

PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

Arthur Spanier (1889–1944)

Philip E. Miller

Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion
New York, NY

Biographical Sketch

The basic facts of Arthur Spanier's life are relatively straightforward and uncomplicated. He was born on 17 November 1889 in Magdeburg, Germany, the son of Dr. Moritz Spanier, a teacher and lay-preacher within the Jewish community and a popular writer, and his wife Helene (née Lehmann). The young Spanier pursued the traditional Classical curriculum at the König-Wilhelm-Gymnasium in Berlin, while simultaneously studying Hebrew and Jewish subjects at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. On 1 April 1915 he entered military service, and served at the front until his demobilization in 1919.

From the spring until the autumn of 1919 he taught at a gymnasium, but left it when he became a research fellow at the newly-formed Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. The following June, Spanier was awarded his doctorate for his dissertation on the Neoplatonist thinker, Albinus. In 1921, Spanier began his work at the Preussische Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, and by 1926 he had become the head of the Hebraica and Judaica Division at that library. With the rise of the Nazis, Spanier was relieved of his duties and was forced to take retirement in December, 1935. After that, he lectured at the Hochschule where he had studied, which by then had been renamed the Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums.

Aside from his duties as librarian, Spanier pursued research in early rabbinic literature. Among his publications were studies on the literary relationship between the Mishnah and the Tosefta, style-critical analysis of Jewish prayer and the liturgy established by the Tannaim, stress in Hebrew sentences, and massoretic accents. Other research touched upon Hebrew manuscripts and early printing. He was highly respected as a careful and methodical scholar.

After Kristallnacht, Spanier was arrested and held at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. In 1939 he moved to Holland, where his mother and a sister lived. In 1943 he was arrested and deported to Germany. Arthur Spanier died on 30 March 1944 (6 Nisan 5704) at Bergen-Belsen.

The cruel fate which befell Arthur Spanier need not have been, for there was one avenue of escape available to him. According to the Immigration Act of 1924, certain potential immigrants to the United States were exempted from the highly restrictive quotas. Such an individual was defined as one "who continuously for at least two years immediately preceding the time of his application for admission to the United States has been, and who seeks to enter the United States solely for the purpose of carrying on the vocation of minister of any religious denomination, or professor of a college, academy, seminary, or university . . ." But this avenue was closed to Arthur Spanier by U.S. State Department bureaucrats so callous that it is difficult for us to comprehend. Indeed, they became the accomplices, however unwittingly, of the Nazi murderers.

Refugee Scholars vs. Librarians

In his article, "The Refugee Scholars Project of the Hebrew Union College," Michael A. Meyer (1976) detailed how, between 1935 and 1942, Hebrew Union College provided a haven for eleven European scholars from the Nazi terror. One of them, the noted historian Ismar Elbogen, provided the names of many of the others to Julian Morgenstern, president of Hebrew Union College. It was Rabbi Morgenstern who issued the required invitations, made the necessary arrangements, secured the requisite commitments, and, where possible, pulled the proper strings.

At this point, it would perhaps be best to let Dr. Meyer's own words tell the details:

Along with thousands of other German Jews [Arthur Spanier], the former Hebraica librarian at the Prussian State Library and later teacher at the Lehranstalt had been arrested and put into a concentration camp after Kristallnacht. He wrote to Elbogen, his former colleague, in New York, that he would be released only on the basis of assured emigration. Elbogen thereupon urged Morgenstern to give him an appointment at the college so that he might be immediately released and admitted outside the quota. Through Elbogen and through Rabbi Jonah B. Wise [rabbi of Central Synagogue in New York City and son of Isaac M. Wise] an arrangement was worked out whereby Spanier's sister in New York would pay the difference between the value of her brother's services to the college and the salary of \$2,000 he would be offered. She also agreed to be responsible for his support after two years. Elbogen noted that the agreement "fulfills *mitsvat pidyon shevuyim* and has no risk." The college's appointment of Spanier as instructor in rabbinics, in December, 1938, apparently influenced his release from the concentration camp; but it did not secure him a visa. Unable to discover the reason for the refusal, Morgenstern finally succeeded in arranging an interview with Avra M. Warren, head of the Visa Division of the State Department, for May 20, 1940, in order to discuss the case.

What Morgenstern learned at the conference astonished him greatly, however typical it later proved to be of State Department policy. The Visa Division had ruled that Spanier was primarily a librarian, not regularly a professor at a legitimate institution of higher learning; hence he was ineligible. Moreover—and incredibly—the Berlin consul had accepted as valid the Nazi government's

demotion of the Berlin liberal seminary from the status of Hochschule to that of Lehranstalt in 1934. On this basis, as well, it claimed that Spanier did not qualify: the Lehranstalt, as a mere "institute" not of university rank, was clearly inferior academically to the Hebrew Union College, and the immigration law was understood to exclude the grant of a nonquota visa to a scholar coming from an institution of lesser status abroad to one of higher status in the United States.

