



Shlomo Simonsohn, 1923-2019



NADIA ZELDES

Professor Shlomo Simonsohn ל"י *

At the conference held at Tel Aviv University in honor of his ninetieth birthday, Prof. Shlomo Simonsohn opened his lecture with reference to Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), the German historian and founder of source based historical research. Von Ranke had been in many ways an inspiring role model for Prof. Simonsohn who often prided himself for providing the "building blocks" of historical research, that is, the publication of primary sources.

During his long academic career, Prof. Simonsohn published several multi-volume series all concerning the history of the Jews in Italy: *History of the Jews in the Duchy of Mantua*, Jerusalem 1977 (first published in Hebrew in 1963, in two volumes); *The Jews in the Duchy of Milan*, 4 volumes, Jerusalem 1982; *The Apostolic See and the Jews: Documents and History*, 8 volumes, Toronto, 1988-1991; *The Jews in Sicily: A Documentary History of the Jews in Italy*, 18 volumes, Leiden and Boston, 1997-2010. Prof. Simonsohn is also the author of more than sixty articles on a variety of topics ranging from epigraphy to a critical analysis of the modern studies on the Jewishness of the Khazars, "The Thirteenth Tribe", in *Una manna buona per Mantova* (2004).

Shlomo Simonsohn was born in 1923 in Breslau, then in Germany, to a Jewish orthodox family. In 1930 the family left Breslau for Fulda where he was admitted to a Jewish elementary school. In a memoir he left for his family, he praised the high level of studies at that school and remarked that although he attended the school for only two years, it was there that he got his

* This article is based on the interview/article Simonsohn accorded to two of his colleagues at Tel Aviv University: "An Historian's Portrait: Interview with Prof. Shlomo Simonsohn by Professor Jeremy Cohen and Professor Ya'akov Shavit", *Zemanim* 115 (2011) 88-97 (Hebrew). I am also indebted to Prof. Uriel Simonsohn, who sent me his father's autobiography, originally written for family and friends. I omitted details that seemed too personal but made use of the precious information it supplied on the history of the Simonsohn family and included in the present article a number of hitherto little known facts concerning the late Prof. Simonsohn's career.

good knowledge of the German language and his love for humanities and history. In 1933 the Simonsohn family left Germany and came to Mandatory Palestine. The family settled in Haifa where they lived for several years and it was there that Simonsohn's younger brother died from an illness. Young Shlomo was enrolled in a religious elementary school and continued his studies at the Yavneh high school. Although in his adult years Simonsohn became very anti-religious, nevertheless he chose to study Talmud and rabbinic literature at the Hebrew University along with history; throughout his career he displayed his thorough knowledge of the Mishnah, Talmud, and much of what is nowadays termed the "Jewish bookcase".

In the late 1930s, the Simonsohn family travelled to London to visit relatives in order to help the mother recover from the loss of her younger son. Shlomo was sent to a local school and used this opportunity to learn English and familiarize himself with British culture.

In 1941 Simonsohn left Haifa for Jerusalem where he enrolled at the Ma'aleh school, a religious but fairly liberal school which accepted students of both genders and was known for its high level of studies. After finishing his studies at Ma'aleh in 1942 Simonsohn, like many young people of that period, joined a paramilitary organization of the *Yishuv* (the term used for describing the Jewish settlement in Mandatory Palestine) and served for a year in Gush Etzion, near Jerusalem. Shortly after that he started his studies at the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus.

When asked why he chose to study history, Prof. Simonsohn told in the interview conducted in 2011 quoted above, that he had always been interested in history ever since childhood. He confessed to have read a shortened version of *The Historians' History of the World* (in German)¹ at the age of eleven, claiming that he was born with a fascination for history. Choosing the history of Italian Jews as his main topic was, however, fortuitous. His teacher at the Hebrew University, Ytzhak Baer, advised him to choose a specific field of research, and as Baer was already an expert in the history of the Jews of Spain, he suggested that Simonsohn should focus on the history of Italian Jews.

