



The Jewish-Theological Seminary of Breslau, the “Science of Judaism” and the Development of a Conservative Movement in Germany, Europe, and the United States (1854-1933). 13th EAJS Summer Colloquium. Andreas Brämer, Institute for the History of German Jews, Hamburg; Frederek Musall, Hochschule für Jüdische Studien, Heidelberg; Garth Gilmour, European Association for Jewish Studies (EAJS), 22.07.2013-25.07.2013.

Reviewed by Kerstin von der Krone

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Research on modern Jewish history has been flourishing over the past decades exploring the wide range of Jewish responses to modernity: from political emancipation and social mobilization to cultural and religious transformation. The 13th Summer Colloquium of the European Association for Jewish Studies (EAJS), funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, highlighted one aspect of this larger process of transformation, the emergence and history of the “positive historical” current, i.e. Conservative Judaism. The conveners, Andreas Brämer (Institute for the History of German Jews, Hamburg), Frederek Musall (Hochschule für Jüdische Studien, Heidelberg) and Garth Gilmour (EAJS) intended to emphasize the relevance of the “golden mean” for modern Jewish history, a phenomenon that often has been overlooked, since inquiry has tended to focus on the controversies between Liberal Judaism and Neo-Orthodoxy.

Two outstanding scholars in the field opened the Summer Colloquium: ISMAR SCHORSCH (New York) and MICHAEL A. MEYER (Cincinnati). Their opening lectures focused with Bernhard Beer and Manuel Joël on two mediators who frequently crossed the borders of politics, religion and scholarship. Schorsch shed light on the life and work of Bernhard Beer, a leading member of the Jewish

community in Dresden (Saxony), who advocated political emancipation, moderate religious reform, and critical scholarship. According to Schorsch, Beer’s concept of scholarship was paradigmatic for Conservative Judaism. He furthermore stressed that not only for Beer, but Conservative Judaism in general, the Talmud continued to be a crucial point of reference. “Conservative Judaism was not at war with the Talmud”, but demanded its deeper understanding through critical scholarship.

Whereas Beer is almost forgotten today, Manuel Joël is known as a scholar, teacher at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), and rabbi of Breslau. As the successor of Abraham Geiger Joël sought to avoid further controversies as Meyer pointed out. Geiger understood dispute as the expression of a Jewish *Freigeist*, a free spirit in thought that would strengthen Judaism, whereas Joël did appreciate compromise as an intrinsic value. This led him to undertake a new edition of the Breslau prayer book and immediately sparked a public controversy with Geiger that, as Meyer demonstrated, highlighted the difference between these two. Nevertheless, Joël was much appreciated beyond Conservative circles and e.g. involved in the plans to found the *Hochschule für die*

Wissenschaft des Judentums—irrespective of his connections with the JTS Breslau.

The following presentations dealt with a variety of questions within the history of Conservative Judaism and focused in particular on the role of Breslau as its birthplace and the JTS as the “mother institution” of rabbinical education. Almost all speakers would refer to players or projects related to Breslau, in one way or another, including its importance for modern Jewish scholarship.

MARGIT SCHAD and co-convener ANDREAS BRÄMER (both Hamburg) provided a socio-historical perspective and focused on the role of Silesia as the birthplace of Conservative Judaism. Schad presented “positive-historical” or “middle-of-the-road” Judaism not only as a religious movement but a political one that can be described by specific social, political, and geographical parameters. With regard to their origin, Schad showed that an astonishing number of Conservatives came from Silesia, Posen, Moravia and Bohemia. Brämer’s talk elaborated in detail Silesia as the center of Conservative Judaism and the interrelationship between the JTS and the Jewish communities in mid-19th century. A majority of Silesian rabbis advocated moderate reform, which drew them closer to Zacharias Frankel already before the foundation of the Breslau Seminary. In the following Abraham Ascher (New York) examined the relationship between the JTS and the local Jewish community of Breslau, while Irene Kajon (Rome) compared the Breslau Seminary and the Rabbinical College of Padua.

Historical research was from its beginnings a central pillar of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and greatly appreciated within Conservative Judaism. Heinrich Graetz was not only the most important 19th-century Jewish historian but also a Conservative and teacher at the JTS Breslau. MARCUS PYKA (Lugano) took the “loud silence” of German Neo-Orthodoxy after Graetz’s death as his point of departure. For Liberals and Conserva-

tives, he became at that point “their Graetz”. Pyka sees the reason for the refusal of Orthodox leaders to follow this path of glorification in the Orthodox reception of Graetz’s work, and in particular in Samson Raphael Hirsch’s response to the *History of the Jews*. NILS ROEMER (Dallas) introduced a broader perspective on historiography by focusing on the approaches of Jewish historians towards revelation and reason, the sacred and the secular. Roemer sought to challenge the “linear narrative” of secularization within the historiography on *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, highlighting the different contexts in which Jewish historiography emerged since the early 19th century. At the end of the century, Roemer argued, *Wissenschaft* had become a sacred space, inheriting a religious dimension that would later become the battleground for the young radical intellectuals in early 20th century.

