



ALEXANDER KOHUT

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1842-1942

BY ISMAR ELBOGEN

ONE hundred years have elapsed since the birth<sup>1</sup> of Alexander Kohut, a great scholar and leader. He was born in Hungary, and at a period when that country gave birth to many brilliant minds which were to become a blessing to Jewry: *e. g.*, Albert S. Bettelheim, Aaron Wise, Benjamin Szold, Adolph Huebsch, in America, and Joseph Perles, David Hoffmann, Siegmund Maybaum, in Germany — not to speak of the numerous outstanding scholars like Samuel Kohn, Ignaz Goldziher and Wilhelm Bacher who served Judaism in their own country. Hungary was then the seat of old Talmudic schooling and received some of the rays of the Mendelssohnian enlightenment — a combination which equipped it to nurture a large number of extremely gifted men and to impart its inspiration to Jewry at large.

At the time of Alexander Kohut's birth, the Jews of his country were fighting a double fight — for Hungary's independence and for their own emancipation. The two movements were interdependent; the Hungarian patriots were willing to grant full rights to the Jews, provided they became Magyarized, adopted the language and the culture of the country. Alexander Kohut himself, throughout his life, was a fervent Hungarian patriot; he spoke, preached, and wrote in Hungarian; and even his son, George,<sup>2</sup> that unforgettable lofty soul, though he had left Hungary when a boy of eleven, was wont to speak Hungarian and sometimes even to write verse in his native tongue. Alexander Kohut was an enthusiastic adherent of the movement of independence, and such an admirer of the national hero, Louis Kossuth,<sup>3</sup> that after the latter's death, though Kohut himself was a deathly sick man, he insisted on attending the Sabbath service at which he delivered an impassioned address and at the end of which

he collapsed. It was indeed the last time that he left his house alive.

Already as a boy Alexander Kohut showed signs of the future scholar; he was a polyglot and well versed in Jewish lore. After graduating from a Budapest high school he went to Breslau to the famous Rabbinical Seminary, headed by Z. Frankel, which comprised a Faculty of such luminaries as H. Graetz, the historian, J. Bernays, the philologist, and M. Joel, the philosopher, all epoch-making scholars and fascinating teachers. In fact, it was not so much the curriculum of the Seminary which built up that grand school as the personalities of the eminent professors. They impressed their pupils with their ardent search for truth. The Seminary was not so much concerned about the amount of knowledge the graduates carried away with them as with their thorough methodical training and their ability to do original research work. Education was more strongly emphasized than the mere accumulation of knowledge, and an extraordinary number of renowned scholars is found among the early classes of the Seminary. Theology was not in the curriculum. Frankel did not believe that anybody could teach the right — i. e., *his* — theology, which he designated as that of historical Judaism. He himself tried to mold the characters of his pupils through occasional remarks in his lectures and through personal interviews. His system worked well enough during his lifetime, and he created a conforming school of disciples.<sup>4</sup>

All the students of the Seminary had to attend the University, and such smaller German universities as that of Breslau at that period always had some excellent and inspiring professors. As a rule, the students majored in philosophy, history or Oriental languages. Almost all of them aspired to a Ph. D. degree; usually they attended foreign universities in order to obtain it. Alexander Kohut went to Leipzig, then the Mecca of Semitic studies. The High Priest of this department was Heinrich Lebrecht Fleischer (1801-1888), well known through his additions to Jacob Levy's neo-Hebrew and Chaldaic dictionaries. Besides Semitics, Kohut cultivated the Persian language and literature. He became so deeply impressed by the numerous analogies between Persian and Talmudic religious views that

he chose as the subject of his thesis "Jewish Angelology and Demonology in their dependence on Parsism," — the first investigation by a Jewish scholar of this interesting problem, which won him much credit.<sup>5</sup> Later on he studied the Persian translation of the Pentateuch.

