

[Passing of Rabbi Dr. Hermann Schmelzer](#)

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H-Judaic is greatly saddened by the passing of Rabbi Dr. Hermann Schmelzer (1932-2020), one of the foremost scholars and rabbis of Central Europe. We are grateful to Professor Susannah Heschel for penning this necrology.

With the death of Rabbi Schmelzer, we have lost one of the great figures of European Jewish life, a rabbi and scholar of extraordinary learning. Fluent in many languages. Rabbi Schmelzer was an exemplar of the great Jewish philologists of the nineteenth century; his teachers had studied in that century and he understood their methods and ways of thinking. He shared their passion for learning, their multilingualism, and their encyclopedic knowledge and brought their world to our lives.

Born in Hungary in 1932, Rabbi Schmelzer studied at the Rabbinical College in Budapest, then at the Ecole Rabbinique in Paris. In 1958 he was hired as a Religion teacher in Stockholm, studied in London and received his rabbinical ordination in Malmo, Sweden, in 1962. In 1968 he was appointed rabbi of Sankt Gallen, a small Jewish community which he served for the next forty years. He conducted an Orthodox service in a magnificent synagogue, with women seated in the balcony. At times it was difficult to raise a minyan, and Rabbi Schmelzer served all functions as rabbi and cantor and teacher, even chanting the entire Torah parsha every week.

A person of dignity, refinement and formality in the traditional European rabbinic manner, he was immensely learned not only in classical rabbinic texts but also in the Wissenschaft des Judentums. He owned an extraordinary library of European Jewish publications and in my several visits with him, I realized that he simply knew not only the answer to every question I had about modern Jewish scholarship, he had the original books, the book reviews tucked inside, and knew of a dozen similar works of scholarship. In his mind, the world of pre-war European Jewish intellectual life was alive and vivid.

His academic interests were broad. He wrote a history of the Jews in Sankt Gallen, one of the wealthy textile centers in Europe, with a major library, beautiful architecture, and an animus toward Jews that only began to lift after Jews were readmitted in the 1820s. Like so many other Jewish scholars in Budapest, a major interest of Rabbi Schmelzer was in the study of Islam and in the history of that scholarship. He published an article on the Hungarian Jewish scholar Martin Schreiner, one of the most important scholars of Islam who died tragically at a young age.

Rabbi Schmelzer was also involved in religious dialogue, which he called a privilege, and he stressed the importance of knowing other faiths. He was certainly a most worthy and learned representative of Judaism in such gatherings. Yet he wore his deep learning lightly, hidden behind his smile, his gentleness and his modesty. Few in his congregation may have realized the extraordinary depth of his

scholarly knowledge, but those who engaged with him in discussions of historical questions were rewarded with his enormous erudition and guidance. He had a strong influence on the work of Beatrix Jessberger, pastor for many years of the Protestant community in Rehetobel, a suburb of Sank Gallen, and author of an important book on interfaith theology.

With his death, Switzerland has lost its most distinguished rabbi and Jews everywhere have lost a final link to that magical era in which scholarship was not found on the internet, but in the sharp minds and keen intellect of great human beings.

H-Judaic extends deepest condolences to Rabbi Schmelzer's family, students and friends.

Jonathan D. Sarna

Chair, H-Judaic