CHANAN GAFNI (Jerusalem) explored a central concept of Jewish tradition, the Oral Law, which gained a particular significance for Jewish historiography in 19th century. The idea that the Oral Law provided Judaism with a certain flexibility and changeability was already promoted in the 18th century, e.g. by Moses Mendelssohn, who emphasized this particular value in contrast to the negative perception of Jewish law in the Christian environment. In the 19th century, Conservative and Liberal scholars stressed a later conception that underlined the idea of flexibility inherent to Judaism and legitimized the historical approach towards Judaism as well as the efforts for reform. By contrast, Orthodoxy preferred the concept of an unchangeable Oral Law. Regardless of the significant differences between these approaches, Gafni refrained from classifying them as movements.

MYRIAM BIENENSTOCK (Tours/Paris) and GEORGE Y. KOHLER (Ramat Gan) focused on the place of philosophy at the JTS and provided further insight into the work of Manuel Joël. Bienenstock proposed that his work on Spinoza might il-

illuminate why Hermann Cohen's changed his perception of Spinoza between an early positive discussion in the 1860s and his later harsh condemnation. How evident this influence was is uncertain, given the short time Cohen spent in Breslau and the fact that Joël was neither his teacher nor did Cohen quote him. George Kohler focused on the interest of the "Breslau school of thought" in medieval Jewish philosophy and its influence on Christian scholasticism. Joël and Jacob Guttmann were the most important representatives of this field of research, which was at least partly based on the political and scholarly efforts of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* to present Judaism in its own right and to highlight its role in world history.

The *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, founded by Zacharias Frankel in 1851, was one of the most important projects of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and linked, not only through Frankel, to the JTS and Conservative Judaism. Unfortunately, Christian Wiese (Frankfurt am Main) was obliged to cancel his talk on Markus Brann and the *Monatsschrift* on short notice. KERSTIN VON DER KRONE (Berlin) examined the late history of the *Monatsschrift* from the First World War to its final issue in 1939. From 1914 onwards the editors of the journal published essays on the war, letters and reports by soldiers and field rabbis. In contrast the dramatic changes since 1933 were almost invisible in the journal's pages and only indirectly discussed, e.g. through the re-evaluation of the history of emancipation.

Conservative Judaism gained influence likewise beyond Germany through the dissemination of ideas, the migration of protagonists, and the adoption of concepts and institutional models. In Hungary, the establishment of the Budapest rabbinical seminary, which resembled the JTS Breslau, played a significant role in strengthening a Conservative approach. CARSTEN WILKE (Budapest) shed light on an earlier but failed attempt by

Wolf Meisel, chief rabbi of Pest (1859—1867), to establish a moderate Reform Judaism in Hungary. MIRJAM THULIN (Mainz, Frankfurt am Main) discussed the eminent role of rabbinical seminaries as the institutional framework of Conservative Judaism and its transnational networks. Thulin presented an outline for further study on a number of seminaries in Europe and North America, which largely followed the educational and organizational program of the JTS Breslau. GUY MIRON (Jerusalem) shed light on one of these seminaries: the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York. Histories on the Seminary from mid-20th century tended to overestimate the role of Breslau and Germany as the wellspring of American Conservative Judaism, which according to Miron is not only an example of invented traditions but was related to the Jewish experience in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s. At a time when Breslau had vanished as a center of Jewish life, it became a positive point of reference for American Conservative Judaism. The discussion on Guy Miron's talk brought up the question whether the concepts of "positive-historical" as used in the German context and Conservative Judaism in the American context are congruent or rather reflect the different historical and political contexts in which they emerged. Zacharias Frankel was influenced by the German intellectual and legal discourse, whereas Solomon Schechter adopted "conservative" as a term from the political landscape of the day in England, which he used to implement his concept of moderate Judaism in a fast growing (migrant) community in North America. The debate showed that further research is necessary not only regarding these concepts but on how they were implemented.

Originally the Colloquium was planned to focus on the history of Conservative Judaism from the mid-19th century until 1933, but the final presentations chose to move beyond that fateful year. ASAF YEDIDYA (Jerusalem) describes the attempts of Ephraim Elimelech Urbach, one of the last

teachers of the JTS Breslau, to continue its legacy in Israel through the formation of the *Movement for Torah* in the 1960s and 1970s. In opposition to the Orthodox establishment, Urbach saw the need to revive the *Halachah* according to the challenges of the time. He failed to implement his plan due to the lack of a vision for the future of this movement within Israeli society. MICHAŁ BOJANOWSKI (Heidelberg, Wrocław) shed light on the recent efforts to re-establish Jewish cultural life in Wrocław (Poland), including a Jewish Studies Program that was developed in cooperation with Wrocław University and is meant to lay the foundation for an international center for Jewish studies. A first educational program attracted members of the Jewish community and the gentile Breslau population alike, creating a new space for interaction between Jews and non-Jews.

