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Rabbi Israel Schapira
(1891-1963)

Jitka Mlsová Chmelíková

I first became acquainted with Rabbi Schapira when I came across a photograph of him in a book. I had just embarked upon research about the history of the Jewish community in my hometown of Cheb in the Czech Republic. Dr. Israel Schapira worked in Cheb from 1928-1935. During this time, the pivotal book, *Jews and the Jewish Communities in Bohemia in the Past and the Present* by Hugo Gold was published together with the above mentioned photograph¹. Throughout the years after leaving Czechoslovakia, Schapira's fate had remained very much of a mystery². Through my current research in Belgium, I was able to discover many new facts about the life of this well-educated and respected man.

Rabbi Israel (Strul) Schapira arrived in Cheb in 1928 as a replacement to his longtime predecessor Rabbi Dr. Arnold Grünfeld, who left Cheb for Jihlava in South Moravia³. Schapira was born November 8, 1891 in the Romanian town of Piatra-Neamt. He came from a rabbinical family. He got his early education in the German elementary school in Suczawa (today Romanian Seceava) in Bukovina. Following this, he continued studying the Torah and Talmud under the direction of his father. At the same time, Schapira educated himself in history and general disciplines. At age fifteen, he wrote the history of the Romanian peasant's revolt in Hebrew.

Schapira lived in Berlin from 1913 and there he prepared himself for the school-leaving exam. In 1922, he successfully passed from the French State Secondary School in Berlin. Schapira continued studying at the University of Berlin, where he dealt with Romance and Semitic

¹ H. Gold, *Židé a židovské obce v Čechách v minulosti a v přítomnosti*, Brno-Praha, 1934.

² <http://www.zanikleobce.cz/index.php?lang=d&detail=54597>.

³ State District Archive, Cheb (SDAC), *Židovská náboženská obec Cheb / Jewish Religious Community, Cheb 1862-1938*, inv. n° 93, box n° 17, Rabbi, religious teacher and registrar Dr. Israel Schapira : Declaration about the election of the function of rabbi and about the renewal of the provisory contract 1928-1931.

philology and philosophy. He also studied at the Academy for the Science of Judaism. In March 1923, Schapira left Berlin for Paris, where he studied at the Sorbonne. He worked as a translator for the journal *Revue des Études juives*. After one year in Paris, Schapira returned to Germany and graduated in 1926 from the University of Heidelberg, where he received a Doctor of Philosophy degree. Schapira published the book *Antisemitism in the French literature* and contributed scientific texts to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* and *Jüdisches Lexikon* (Jewish Lexicon). In November 1928, he passed the rabbinical exam at the Academy for the Science of Judaism in Berlin.

Schapira mastered many languages, including German, French, Hebrew, English, Italian, Romanian, Russian and Polish. His promise to learn Czech played a significant role in his acceptance into the Cheb Jewish Religious Community. Czech was the official language in Czechoslovakia as well as Slovak and German being spoken there. However, the city of Cheb belonged to the German speaking part of the country. Dr. Schapira began his rabbinical career serving as an Assistant Rabbi in Berlin, serving the worship just during the important holidays⁴.

The Cheb appointment was Schapira's first in the position of a Chief Rabbi. The local Jewish community was not big ; it numbered around five hundred people and belonged among the Reform communities. In 1893, the new synagogue was built in a Neo-Romanesque style on the corner of the present streets of Obrněné brigády and Hradbní. The major tasks of the rabbi included the leading of the worship, spiritual care of the believers, religious education at the high and secondary schools and managing the registers⁵.

One of Rabbi Schapira's letters of recommendation describes him as « a very representative, good-looking and slight man, excellent speaker, exquisite singer. Also his other behaviour either as a rabbi or a

⁴ SDAC, Židovská náboženská obec Cheb / Jewish Religious Community, Cheb 1862-1938, inv. n° 76, box n° 14, Competition for the position of a rabbi : announcement, applications and recommendations of the individual candidates, ballots, results (ranged alphabetically) 1909-1928.

⁵ J. Chmelíková, *Osudy chebských Židů. Chebské Židé od 2. poloviny 19. století do současnosti (The Jewish History of Cheb from the 2nd Half of the 19th Century till Present)*, Cheb, 2004, pp. 40 ff, 33.

teacher was always perfect⁶. » The Cheb Jewish community accepted Rabbi Schapira and were very satisfied with their choice : « Dr. Schapira is a credible person with the distinguished character and exceptionally educated man. » However, Rabbi Schapira's Romanian citizenship created a problem. He had to regularly ask for an extension of his residence permit. The Jewish community fought for their rabbi. They intervened through governmental departments on behalf of Rabbi Schapira and paid a considerable advocate's fee. The State Office in Prague granted Rabbi Schapira naturalization papers in June 1932⁷.