(Meyer, 1976, p. 364)

Conclusions

These being the facts, what are we to make of them? Librarians who see academic research and publication as complementing their professional duties as bibliographers or administrators may be inclined to identify with Spanier, projecting themselves into the cruel situation in which he was trapped, trying to feel the crushing disappointment and sense of abandonment he must have experienced. Indeed, some might be tempted to hear a parody on the words of the Passover Haggadah. Where the text relates regarding the evil son, *Ilu hayah sham, lo hayah nig'al* ("Had he been there, he would not have been saved"), some might hear, *Ilu hayinu sham, he-hayinu nig'alim*? ("Had we been there, would we have been saved?")

Nowhere in this piece have I used the word "tragic," because to my mind the word brings up the classical definition which implies a fatal flaw in the individual involved. What was Spanier's flaw? That he was a Jew? That he was a librarian? Being a Jew was an accident of birth. And as for the choice of his profession, are we to consider ourselves equally "flawed?" This discussion leads to another word, "hero," one who, according to classical definition, demonstrates courage and nobility in the face of adversity. Was Spanier courageous? Was he noble? I do not actually know, but I would like to think he was.

We, the generations following the *Shoah* (Holocaust), recognize that we have an obligation to remember. But how difficult it is for us to "remember" names we will never know and recognize faces we will never see. When I began to prepare this sketch, it was my intention that a photograph of Arthur Spanier accompany it, for, I believed, to be able to put the features of his face to his name would enhance his humanity. So far, however, I have been unsuccessful in locating a photograph of him. But never mind. We know who Arthur

(Continued in col. 2)

The Jewish Public Library of Montreal: a Portrait of the Founders

Naomi Caruso

*Jewish Public Library
Montreal, Quebec, Canada*

The Jewish Public Library of Montreal began celebrating its 75th anniversary starting in May, 1989. This unique institution is both a lending library open to the general public and a specialized Judaica Resource Center serving academics and researchers who are drawn by such special collections as the Jewish Canadiana and the Library Archives. There is no other library quite like it in all of North America.

To commemorate the 75th birthday, the Library has published an update of its history (Caruso, 1989). The following article is based on one of the chapters that appears in it.

There were several attempts to establish a Jewish library in Montreal in the early 1900s, all of them ending in failure. It was probably because of the fortuitous meeting of two intellectual giants, Reuven Brainin and Yehuda Kaufmann, that the attempt in 1913 finally bore fruit; on May 1, 1914, the Jewish Public Library opened its doors. Neither Brainin nor Kaufmann stayed long in Montreal, yet during the short time that they lived there, they transformed the face of the Jewish community. Almost every educational and cultural institution that exists today in the city can trace its origins to these two men.

Yehuda Kaufmann

Yehuda Kaufmann (1886–1976) came to Montreal in 1913 to join relatives who were living here. He came from a wealthy, well-educated family in Balta, Podolia, that had lost everything after the pogroms. While in Montreal he studied at McGill University, from which he received a Bachelor of Arts in 1915. His proposal for a graduate thesis in Jewish Studies was rejected by McGill, however, so he was forced to leave Montreal in 1916 for Dropsie College (Philadelphia), where in 1918 he obtained his doctorate. His dissertation was on the great Bohemian Rabbi Yom Tov Lippman Muelhausen, who lived in Prague in the 14th century.

Kaufmann's connection with Montreal continued beyond 1916, because of his ongoing ties with the Folks Shule's Teachers Seminary, where he regularly gave lectures. In 1926 he was invited by Haim Nahman Bialik, at that time the editor of The Dvir Publishing House in Tel Aviv, to come to Palestine and compile a Hebrew-English dictionary. He worked at Dvir until 1947, when he left to conduct his own research. His studies on Moses ben Maimon (Even Shmuel, 1935) and Judah Halevi (Even Shmuel, 1973), whose lives he often thought paralleled his own, are well-known and still in print, as is his dictionary.

Even in his twenties, Yehuda Kaufmann signed his name Ibn Shmuel, meaning the son of Shmuel. But in 1947, when his own

MILLER (Continued)

Spanier was, and we know what he stood for in life. We refuse to deny him the immortality that is memory. By our choosing to be Judaica librarians, we tie ourselves to him We become his legatees We are his *kaddish*.

Sources

Lowenthal, Ernst G. *Bewährung im Untergang* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1965), pp. 162–164.

Meyer, Michael. "The Refugee Scholars Project of the Hebrew Union College," in *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus* (New York: Ktav, 1976), pp. 359–375.

"Spanier, Arthur," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), vol. 15, col. 247.

Taeubler, Eugen. "Arthur Spanier, 1889–1944," in *Historia Judaica*, vol. 7 (1945), p. 96.

Dr. Philip E. Miller is Librarian of The Klau Library at the Brookdale Center of Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City.