The concluding discussion, opened by the impressions of co-convenor FREDERIK MUSALL (Heidelberg), picked up several issues raised during the Colloquium. A number of presentations pointed out the different levels of invention of tradition prevalent in the history of Conservative Judaism, which according to Andreas Brämer can be explained by a dual challenge its protagonists had to respond to: the demand to define precisely what Conservatism is and the need for openness with respect to the broader idea of a "middle of the road" movement. The further discussion also commented on Chanan Gafni's thesis that there were no movements as such. In response, George Kohler questioned the perception of Conservative Judaism as a clearly defined religious movement and insisted on the acceptance of the *Halachah* as the decisive factor of differentiation.

Whether the Conservative approach should be understood as another version of Reform or constituted an independent movement, it is clearly based on particular concepts: The idea of a revealed Torah remained unquestioned and only the Oral Law was historicized. As Ismar Schorsch had already pointed out in his opening lecture,

this led to a different attitude towards the Talmud. In contrast with Liberal Judaism, the Talmud was not fought against but rather studied critically. However, the Colloquium showed that deeper inquiry into the history of Conservative Judaism, its protagonists and institutions, reveals a more complex picture of modern Jewish history. It offered new impetus for further research that hopefully will contribute to a better understanding of Conservative Judaism and its place in modern Jewish history.

Conference Overview

Opening:

Andreas Brämer (Hamburg)

Opening Lectures

Ismar Schorsch (New York): Bernhard Beer – Between Religious Reform and Positive-Historical Judaism

Michael A. Meyer (Cincinnati): The Career of a Mediator: Manuel Joël, Conservative Liberal

Panel I: Positive-Historical Judaism in Germany

Chair: Frederek Musall (Heidelberg)

Margit Schad (Hamburg): The Positive-Historical or Middle-of-the Road Judaism in Germany as a Movement (1844–1930)

Andreas Brämer (Hamburg): Positive-Historical Judaism in Silesia – A Success Story?

Panel II: The Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau (in Comparative Perspective)

Chair: Nils Roemer (Dallas)

Abraham Ascher (New York) The Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau: The Pride of a Small Community

Irene Kajon (Rome) The Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau and the Rabbinical College of Padua: A Comparison

Panel III: Historical Research at the Jewish Theological Seminary and Beyond

Chair: Margit Schad

Marcus Pyka (Lugano): Greatz, Hirsch, and the Dimension of Personality in the Emergence of Conservative Judaism. A Plea for More Than One Context

Nils Roemer (Dallas): Secularism and Its Discontent: Jewish Historians between Revelation and Reason

Chanan Gafni (Jerusalem): The Debate on Oral Law in the 19th Century

Panel IV: Breslau Versions of the Wissenschaft des Judentums

Chair: Carsten Wilke (Budapest)

Myriam Bienenstock (Tours): Between Biblical Hermeneutics and Biblical Criticism: Manuel Joel on Spinoza

George Kohler (Ramat Gan): "Scholasticism is a Daughter of Judaism" – Breslau and the Discovery of Jewish Influence on Medieval Christian Thought

Panel V: The Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums

Chair: Marcus Pyka (Lugano)

Christian Wiese (Frankfurt): Markus Brann (1849–1920) and the Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums [cancelled on short notice]

Kerstin von der Krone (Berlin): Crisis, New Beginnings and a »Dignified End«: The Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums in the First World War and the Interwar Period

Panel VI: The Conservative Trend in Judaism – Beyond Germany

Chair: George Y. Kohler (Ramat Gan)

Carsten Wilke (Budapest): Rabbi Wolf Meisel's Attempt to Establish a Midstream Judaism in Hungary, 1859–1867

Mirjam Thulin (Mainz): From Breslau to New York: The Establishment of Rabbinical Training in Conservative Judaism

Guy Miron (Jerusalem): In Search of a Usable Past: On the German Roots of Conservative Judaism

Panel VI: Contemporary Issues

Chair: Guy Miron (Jerusalem)

Asaf Yedidya (Jerusalem): Ephraim Elimelech Urbach and the Movement for Torah's Judaism 1966–1975. An Attempt to Re-Establish the Breslau School in Israel

Michal Bojanowski (Wrocław): History Reclaimed: Jewish Studies in Wrocław after World War II

Concluding Remarks and Final Discussion

Chair: Frederek Musall (Heidelberg)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

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