

# REFERENCE DEPARTMENT

## AJL Judaica Reference Book Award\*

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### Introductory Remarks

The bibliographical quarterly *Kiryat Sefer* records 7847 entries just for the year 1984; this figure is most meaningful as an indicator of the tremendous number of Jewish-interest materials published world-wide in all languages. Without the conscientious labors of bibliographers, however, and without bibliographical tools and reference guides, this torrential outpouring of literature, all of it of potential interest to our research collections, would be an unfathomable morass. As we inaugurate the newly established Harold J. Mason Judaica Reference Book Award, we are pleased to acknowledge Dr. Mason's tangible support of our endeavors to encourage and promote the compilation of these much-needed tools that bring a semblance of order to the world of Jewish research and scholarship. Dr. Mason, who has a doctorate in Library Science from Columbia University, is the founder of Greenwood Press, a well-known publisher of reference works. Hazel Karp, the immediate past president of AJL, is to be commended for her tireless efforts to secure permanent funding for the Judaica Reference Award. I also wish to thank Charles Cutter, Michael Grunberger, and Adaire Klein for serving with me on the Reference Book Award Committee.

The winner of this year's award is, in many respects, a very special individual. Born in Lithuania, Berl Kagan's "university" was the Kovno Ghetto, where he was a member of

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\*Remarks made at the Banquet of the 22nd Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries held in Livingston, New Jersey, June 23, 1987.

the Underground Zionist Central Committee during the dark years of 1941 to 1945, when Jewish Europe—as Berl knew it—collapsed. His pre-war experience as a Jewish newspaper editor of *Dos Vort* in Kovno served him well as a refugee in Italy, where he edited *Baderech* on behalf of the Central Committee of Jewish Refugees in Italy. Many of you already know our honored recipient from his combined twenty-five years of experience as a librarian at the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, spanning the years 1954 to 1979.

The product of a rich Jewish education in his native Lithuania, Berl Kagan was nonetheless denied those formal, "accredited" academic opportunities that each of us in America takes for granted. We honor him tonight for his *Leksikon fun yidish-shraybers*, an 800-page biographical lexicon of Yiddish writers that updates and extends the standard eight-volume *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*. I am reminded of the Passover Hagadah, Berl, for the lexicon would have been enough, but then you created an additional miracle—a section listing 5,800 pseudonyms of Yiddish authors and journalists.

A vast project of this sort would normally be undertaken only by a staff of researchers with expenses such as travel, postage, and overhead being absorbed by a host institution or underwritten by a foundation. In his introduction, Berl compares his difficult five years of compilation and verification work on the *Leksikon* to the parting of the Red Sea. The analogy is quite appropriate—in more ways than one—because neither Berl nor the Jews who fled Egypt in the exodus received National Endowment for the Humanities funding! Few of us would

have the tenacity and love of *yidishkeit* to pursue such an ambitious effort single-handedly, given the geographic dispersion of Yiddish literary culture and journalism in all of their post-Holocaust manifestations.

We are therefore indebted to Berl Kagan for his creativity and fortitude under such adverse circumstances. Yiddish culture is truly enriched by your achievement; the *Leksikon* is clearly a monumental labor of love, and it is my pleasure to award you the Harold J. Mason Judaica Reference Book Award for 1987.

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*Robert Singerman is Head of the Price Library of Judaica at the University of Florida at Gainesville. He is also Vice President of the Research and Special Library Division of the Association of Jewish Libraries and Chairman of its Reference Book Award Committee.*

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*Berl Kagan's Leksikon fun Yidish-Shraybers was reviewed at length by Dina Abramowicz in Judaica Librarianship, vol. 3, no. 1-2 (1986-1987), pp. 28-30, 34.*

**As this issue was going to press, the editors learned that the recipient of AJL's Harold Mason Reference Book Award for 1987 is Shimeon Brisman for A History and Guide to Judaic Encyclopedias and Lexicons. We hope to publish Dr. Brisman's acceptance speech in the forthcoming issue of the journal.**