In 1952 Simonsohn finished his Ph.D. studies at the University of London, submitting a thesis on Leone da Modena. While in London, Simonsohn enrolled at the Institute of Historical Research in order to study medieval paleography which he considered indispensable for the study of medieval documents, an expertise that later helped him in his research in Italian archives. During his studies in England Simonsohn met with Cecil Roth (1899-1970), at the time professor at Oxford University, already well known for his *History of*

¹ Henry Smith Williams, *The Historians' History of the World*, London 1907 (a 25-volume encyclopedia of world history, originally published in English).

the Jews in Italy, and many other publications on Jewish history. Although Roth was not Simonsohn's teacher, the latter regarded him as a mentor and sought his advice. When Simonsohn left England on his way back to Israel, Roth suggested that he visit Mantua and check whether or not the rich archive of the Jewish community survived destruction in the aftermath of the Second World War. In Mantua Simonsohn met Vittore Colorni, professor of Italian Legal History at the University of Ferrara. They became lifelong friends. Colorni presented young Simonsohn to members of the Mantua community and helped him find his way in the archive. What was intended as a short exploratory visit, turned into a year long stay in that city. The material found in the Mantua archive became in due course Simonsohn's *History of the Jews in the Duchy of Mantua*. In order to create copies of the Mantua documents, Simonsohn built a rudimentary photography chamber and managed to photograph over 40,000 documents. Many years later, in a chat over coffee, Simonsohn told me how in his youth he had built a microfilm reader using lenses from a dismantled camera. These technical skills, rare for a scholar of humanities, reveal a little known side of his personality.

In the 1950s there was only one university in Israel, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Simonsohn soon realized he had few chances of obtaining a post there. In the following years he joined a group of academics who founded Tel Aviv University. Between 1972 and 1977 he held the post of rector at that university. There he founded the *Department of Jewish History*, the *Diaspora Research Institute* (now *The Goldstein-Goren Research Center*), the *Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies and Archaeology*, and the *Italia Judaica* project. Among his many contributions to historical studies in Israel, Simonsohn also founded several journals: *'Et-mol* (its title forming a Hebrew pun composed of *'et* (time) and *etmol* (yesterday), that published popular articles on the history of the Land of Israel; *Michael*, dedicated to Diaspora studies; *Shevut*, on the Jews of the Soviet Union, and *Gal'ed*, on the history of the Jews in Poland.

During a sabbatical at Yale University in the late 1970s Simonsohn concentrated on what was to become his magnum opus, researching for and organizing the documentary material for *The Apostolic See and the Jews*. At the same time he started working on one more project, the *Jews in Sicily*. Simonsohn continued his work on the *Apostolic See* during another sabbatical, this time at Oxford University, enjoying the rich collections of the Bodleian Library. However, the *Apostolic See* was finished only during another sabbatical, in Berlin, Germany.

In the already mentioned interview conducted in 2011 by two of his colleagues at Tel Aviv University, Professors Jeremy Cohen and Ya'akov Shavit, Simonsohn used the opportunity to discuss his methods of research, his disapproval of historical hypotheses unsupported by documentary evidence,

expounded on the unique aspects of Italian Jewish life, and commented on the attitudes of the Church towards the Jews.

When asked about his own views of Jewish history, Simonsohn openly admitted that he saw himself as committed to his national identity. Although he prized scholarly objectivity above all else, he saw himself first and foremost as a Jew, indebted to the long history of his own family (which could trace its roots to the 13th century), and to that of the Jewish people in general. He strongly objected to the theories recently brought forth by new historians, and in particular to the claim that European Jews were in fact the descendants of the Khazars;² he dismissed the historical importance of ethnicity studies based on DNA, but argued that collective consciousness and common cultural traits create historical reality (in this case, national identity). At the same time he rejected the view of certain scholars who stressed the importance of the historian's personality and circumstances, particularly that of the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl (1877-1866) who argued that "there never can be a definitive account for all the ages because every age has a different view of the past".³ According to Simonsohn, history is a struggle to attain Truth. In his opinion, research should always be founded on documentation and only on that: *quod non est in actis non est in mundo* (what is not present in the acts, does not exist). Was he indeed totally objective in his attitudes towards history? In the same interview, Simonsohn conceded that he never saw himself as a historian armed with an agenda and always strove to be as objective as possible, and yet, he would never let this conflict with his awareness of his own national (Jewish) identity.

