg’s close friend Henrietta Szold, the translator of much of his work...to reassess her life, a process which eventually led her to found Hadassah in 1912.” The close friendship and subsequent rift between the Baltimore-born Szold and the Lithuanian luminary has been chronicled by Eli Ginzberg in his rather candid biography of his father and by some of Szold’s biographers, most recently (and extensively) by Baila R. Shargel.

Shargel’s *Lost Love* (1997) contains not only numerous letters between Ginzberg and his devoted translator, but also many entries from Szold’s private journal, from which we learn a good deal not only about the ups and downs of their complicated relationship, but also about the wider Seminary community in the early twentieth century. It emerges, for example, that it was Alexander Marx, Ginzberg’s close colleague and (slightly) younger friend, who became Szold’s chief confidant during the traumatic months that followed Ginzberg’s return from

BERLIN’S DIVERGENT OPINIONS REGARDING THE TWO GINZBERGS ARE ALSO REFLECTED IN A LETTER WRITTEN SEVERAL MONTHS LATER, IN WHICH HE INFORMED HIS PARENTS THAT HE WOULD SOON BE DINING “WITH PROF. GINZBERG, THE OUTSTANDING JEWISH SCHOLAR OF THIS LAND, A CHARMING, GAY LITVAK WITH A TERRIBLE LOUD, BRIGHT, SHINY SNOWMANESQUE WIFE FROM FURTH.”

Prof. Ginzberg, the outstanding Jewish scholar of this land, a charming, gay Litvak with a terrible loud, bright, shiny Snowmanesque wife from Furth [Fürth, in Bavaria].”

The earlier letter also mentioned Ginzberg’s “excellent book on Jewish legends,” which, as Hardy (almost) correctly notes, “appeared in six volumes between 1909 and 1938.” (The sixth volume appeared in 1928 and a seventh, the index, appeared a decade later.) The first two volumes of *Legends of the Jews* are described on their frontispieces as having been “translated from the German manuscript by Henrietta Szold,” but the third, which appeared in 1911, was translated by the Lodz-born anthropologist Paul Radin (1883–1959), who was working on his doctorate at Columbia, and whose first academic specialization was the Winnebago tribe of American Indians. One thing that Radin had in common with Henrietta Szold, his senior by more than two decades (other than a knowledge of German), was that both their fathers were European-born rabbis. Paul Radin did not

Europe in 1908 as a newly engaged man, and that she and Ginzberg had first met some five years earlier at the home of Solomon and Mathilda Schechter. When she entered the apartment, Szold later recalled, they were teasing the unmarried Ginzberg “about writing the article on ‘Kissing’ for the *Jewish Encyclopedia*,” a publication for which he had already written more than 400(!) entries during the hiatus between his abortive appointment at Cincinnati’s Hebrew Union College and the beginning of his long career at JTS. (The entry on “Kiss and Kissing”

biography, the couple’s first kiss occurred after their engagement:

When I returned to Berlin [from Amsterdam, in the fall of 1908] even though we were engaged, her [German-Jewish] family didn’t let her meet me at the train alone; so her brother came with her. Nevertheless I kissed her for the first time at the station. I stayed for a week, met her parents, and then came home to New York.

restive when confronted with the rigidities of German orthodoxy, awaited the return of the elevator to the ground floor, stepped in, and rode up. Marx, astonished, reminded him that he had just stated that using an elevator was not permitted. He replied: “I didn’t ask for an opinion.”

Whether or not the story is entirely accurate, one can see easily how decades later Isaiah Berlin, to whom Ginzberg may have told the story, could describe him as “a charming, learned, gay Litvak.”

“IN HARMONY WITH HER ORTHODOX UPBRINGING,
MY MOTHER WORE A WIG WHEN SHE WAS MARRIED.
WHEN MY FATHER DISCOVERED IT SHORTLY AFTER THE
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was eventually written by Joseph Jacobs, one of the encyclopedia’s editors, who may be the only scholar who contributed more entries to it than did Ginzberg.) Szold noted in her diary that in the conversation that ensued in the Schechter home Ginzberg “spoke enthusiastically of the chaste ways among the Jews, and he instanced the fact that he had never seen his mother and father, a very devoted couple, kissing each other. . . .” She reminded herself of this in an entry dated April 27, 1909, contrasting the restrained behavior of Ginzberg’s Lithuanian parents with that of Adele Katzenstein, “who gave herself to him after the third meeting.”

It is not clear in what sense Szold believed that Ms. Katzenstein “gave herself” to Ginzberg at that meeting (nor how she knew), but according to his own autobiographical essay, from which his son Eli quoted in his

This was not the only occasion on which Ginzberg expressed disdain for the *Yekkish-fromm* ways of the Katzensteins. As Eli Ginzberg wrote: “In harmony with her Orthodox upbringing, my mother wore a wig when she was married. When my father discovered it shortly after the ceremony, he ripped it off, and off it stayed.” This tension between the cavalier approach to observance of many learned Lithuanians and the conservatism of Orthodox German Jews is well illustrated in an anecdote which, according to Eli Ginzberg, his father “was fond of telling.” One Sabbath, shortly after the arrival of Alexander Marx in the United States, the latter asked Ginzberg whether it was permissible to use an elevator:

My father replied that it was not permitted, and Marx started his climb of six stories. My father, always

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