

## Abraham Berger (1903–1989)\*

*Leonard Singer Gold*  
New York Public Library  
New York, NY

Abraham Berger was my mentor and my teacher, and I loved him, even as I know he loved us, his younger colleagues. He was a man of very wide interests, of intellectual virtuosity combined with real understanding, and, most important, a man of great human kindness.

He joined the staff of The New York Public Library's Jewish Division on October 4, 1926 and served with distinction, for many years as First Assistant of the Division and, from 1956 until his retirement in 1967, as its Chief. A myriad of Library users, from the unsophisticated to the greatest scholars, remain in his debt.

Abraham Berger studied at Columbia University, both as an undergraduate and a graduate student. In 1938 he was graduated from Columbia's School of Library Service, and later he did graduate work in political science and as a Fellow in Jewish history. He wrote scholarly papers in the fields of Jewish mysticism and folklore, and was active professionally as a member of the Historians' Circle of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the American Academy for Jewish Research, and the Jewish Book Council. He served as President of the Jewish Librarians Association, one of the two bodies that were to unite as the present-day Association of Jewish Libraries.

Abraham Berger entered my life in 1963, over twenty-five years ago. I had just returned to the United States after living in Israel for five years. I was still under thirty, but only just, was married and had a small daughter, and professionally I was without direction. I got a job at the Jewish Division as Technical Assistant. Mr. Berger's Hebrew was quite fluent, and for that reason I somehow expected him to be like the pompous Israeli bureaucrats I had known. I quickly found out how wrong I was. I remember writing to the Assistant Principal of the high school where I had taught in



*\*Words spoken at the funeral of Abraham Berger, former Chief of the Jewish Division, NYPL, on Thursday, March 16, 1989.*

**Abraham Berger.** Drawing by Andrew S. Conklin, the New York Public Library.

Haifa: "Matsati ken shel enoshut be-tokh Nyu-York"—"I have found a nest of humanity in the middle of New York."

One of the rituals into which I was quickly inducted was lunch with Mr. Berger. It was his practice to invite a different staff member to have lunch with him almost every day. I resisted, at first, with a long speech about equality and the importance of my being able to reciprocate. I had missed the point completely. He said he was sorry I felt that way and hoped I would change my mind. I did and very soon. It was not anything in particular that Mr. Berger said, but his human warmth, which was irresistible.

On the first occasion, as we left the Library, he began the conversation as many Jews of Eastern European origin might have done, by asking where my family came from. We got through that, and I went on to tell him about my wife's family. In the middle of Fifth Avenue, right in front of a bus, he clapped his hand to his forehead and exclaimed: "Podwoloczyska, oh my God!" When we got to the other side of the Avenue, he explained that he was from Grzymalow, just a few kilometers away. And after lunch he showed me a pre-World War I map in *Meyers Konversations-Lexikon*. Of course, he was right, as he always was. From that day on, our friendship was sealed.

Talk at those lunches touched upon almost everything. I learned much about Mr. Berger's nieces and nephews and other family members. I know about his family's wanderings as refugees during the First World War, and how he, as *bekhor* (first-born son), had to be the man of the family when his father was away. And, ranging farther afield, I remember a discussion of Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* and another on whether Brazilian culture, with its many components, held the key to humanity's future. And this was in addition, of course, to Mr. Berger's repertoire of Jewish topics: of Cozbi and Phinehas and Elijah and Abraham Abulafia and Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav. And whenever I spoke about what I was learning in school, I was amazed to find that he knew all about it. But his knowledge was not only an encyclopedic accumulation of data, although it was surely that; it was also comprehension, willingness to think and draw conclusions from his vast store of information.

In the summer of 1964, he showed me and let me handle Hebrew incunabula (printed books of the fifteenth century), for the first time. And when I was appointed Chief of the Jewish Division in 1971, he made me a present of a Hebrew book from the sixteenth century. "Here, take it," he said.

"Keep it in the house. It'll be good for you." It was Abraham Berger who helped me to see that it was all right to be a librarian and all right to specialize in Jewish studies, and that this in no way implied narrowness or insularity. It is no exaggeration to say that he helped me to find the direction my life has taken.

My last communication from Abraham Berger was recent. I had sent [his wife] Pauline and him a copy of *A Sign and A Witness*, the companion volume to the Library's exhibition of that title, which consisted of an international gathering of Hebrew manuscripts and printed books produced over 2,000 years. The day we received a note of thanks, written in Abraham Berger's own hand, was like a holiday in the Jewish Division. Real joy was visible in the faces of those of us who had worked with him.

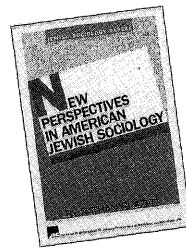
In 1971 Abraham Berger published an essay entitled "Approaches to Rabbi Nachman and His Tales" [In: *Studies in Jewish Bibliography, History and Literature in honor of I. Edward Kiev*, edited by Charles Berlin (New York, 1971), p. 11-19]. Nahman of Bratslav, the Hasidic leader who lived from 1772-1811, was a figure who fascinated Abraham Berger. In the essay, Mr. Berger alluded to a pun based on Psalm 61, verse 8: "*Hesed ve-emet man yintseruhu*." The word *man* has long been a challenge to commentators. The new Jewish Publication Society translation of the Bible renders it as "appoint," yielding "appoint steadfast love to guard him," with a note that the meaning of the Hebrew word *man* is uncertain. Rabbi Nahman, however, read *man* in its Yiddish sense of "man" and spoke of the "*hesed ve-emes man*," which Berger translated as the "great man of True Grace." Let us now go back to this learned essay of Abraham Berger's, for Abraham Berger was himself a "*hesed ve-emes man*," a great man of True Grace.

---

*Dr. Leonard Gold is Dorot Chief Librarian of the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library in New York City.*

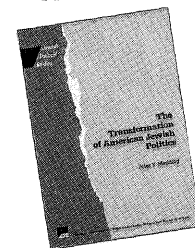
# THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

announces three new pamphlet series on Jewish life today . . .



## 1 JEWISH SOCIOLOGY PAPERS

- **New Perspectives in American Jewish Sociology.** Nathan Glazer, 19 pp., \$2.00.
- **The Quality of American Jewish Life—Two Views.** Steven M. Cohen and Charles S. Liebman, 55 pp., \$3.50.
- **Basic Trends in American Jewish Demography.** U.O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola, 44 pp., \$5.00.
- **Pluralism, Jews, and Equal Employment Opportunity.** Paul Burstein, 39 pp., \$5.00.



## 2 JEWISH POLITICAL STUDIES

- **The Transformation of American Jewish Politics.** Peter Y. Medding, 32 pp., \$3.50.
- **The Dimensions of American Jewish Liberalism.** Steven M. Cohen, 60 pp., \$5.00.



## 3 WORKING PAPERS ON CONTEMPORARY ANTI-SEMITISM

- **What Do We Really Know About Anti-Semitism—And What Do We Want To Know?** Earl Raab, 24 pp., \$2.50.
- **Policy-Oriented Research on Anti-Semitism: An Inquiry.** Ben Halpern, 18 pp., \$2.50.

► **ORDER** from:  
**The American Jewish Committee**  
 Literature Distribution Office Box C  
 165 East 56 Street, New York, NY 10022