But above all, Alexander Kohut returned to an idea which he had cherished since his early youth, a revised edition of the *Aruk* of Nathan ben Jehiel.<sup>6</sup> This classic Hebrew and Aramaic dictionary, composed in Rome about the year 1100, is of incomparable value to the student of old Jewish literature inasmuch as it preserves many lost texts and quotes numerous well known ones in much more correct readings than those familiar to us. However, the *Aruk* itself was transmitted in a very corrupt text, the first editions and the manuscripts showing many variants. It was Kohut's intention to publish this great work in a critical text, revised after the best sources available. Furthermore, he believed that his knowledge of Persian would be of utmost help in elucidating the Talmudic sources of the work. The Jews of Babylonia lived under Persian rule and were influenced by the conditions of Persian life. Hence, many obscure words and passages, he thought, could be explained through familiarity with that language. He employed the whole of modern philological apparatus in order to enlarge and improve the existing linguistic interpretations.

It was a gigantic task which Kohut undertook. He functioned as a rabbi in provincial towns<sup>7</sup> with no scientific library facilities. Photographic or typewritten copies of manuscripts were then unknown, assistants or secretaries not available — he had to do all the work himself, to use his own eyes, his own hands. For about twenty-five years he remained absorbed in the work; with feverish passion he labored on it; he neglected his health, his family, — for the greater part of the nights, too, he gave to his *opus magnum*. In 1878, when the printing commenced, he wrote a remarkable introduction, showing that he had already surveyed the whole of the material. But it took more than fourteen years before the eight volumes of more than 8,000 columns were seen through the press. The printing was an ordeal in itself. When the scientific material was ready in manuscript, the struggle to meet the cost of printing began.

No publisher was ready to assume the risk of so large an undertaking. Many persons were eager to possess such a work, but very few would buy it. There were no learned institutions or public funds to sponsor it in a satisfactory way. Volume by volume had to be financed through the efforts of the author and his close friends.<sup>8</sup>

He called his work *Aruk ha-Shalem*, or *Aruch Completum*. It was his ambition to make the old dictionary encyclopedic and to provide the student with all information related to the subject. A stupendous number of learned notes and comments had to be collected. Moritz Steinschneider, a close friend of the Kohut family, jestingly called the work the "overcomplete" *Aruch Completum*. The author had given too much, and with his lavish additions and different forms of brackets, rendered it somewhat difficult for the reader to find his way through the thickets of the scientific forest. This accounts for the fact that the work, acclaimed by the greatest authorities as a "monument of science," did not become as popular as was to be expected. One can imagine the happiness of the author when at last he succeeded in completing the manuscript. The whole family had to be present at that solemn moment. The fourteenth of May, 1889, at 1 a. m. he called the members of his family to his study and each of them had to write one of the words he had reserved for them — just as when a newly-written *Sefer Torah* is dedicated by a congregation, the most important members thereof are honored with writing the last word.<sup>9</sup>

While Kohut was busy with the *Aruk* and had published four of its volumes, a significant change came into his life. He received a call from the Congregation Ahavath Chesed, now Central Synagogue, of New York City. After much deliberation, he accepted it and arrived there on May 3, 1885.<sup>10</sup> "The joy of his new congregation" — so writes a competent observer — "was unbounded. His arrival was everywhere acclaimed with the utmost enthusiasm. A new light had come to American Israel."<sup>11</sup>

Kohut was anything but a fighter. Polemics were abhorrent to him. However, he enjoyed the reputation of being an outstanding rabbinical scholar and a fascinating preacher of traditional Judaism. The orthodox group, then