Shortly after his arrival in Cheb, in December 1929, Rabbi Schapira married his Polish bride, Sabine Nord. The wedding took place in the synagogue in the West Bohemian town of Bezručice⁸. Rabbi Schapira left Cheb in mid 1935 to accept the position of rabbi in Antwerp, where, later on, he was recommended to the Belgian Great Rabbi by the Romanian consul in Prague as « the right man in the right place »⁹. In Cheb, he was replaced by the last local rabbi, Rabbi Isidor Sud¹⁰. During this time, the religious life of the Jewish communities in Antwerp was much more varied than in Cheb. Dr. Israel Schapira became a rabbi in the community of Shomre Hadass with the synagogue in the Bouwmeestersstraat. Many of these community members came mainly from Russia, Poland and other East European countries. After a short time, Schapira was appointed the Chief Rabbi of Antwerp¹¹.

In January 1936, Schapira wrote a letter to Eduard Löwy, the head of the Jewish community in Cheb, on the occasion of Löwy's birthday and he mentioned his new position : « I am fully drawing on fulfilling of social duties. For example, yesterday we received forty gentlemen

⁶ SDAC, Židovská náboženská obec Cheb / Jewish Religious Community, Cheb 1862-1938, inv. n° 76, box n° 14, Competition for the position of a rabbi : announcement, applications and recommendations of the individual candidates, ballots, results (ranged alphabetically) 1909-1928.

⁷ SDAC, Židovská náboženská obec Cheb / Jewish Religious Community, Cheb 1862-1938, inv. n° 93, box n° 17, Rabbi, religious teacher and registrar Dr. Israel Schapira : applications and negotiations about the naturalization in Czechoslovakia 1929-1932.

⁸ City Archive Antwerp, Vreemdelingendossiers MA#74762 1931-1950, MA-VR#238822, Dr Israel Schapira 1935-1953.

⁹ Archives of the Jewish Central Consistory of Belgium Brussels, 22 513, Correspondance Schapira – Rabbi de la communauté d'Anvers – avec le grand rabbin de Belgique J. Wiener, 1935-1940.

¹⁰ J. Chmelíková, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹¹ S. Brachfeld, *Brabosh. Een sjtetl aan de Schelde*, Herzlia, 1986, p. 34.

and ladies. They were members of the close and wider board and also the “gabaim” – the heads of the synagogue – and the heads of “batei midrash” – talmudic study halls. They came paying their respects to me. The head of the Jewish community was also present. We could hear yesterday evening at our house four languages. »¹²

Schapira wrote regularly for the Hebrew periodic *Ha-Olam*, 1936-1937 for the Antwerp journal *Haratson* and in October 1936 for *Le judaïsme comme religion*¹³.

On February 2, 1941, following the occupation of Belgium by Nazi Germany, Rabbi Schapira and his wife fled from Antwerp to France. They remained in Lyon and Marseille until January 1942. From there, they succeeded in reaching Casablanca in Morocco. Schapira and his wife left Morocco on January 22 and arrived, on February 14, 1942, in the Cuban capital of Havana, where they remained until December 1945¹⁴. In March 1942, there were officially about 1200 Jewish families from Antwerp and Brussels living in Havana. These emigrants created the *Union of the Jewish Refugees* (*Unión de Refugiados Hebreos*). Many of them started to practice their professions again. A good number were very skilled in the diamond industry¹⁵.

Rabbi Schapira worked as a Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation, which belonged to small and very liberal communities. However, this congregation always played an important role in the life of the Cuban Jewish community¹⁶. Rabbi Schapira's synagogue was supposedly « very American ». Many members of this community left during the war for the United States. Schapira himself had no « long term » desire to remain in Cuba¹⁷.

After the end of World War II, Schapira and his wife left Cuba to return to Belgium. In the middle of January 1946, they finally arrived

¹² SDAC, Židovská náboženská obec Cheb / Jewish Religious Community, Cheb 1862-1938, inv. n° 233, box n° 70, Providing of religious teaching – number of pupils at the schools in Cheb 1872-1938.

¹³ J.-Ph. Schreiber, *Dictionnaire biographique des Juifs de Belgique. Figures du judaïsme belge XIX^e – XX^e siècles*, Bruxelles, 2002, p. 316.

¹⁴ City Archive Antwerp, Vreemdelingendossiers MA#74762 1931-1950, MA-VR#238822, Dr Israel Schapira 1935-1953.

¹⁵ E. Schmidt, *L'histoire des Juifs à Anvers*, Antwerp, 1969, p. 218.