When asked about his most recent work, the publication of the volumes on the history of the Jews in Sicily, he stressed his commitment to the same method he used in his other studies: the collection and publication of relevant documents and their analysis in the final, conclusive volume. In his treatment of the history of Sicilian Jewry he attempted to place this particular chapter in the wider context the general history of the Jews, history of Italy in the Middle Ages, history of the Jews in the Middle Ages and the larger context of Mediterranean medieval history. In his view, the history of the Jews in Sicily, confirms the traditional role of medieval Jews as a necessary element in the colonization of newly conquered lands (to be used until there was no more need for them), it also fits in with the Church's role as a driving force towards certain goals, while other forces pull in a different direction.

² Hinting at the controversial book authored by Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, trans. Yael Lotan, New York 2009.

³ On Pieter Geyl, see: Herbert H. Rowen, "The Historical Work of Pieter Geyl", *The Journal of Modern History* 37 (1965) 35-49.

Simonsohn was often criticized for refraining from condemning the papacy for its anti-Jewish policy, as in his view the papacy usually advocated a relatively more tolerant attitude towards the Jews than other forces within the Church, particularly the Mendicant Orders. In his *Apostolic See* he stressed the fact that most medieval popes adhered to the Augustinian doctrine that interpreted the verse "Slay them not, lest my people forget" (*Psalms* 59:12) as the need to tolerate the Jews because they bore witness to the Truth of Christianity. In his concluding chapter, Simonsohn observed that while Catholic theology rejected Judaism, it permitted the presence of the Jews among the Christians. Often the popes admonished those who persecuted the Jews, reiterating time and again the formula expressed in the Bull *Sicut Iudaeis* (first issued by Pope Gregory the Great, 590-604) in defense of the Jews. The popes, according to Simonsohn, were the mainstay of the Jews during the Middle Ages.

On the unique aspects of Italian Jewry, Simonsohn remarks that Italy's geographical situation has turned it in the course of history into a crossroads of encounters between peoples and cultures which in turn affected the Jews living there. The south, particularly Sicily, was during the high Middle Ages in close relations with Africa and the Muslim world. Later, with the movement of the Jews from the south to central and northern Italy, the local communities were strengthened by the influx of immigrants from Germany, France, and Spain. Each group of Jewish immigrants had its own pattern of settlement – the French settled in the north-west, the Germans in the north-east, while those coming from the Iberian kingdoms settled in various cities. Each group kept its own customs and traditions, language and rite. The multi-ethnic encounters resulted in a flourishing culture. This situation continued to be in force until the dismantling of the ghettos, and perhaps even beyond that. Italy served, therefore, as a melting pot for the Jews. Its openness to a variety of cultural influences created a truly multi-cultural people. Its unusual openness to non-Jewish surroundings, even in the ghetto era, contributed to its unique cultural characteristics.

As regards the state of research on Italian Jewries, he noted that although there are numerous studies on this topic, they remain somewhat marginal. Perhaps it is so because they have always been perceived as a small and marginal community, despite their huge contributions to cultural history. In fact, as regards the status of the study of history in Israel, Simonsohn bemoaned the lack of interest in Jewish history, particularly in the history of the Jewish Diaspora (with the notable exception of the Holocaust). Worse still, with the retirement of the older generation of experts on Italian Jewry, such as Robert Bonfil, Israeli universities are making little effort, if any, to replace them. On the other hand, he lamented what he termed "the insular-

ity” of historical studies in Italy. Most Italians read only Italian and often disregard important studies on the very topics they are interested in when written in other languages.

I would like to conclude this small contribution to the memory of my teacher Shlomo Simonsohn with a personal note. Simonsohn applied very demanding standards to himself and others and many noted his rigidity and lack of empathy. Yet, when in 2005 I told him that I could not attend the *Italia Judaica* conference held that year at Lucca because of an eye operation, he offered to read my paper for me. I then sent him my “Aspects of Married Life of Jewish Women Converts in Italy”, which he presented in my name.⁴

In my meetings with Prof. Simonsohn, both during the work on my Ph.D. thesis in the late 1990s and in the coming years, I was always amazed at the depth of his knowledge on almost any subject I mentioned. He gave me useful advice and encouraged me in many of my endeavors.

יהי זכרו ברוך

⁴ Published in *Donne nella storia degli ebrei d'Italia*, eds. Michele Luzzati and Cristina Galasso, Firenze 2007.