represented through the *American Hebrew*, looked for a rallying cry. But he was not a champion of orthodoxy; he was a loyal disciple of his master, Z. Frankel. He sought neither the "way of fire" nor the "way of snow." Perhaps the best designation for him would be that of a conservative reformer or a progressive conservative "offering the old and the new in happily blended union." He made his first public appearance with a series of sermons on the *Pirke Abot* wherein he stated his program, to wit, that "we can not maintain Judaism without tradition." He advocated, instead, a moderate reform. "A reform which seeks to progress without the Mosaic rabbinical tradition is a deformity — a skeleton without flesh and sinew, without spirit and heart. It is suicide, and suicide is not reform. We desire Judaism full of life. We desire to worship the living God in forms full of life and beauty; Jewish, yet breathing the modern spirit. Only a Judaism true to itself and its past, yet receptive of the ideas of the present, accepting the good and beautiful from whatever source it may come, can command respect and recognition."<sup>12</sup> He preached unity, peace; he preached against intolerance, and when it came to actual shortcomings, he criticized the Orthodox and the Reformers alike. Nevertheless, Reform Judaism considered these sermons as a challenge. Kaufmann Kohler, then rabbi of Temple Beth El, answered in a series of sermons preaching radical reform.<sup>13</sup> A kind of modern disputation started from the two New York pulpits and the great public of these and many other congregations followed with interest and anxiety the polemic which from both sides was led without passion and without animosity — Kohler and Kohut remained personal friends. American Jewry saw the alternative of the two different standpoints and cried for a decisive word.

In the fall of the same year, 1885, Kohler convened a meeting of rabbis in Pittsburgh. Nineteen rabbis met and passed resolutions which became known as the Pittsburgh Platform of Reform Judaism.<sup>14</sup> It is a very peculiar document, significant of the currents prevalent in those days. It was not a *Confessio Judaica* but a homage to the latest European school of thought in science, in history of religion and particularly of the religious evolution in Israel. The laymen did not get much out of this platform; they did not

learn what to believe and what to do, but only what not to believe and not to do. They heard that the observance of such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress are apt to obstruct rather than further the spiritual elevation of the modern man. The only positive sentence they read was, "That today we accept as binding only the moral laws of the Mosaic legislation, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives," but nothing was added to give a living quality and spirit to this general and rather vague statement.

The platform aroused a storm of opposition. Kohler termed it "the Jewish declaration of independence." Independence from what? asked his opponents, and answered: "Independence from Judaism."<sup>15</sup> Kohut did not take part in the controversy; he had his personal grief—he was mourning the loss of his beloved wife, the mother of eight children. But the controversy had consequences; the orthodox and conservative groups felt that some positive action was needed. Sabato Morais, the saintly rabbi of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, severed his connection with the Hebrew Union College, at which he had served as a member of the Committee on Examinations, and he launched the idea of founding a seminary, the purpose of which was to be "the preservation in America of the knowledge and practice of historical Judaism." He approached Alexander Kohut, the outstanding Talmudic scholar in the country, and found him willing to apply his vast knowledge and his learned experience to the noble task. In 1887, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America opened its gates in New York City. It was a very modest institution which had to struggle for its existence.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, Kohut was a broken man, tormented by that lethal illness to which he succumbed a few years later. Notwithstanding his severe pains, he insisted on continuing his classes, and when he felt too weak to leave his house, the students came to his sick-room and sat at his bedside. Foremost of them were young Stephen S. Wise, Joseph H. Hertz, the present Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom and, last but not least, Kohut's own son, George Alexander.<sup>17</sup> And one more interesting feature. As early as 1890, while in Europe, Dr. Kohut invited Solomon Schechter to head

the faculty of the young Seminary. At that time Schechter thought that the time was not yet ripe for him to leave Europe, but ten years later conditions were different, and he accepted the call.<sup>18</sup>

Alexander Kohut died on the 25th of May, 1894, at the early age of 52. He passed away, but he "continued to live never more to die." Never was the memory of a husband and a father cherished with more devotion than that of Alexander Kohut by his family. His young widow, a true *Eshet Hayil*, erected to her husband an everlasting monument through her deeds and her writings. And his son George, so tender-minded and poetic, devoted his life to the memory of his father. In addition to publishing a memorial volume in his honor and reprinting his main work, the son organized The Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundations for the furtherance of Jewish scholarship.<sup>19</sup> The large number of valuable contributions to the knowledge of Judaism, published under the auspices of the Kohut Foundations are, and will ever remain, a blessing, even as they will perpetuate the memory of Alexander Kohut.