¹⁶ J. Levinson, *Jewish Community of Cuba. The Golden Years : 1906-1958*, Nashville, 2006, p. 179.

¹⁷ Email from Dr. Jay Levinson, April 12, 2009.

in Antwerp¹⁸. Israel Schapira continued his rabbinical career as before the War and worked as a rabbi in the community Shomre Hadass until his death in 1963. After WWII, Schapira resumed his position as the Chief Rabbi of Antwerp and was the only rabbi who was able to regain his former position¹⁹.

Mr. Sylvan Brachfeld's testimony concerning Rabbi Schapira was that « he lost much of his influence because they said that in Cuba he joined the Reform Judaism »²⁰. Mrs. Thea Zucker of Antwerp also remembers Rabbi Schapira in a similar way. After WWII, many more Jewish community members became orthodox than before. Schapira was also subjected to criticism that he had abandoned his community in the hard times. « He was a very well educated man looking as a non Jewish gentleman. »²¹

Rabbi Schapira's liberal thinking appeared evident in the 1930's. A letter of recommendation of March 1935 sent by a rabbi from the nearby city of Mariánské Lázně to the Belgian Great Rabbi Dr. Josef Wiener proves that in Antwerp Schapira was already engaged as a reform rabbi : « I learned about his character only the best... He lives more as a maverick [germ. « *Eigenbrötler* », french « original »]. His community is very liberal and so is also his attitude to the religion. »²²

Schapira's former place of work, the Jewish community of Cheb, was totally destroyed during WWII. Schapira had remained in touch with Eduard Löwy, the head of the Jewish community there. Eduard Löwy fled to Prague in 1938 and died in August 1942 in the concentration camp at Terezín²³. The synagogue at Cheb was burned down during the so called *Reichskristall* night of November 10, 1938. After WWII, Jews mostly coming from the Eastern part of Czechoslovakia re-established the Jewish community in Cheb. However, the Communist push in February 1948 created an end to this community, causing most of them to emigrate yet again²⁴.

¹⁸ City Archive Antwerp, Vreemdelingendossiers MA#74762 1931-1950, MA-VR#238822, Dr Israel Schapira 1935-1953.

¹⁹ E. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

²⁰ Email from Mr. Sylvain Brachfeld, June 12, 2008.

²¹ Interview with Mrs. Thea Zucker, May 2008.

²² Archives of the Jewish Central Consistory of Belgium Brussels, 22 513 Anvers, Shomre Hadass 1932-1935.

²³ J. Chmelíková, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121 ff.

In 1947, in Brussels, Israel Schapira published a religious-philosophical book entitled *Le sang et l'esprit* (*Blood and Spirit*). This book dealt with the history of the first Jewish settlement in Europe, juridical stand of the European Jews, religious tendencies and of the women's role²⁵.

On July 12 1962, following a decision by the Belgian King Baudouin, Rabbi Schapira was conferred with the decoration of Knight of the Order of Leopold II²⁶.

Israel Schapira died in Antwerp on July 11, 1963. He outlived his wife, Sabine, by only a few months. She died on February 10, 1963. Both are buried in the Shomre Hadass's community cemetery in the Dutch city, Putte²⁷.

²⁵ I. Schapira, *Le sang et l'esprit*, Bruxelles, 1947, 193 p.

²⁶ Chevalier de l'Ordre de Léopold II. Archives of the Jewish Central Consistory of Belgium Brussels, Communauté Shomre Hadassd'Anvers, 0462, Ministres du Culte 1956-1992.

²⁷ Email from the genealogist Bob Drilsma from April 7, 2008. Look at : <http://www.iajgsjewishcemeteryproject.org/belgium/putte.html>

Rabbi Dr. Schapira and his wife Sabine née Nord, 1935
(© Stadsarchief Antwerpen).

The Cheb synagogue 1893-1938 (© State District Archive, Cheb).

Interior of the Cheb synagogue 1893-1938 (© State District Archive, Cheb).

House in Schilderstraat n° 10, where the Schapira's lived in Antwerp, 2008.
(© Author's archives).

Program of the Chanukah Service in Antwerp lead by Rabbi Schapira, November 1937 (Archives of the Jewish Central Consistory of Belgium, Brussels).

FOTO van den MAN	FOTO van de VROUW

<p>Ik ondergeteekende verklaar geen enkele veroordeeling te hebben opgelopen.</p> <p>Handtekening van den vreemdeling,</p> <p><i>Israel Schapira</i></p>	

Dr. Israel Schapira with his wife in 1946
after their return to Belgium (© Stadsarchief Antwerpen).