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## Rabbi Yitzhak Kertesz, 1956–1995: Menuḥato kavod

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The arrival of Evelyn Ehrlich as Chief Librarian in 1988 heralded the forging of a strong partnership; they cooperated in automating the catalog and other library functions. Yitzhak proposed and oversaw the implementation of the conversion of the card catalog (consisting of typed and hand-written cards representing some 60,000 volumes) to machine-readable form. In addition to current cataloging (approximately 1,500 titles per annum), he paid special attention to the retrospective cataloging of Hebrew and Yiddish-language materials, which were a special love of his. He created and maintained databases for acquisitions, serials, and gifts/exchanges (book-dealers and librarians may recall the wonderful lists which he distributed on the basis of the latter). He was responsible for LBI's application for special membership and eventual acceptance in the Research Libraries Group.

Yitzhak was dedicated to his responsibilities and spent long and arduous days at his work. Still, he found the time to complete his studies for the MLS degree at Rutgers University in 1991. When Evelyn Ehrlich left LBI in 1992, he assumed her duties as well. All of his colleagues remarked on his seemingly inexhaustible energy. The strain of his many tasks, performed under the sometimes difficult conditions at LBI, did not seem to affect him. He often regaled his colleagues with his trademark anecdotes and dry humor.

#### Research and Publications

Parallel to his work, Yitzhak continued his research and deepened his knowledge in the subjects of his interest. He was especially attracted to the study of Jewish humor, both in classical Jewish sources, such as the Talmud, and in later times. After a long period of collection, analysis and reflection, he published his first and only book in 1993 under the title: *Gittli neni tesztaja: avagy elmelkedes zsidó viccekrol* (New York: Ganon Books).<sup>1</sup> It was designed to be part of a larger program of collecting and analyzing Hungarian Jewish and general Jewish humor. At the time of his passing, he was planning to issue an enlarged English translation of the book.

Yitzhak also prepared an article on Genizah fragments of the Haggadah; it was accepted by the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, but he did not live long enough to revise it for publication. It must be consid-

ered a matter of great regret that virtually nothing of his research appeared in print. The one exception, aside from his book, is the article that he wrote for *Judaica Librarianship*.<sup>2</sup> It is a thorough, precise, and logically tight argument for greater cooperation in the acquisition and sharing of monographs and serials among Judaica collections, and undoubtedly an important contribution to the debate on this subject.

Despite his many other commitments, Yitzhak was an active member of the New York chapter of the Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL). He attended the national conventions as well as the local chapter meetings, and contributed to many of the discussions. He was responsible for the computer work and layout for the program book for the 1993 AJL convention in New York. His many contributions to AJL's electronic newsletter, *Hasafran*, reflected his humorous view of events and issues touching Judaica librarianship.

#### Illness and Untimely Death

In the midst of his many activities and projects, and with the promise of great things yet to come, Yitzhak was afflicted with viral hepatitis, which he fought for more than a year. Though his illness must have greatly weakened him, he continued his work to the very end with an almost unbelievable devotion, all the while aware of his approaching fate. He passed away on January 10, 1995, awaiting a compatible liver transplant. His loss is felt by all of those who knew him and were warmed by that acquaintance. He must also be mourned by the wider circle of those who stood to gain from his knowledge and unique character, but who will now be forever denied them. Let me conclude by quoting the famous story related in Tractate *Semahot* (chap. 8; folio 47a):

When Shmuel Ha-Katan died, they suspended his key and writing-tablet from his coffin because he had no son, and when Rabbah Gamliel the Elder and R. Eleazar delivered their funeral oration over him, they exclaimed, 'For this one it is fitting to weep, for this one it is fitting to mourn. When kings die they leave their crowns to their sons; when wealthy men die they leave their riches to their children; but Shmuel Ha-Katan has taken away with him all the desirable things in the world and has departed.'<sup>3</sup>

#### Acknowledgments

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#### Notes

1. Available from the Leo Baeck Institute, 129 East 73rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10021.
2. "Creating Judaica Research Collections: The Cost-Effective Way," *Judaica Librarianship*, vol. 6, no. 1-2 (Spring 1991-Winter 1992), pp. 163-167.
3. Adapted from *The Minor Tractates of the Talmud: Massektoth Ketannoth*. Translated into English under the editorship of A. Cohen. London: Soncino, 1965, vol. 1, p. 365.