<sup>1</sup> The date of Alexander Kohut's birth at Felegyhaza, Hungary, is given by his brother Adolph as May 4, 1842 (*Semitic Studies in Memory of Alexander Kohut*, p. IV). But in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, VII, 537, George A. Kohut gave the date: April 24, 1842.

<sup>2</sup> Born February 11, 1874 in Hungary, died New York City, December 31, 1933. For his character and his writings cf. Rebekah Kohut, *His Father's House*.

<sup>3</sup> Kossuth died March 20, 1894, at Turin. He has a monument in New York City on Riverside Drive. About Kohut's attitude cf. Rebekah Kohut, *My Portion*, p. 190.

<sup>4</sup> On the Breslau Seminary see the present writer's: *Ein Jahrhundert Wissenschaft des Judentums* (In: *Festschrift z. 50 jährigen Bestehen d. Hochschule für die Wissenschaft d. Judentums*, Berlin, 1922, p. 126 ff.).

<sup>5</sup> The Angelology was published in 1866. Of the publications of Kohut cf. George A. Kohut, *A Tentative Bibliography*, 1927.

<sup>6</sup> On the *Aruk* cf. Hermann Vogelstein: *Rome* (Jewish Communities Series), 1940, p. 132 ff.

<sup>7</sup> After having served for a short time as Rabbi in Tarnowitz, Upper Silesia, he became successively Rabbi at Scékesfehervar (where his son George was born), Pecs and Nagyvarad, Hungary.

<sup>8</sup> Kohut's original manuscript of the *Aruk* in his beautiful handwriting is deposited in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The author had intended publishing his work in Hebrew and adding a



German translation. He soon omitted the German version because it would have enlarged the work to at least three times the present size. The Seminary preserves also the book of subscriptions which shows the enormous difficulties met by the author.

<sup>9</sup> A dramatic description of the scene is given in *My Portion*, p. 162 ff. Extremely valuable supplements to the *Aruk ha-Shalem* are furnished in D. S. Blondheim: *Notes on the Italian words of the Aruch Completum*, 1933, and in S. Krauss: *Tossefot he-Aruk ha-Shalem*, 1937. Of his collaborators Bernhard Geiger deserves special mention.

<sup>10</sup> About the call to New York cf. *My Portion*, p. 78; *ibid.*, p. 80, the quotation of an article of Barnett A. Elzas.

<sup>11</sup> Mr. Philip Cowen, the founder of the *American Hebrew*, told the present writer that at first his group was in doubt whether Alexander Kohut was the leader they longed for. Only after having heard his first sermons did they decide to give him their full support, and Max Cohen, one of the co-editors of the *American Hebrew*, translated the sermons from the German. In this form they were printed in their magazine and later published as a separate book, *The Ethics of the Fathers*, 1885.

<sup>12</sup> *Ethics*, p. 12 f.

<sup>13</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, *Studies, Addresses, and Personal Papers*, 1931, p. 201 ff; 593.

<sup>14</sup> Authentic report of the proceedings are in the *Jewish Reformer* for January 15, 1886. The platform is reprinted in the first *Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* and in D. Philipson, *The Reform Movement in Judaism*, p. 355 ff. The words faith, confidence, prayer do not occur in this important document.

<sup>15</sup> The polemics mostly in the *American Hebrew* of the beginning of the year 1886. Cf. also *My Portion*, p. 99 ff., 114 f.; Philip Cowen, *Memoirs of an old Jew*, p. 405 ff.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Semi-Centennial Volume*, ed. by Cyrus Adler, p. 4 ff; *My Portion*, p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> *My Portion*, p. 189.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>19</sup> The beginnings of the Foundations go back to the year 1915.