

A Personal Reflection on the Life and Work of Menahem Schmelzer (1934–2022)*

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“Like the Heavens in their breadth, like the Earth in its depth,
The mind of kings—unfathomable” (Proverbs 25:3)

Amid the long and horrible years of the Shoah, scholars of Jewish history and culture continued to produce. I have often wondered how they, and so many others, managed to research and write at such a time. Loss, especially unexpected and undeserved, can rob the spirit, muddle the mind, and inhibit ability. Yet perseverance—a rejection of despair—is an integral part of Jewish history, one that continues to infuse our own era as it has for centuries and millennia.

In December 2022, we lost a man who reflected that Jewishness in profound and, for those involved in the world of Judaica librarianship and scholarship, foundational ways. He was a man of integrity, humor, and deep knowledge. He embodied a modern Jewish culture of study, teaching, and production of new knowledge for the greater good. Without hesitation, he responded to scholars, students, curators, collectors, and laypeople.

Menahem Schmelzer was born in the small town of Kecel, Hungary. His father, Ferenc, was a winemaker and merchant, and his mother, Margit, was a homemaker. Though they were not intellectuals, the Schmelzers encouraged and enabled their son’s academic growth. He and most of his extended family survived the Shoah after his train car, bound for Auschwitz, was diverted as part of Rudolph Kasztner’s deal with Adolf Eichmann. He did not regularly speak of his experiences in the Shoah, though like all survivors he carried them with him, and later in life he patiently sat for an interview.¹



Menahem Schmelzer, displaying Shahin’s *Ardashīr nāmāh*; *Ezrā nāmāh* (Judeo-Per­sian, ca. 1670). The JTS Rare Book Room, 2015

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1. See “Menahem Schmelzer interview in Holocaust Oral History Film Documentary project, ‘Names, Not Numbers,’ at SAR Academy in 2019,” <https://vimeo.com/780190347>, accessed November 3, 2024, accessed August 21, 2024.

Following the war, Menahem Schmelzer studied in several yeshivas, graduated high school in 1952, and studied Semitic languages and ancient history at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest and later at the University of Basel in Switzerland. While still in Hungary, he was imprisoned under the communist regime for Zionist activity. Upon release, unable to return to the university because of his “criminal” past, he enrolled at the Rabbinical Seminary in Budapest, where he built a lifelong relationship with the great Hungarian rabbi and scholar Professor Alexander Scheiber (1913–1985). Unlike so many of his fellow scholars, Menahem Schmelzer opted to pursue a career in librarianship. He earned a master’s degree in Jewish studies and a diploma in library science in Copenhagen and between 1960 and 1961 worked in the Jewish National and University Library (now the National Library of Israel) in Jerusalem. While *yeshivot* had provided him with Jewish learning, and European universities had offered formal training, his experiences in the new State of Israel surrounded by both traditional learning and academic scholarship presented a springboard for what would ultimately be his legacy.

In 1961, Dr. Schmelzer moved to New York to serve as assistant and later associate librarian at the Jewish Theological Seminary. In 1965, he assumed the position of librarian, a role he held until 1987. The library’s collection of hundreds of thousands of printed volumes, thousands of manuscript codices, tens of thousands of genizah fragments, hundreds of scrolls, and still thousands more ephemeral pieces, had been amassed by Alexander Marx, who had served as librarian from 1903 to 1953. Following an interim period in which scholars Gershon Cohen and Nahum Sarna each served as librarian, the young Dr. Schmelzer worked to fulfill the herculean role of modernizing what was then the greatest Judaica library ever assembled. He did not seek to step into Marx’s unfillable shoes but made the library his own through a unique combination of content knowledge, bibliographic expertise, paleographic skill, linguistic aptitude, curiosity, humility, and an awareness of what constituted a great library. He was immediately put to the test in 1966, when a horrible conflagration consumed 70,000 volumes and the library space itself. Dr. Schmelzer led the charge to salvage and rebuild, not as a shadow of its former glory but as an example of the Seminary’s motto, “Yet the bush was not consumed” (Exodus 3:2), an idea that ran deep within post-Holocaust consciousness and which remains perpetually important.