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The following is a translation (by Zvi Erenyi) of a eulogy for Yitzhak by Dr. Jozsef Schweitzer, Director of the Rabbinical Seminary in Budapest. The eulogy appeared originally in the March 1, 1995 issue of the Hungarian periodical *Uj Elet* (New Life).

#### Rabbi Yitzhak Kertesz, 1956-1995: *Menuhato kavod*

We buried his mother, the medical professor, Dr. Marta Balazs, before the past Rosh Ha-Shanah. Yitzhak arrived at his mother's funeral already visibly ill. Now, not long afterwards, he has followed her to the grave.

He has joined in eternal rest our former students Ivan Silber and Istvan Zucker, who passed away [of cancer] before his ordination in 1982. With a fresh diploma in hand and with the late Professor Alexander Scheiber's warm recommendation, he continued his postgraduate studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. All of us saw in him a future professor at our own institution. At the Seminary in New York, his helpfulness and diligence brought

him universal esteem. He found a warm and friendly affection at the home of Professor Menachem Schmelzer. He acquired trustworthy and good friends within a short time. The coffin of the young Rabbi who journeyed from Budapest was surrounded by 150 people in one of the Metropolis' Jewish cemeteries.

With accustomed deep seriousness, he continued at the Jewish Theological Seminary the studies which he had undertaken initially at the Budapest Rabbinical Seminary. Our traditional literature has a beautiful name for the attractive and exemplary figure who generously bestows from the treasures of his spirit and heart on those around him: *butsina kadisha*, that is, the holy enlightener. Though he never yearned for this honorable epithet or for similar ones, which he merited already in his seminarian days in Budapest, his deep faith, assiduous synagogue attendance, book-loving intellect, and devotion to Biblical studies showed that the term suited him. He was quiet and introverted. As compared to those favoring the understandably noisier society of the young, he was rather withdrawn. In truly congenial company, however, he lost his reserve. He liked to carry on meaningful conversations with

friends. Our knowledgeable colleague and friend, Chief Rabbi Istvan Berger, who also passed away before his time, was his trustworthy and loyal interlocutor.

I know from a friend of mine, an outstanding senior physician, that he told an already gravely ill Istvan Berger, that his good friend, Yitzhak Kertesz, had arrived in Budapest and would be in shortly to visit him. Rabbi Berger's voice broke and he began to cry. He was so moved and was made happy by the news of his good friend's visit. The two of them will continue their long and beautiful series of conversations, begun at the Budapest study-hall with so much learning and affection, in the Heavenly Academy.

At the conclusion of his studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, Yitzhak Kertesz became a librarian at the Leo Baeck Institute, and eventually the head of its library. He often participated in conferences dealing with the problems facing the Judaica book and library world. At these, he made presentations in his areas of expertise and enriched Judaica librarianship with his studies. As the head of a library, he found opportunities to enrich the library of his beloved alma mater (which he

never neglected to visit during his stays in Budapest) with large-scale and important gifts.

Because of his modest nature, he seldom published the results of his continuous researches. I wish to recall only the book that he devoted to Jewish humor. He wanted to express his feelings toward his mother in his own special way by perpetuating her name in the title of his work: *Aunt Gittl's Dough; Or Thoughts on Jewish Humor*. It appeared simultaneously in New York and Budapest in 1993.

The writer of these lines recalls with sorrow and gratitude that his faithful student asked him to write a foreword to this book, so rich in original observations.

The Rabbinical Seminary family and his circle of friends all share feelings of heavy sorrow and deep commiseration with his father, the outstanding senior physician, Dr. Tibor Kertesz. They likewise share in the pain of his sister Judith and her family, who live in Israel.

Let us treasure Rabbi Yitzhak Kertesz, our friend, student, and colleague in divine service, in our memories with profound love.

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