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# PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

## Yitzhak Kertesz (1956–1995): In Memoriam

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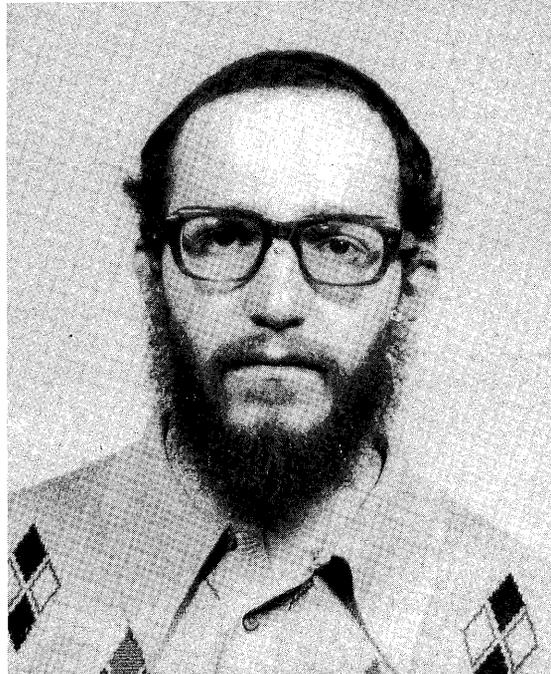
**Abstract:** The career and contributions of Yitzhak Kertesz, the late Chief Librarian of the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, are described. Appended is a translation of a eulogy by Dr. Jozsef Schweitzer, Director of the Rabbinical Seminary in Budapest, which appeared originally in Hungarian.

In January 1995 the community of Judaica librarians lost one of its most valuable members. Yitzhak Kertesz z"l, who at the time of his passing was Chief Librarian at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York. He was remarkable in his talents, character, and attainments. I do not think that we shall see his like again. In this brief article, I outline his career and contributions to Judaica librarianship for the sake of those who did not know him and as a memorial to a personal friend.

### Education

Yitzhak came to the U.S. in 1982 at the urging of his mentor, the late Professor Alexander Scheiber, the Director of the Rabbinical Seminary in Budapest, where Yitzhak had been ordained earlier that year. As a frequent guest of his parents, Professor Scheiber had gotten to know Yitzhak, and he observed the development of a young man who seemed destined for a brilliant career in Mathematics.

Under Scheiber's influence, Yitzhak began to visit the Rabbinical Seminary, became interested in Jewish studies, and eventually decided to study there. Scheiber wanted Yitzhak to further his education at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. It was a step that required great courage and faith, for he would be leaving familiar and well-understood circumstances for an alien destination and an uncertain future. Yet Yitzhak made this sacrifice consciously for the sake of fulfilling personal and religious ideals. Its magnitude was the greater because of his essentially shy and introspective nature



Yitzhak Kertesz

and his close family ties. Yitzhak undertook an intensive course of studies at JTS, and he also attended lectures on Semitic languages at Yeshiva University. We both took the Hebraica and Judaica Cataloging course taught by Bella Hass Weinberg at YIVO. She reports that Yitzhak was an excellent student. I clearly recall the strong impression he made on me when he visited the Gottesman Library to study: serious, vastly learned in the subjects which interested him, and blessed with an outstanding analytical mind. He demonstrated a wonderful sense of humor, though his whole being seemed touched with deep melancholy.

### Career at Leo Baeck Institute

At the conclusion of Yitzhak's studies at JTS, Michael Riff, the Assistant Director of the Leo Baeck Institute (LBI), hired him as a cataloger. From the beginning of his association with LBI in 1986, Yitzhak did much more than catalog. He also performed the tasks of acquisitions librarian and assisted patrons with research questions that went beyond the purview of the reference librarian, for his knowledge of LBI's subject specialties was extensive and he loved to assist anyone who turned to him with a question.

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