I was fortunate to know Dr. Schmelzer for nearly two decades. As an employee in the JTS library’s special collections for several years, I had the privilege to seek his advice and ask him questions, big and small, about manuscripts, rare books, scrolls, broadsides, photographs, and so much more. Even in his retirement, I witnessed scholars arriving from far and wide to consult with Dr. Schmelzer about their research, the JTS Library collections, and related material elsewhere. In earlier decades, in an age prior to online catalogues, it was imperative for scholars to confer with him, and like his predecessor, Alexander Marx, Dr. Schmelzer would respond with alacrity and astounding facility. He devoted himself wholeheartedly and earned deep appreciation from generations of scholars in virtually any and every genre and subfield of Jewish studies.

Moreover, his personality, which included a desire to keep abreast of current scholarship and the well-being of his friends around the world, especially in Israel, endeared him to all.²

Even as I pursued my own research outside the JTS Library, I regularly consulted with Dr. Schmelzer about rare materials, scholarship, and life itself. Despite my persistence, there was not a single time that I had the sense I was bothering him. He never derided or even questioned my ignorance, nor did he hesitate to admit when he did not have an answer. He shared effusively about the work he was involved in, about the material we discussed, and about great personalities of the past who seemed to dwell in his office and in his heart. His accounts of David Tzvi Hoffman (a portrait of whom he hung on the wall behind his desk), Alexander Marx, Shalom Spiegel, Saul Lieberman, and many others were full of humor, adoration, and thoughtfulness. To me, his stories about their lives and the lives of the books he cherished and cultivated demonstrated an acute sensibility that the past feeds the present, even as we work toward building something new and fresh for a better future.

Dr. Schmelzer's achievements in Jewish studies, Judaica librarianship, and bibliography are impressive for their breadth and depth. In 1965 he received a Doctor of Hebrew Literature degree in Medieval Hebrew Literature under the guidance of Professor Spiegel. Four years later, he was appointed Assistant Professor of Medieval Hebrew Literature, and in 1987 he was named Professor of Medieval Hebrew Literature and Jewish Bibliography. He served as Provost at JTS between 1994 and 1997, and in 2000 assumed the Albert and Bernice Cohen Chair of Medieval Jewish Literature. Over many decades of research, he published widely and innovatively on medieval Spain and Ashkenaz, liturgy, poetry, *piyyut*, manuscripts, and early printing. He reworked and completed massive projects started by Aron Freimann and Shalom Spiegel.³ He guided, assisted, and taught thousands of researchers, patrons, and students over decades at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Elite scholars are occasionally rewarded with *festschriften*—Dr. Schmelzer had such an impact that he was honored with two.⁴

Yet Dr. Schmelzer's greatest legacy is something that cannot be measured. It is rare and profound to meet someone who is essentially a walking library. Beyond reading, learning, classifying, and

2. Prof. Joseph Hacker described his conversations with Dr. Schmelzer as *lashon ha-tov* (personal communication, summer 2024).

3. Aron Freimann, *Union Catalog of Hebrew Manuscripts and Their Location* (American Academy for Jewish Research, 1973); Shalom Spiegel, *Avot ha-piyut: meqorot u-mehkarim le-toldot ha-piyut be-Eretz Yisra'el* [Fathers of Piyut: Texts and Studies Toward a History of the Piyut in Eretz Yisrael] (Bet ha-midrash le-rabanim ba-Amerikah, 1996).

4. Debra Reed Blank (ed.), *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy: Studies Dedicated to Menahem Schmelzer* (Brill, 2011); Shmuel Glick, Evelyn M. Cohen, Angelo M. Piattelli, et al. (eds.), *Mehevah le-Menaḥem: Studies in Honor of Menahem Hayyim Schmelzer* (Schocken, 2019).

cataloguing, Dr. Schmelzer worked to know the story of every book, and to know its relationship to any and every other book. His devotion to this duty meant he essentially embodied the books, their stories, their people, and their purpose in a brilliant circular fashion that infused meaning into his life and work.

Occasionally there are books that stump even the most experienced rare book cataloguers—they do not fit a standard genre, they lack crucial bibliographic information, they have so much manuscript annotation that their hybridity belies definition. As a gentleman and a scholar, Dr. Schmelzer was that and so much more.