



'The Golden Chain of Pious Rabbis'

The origin and development of Finnish Jewish Orthodoxy

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ABSTRACT • This article provides the first historiographical analysis of the origins of Jewish Orthodoxy in Helsinki and describes the development of the rabbinate from the establishment of the congregation in the late 1850s up to the early 1980s. The origins of the Finnish Jewish community lies in the nineteenth-century Russian army. The majority of Jewish soldiers in Helsinki originated from the realm of Lithuanian Jewish (Litvak) culture, that is, mainly non-Hasidic Jewish Orthodoxy that emerged in the late eighteenth century. Initially, the Finnish Jewish religious establishment continued this Orthodox-Litvak tradition. After the independence of Finland, the Helsinki congregation hired academic, Modern Orthodox rabbis educated in Western Europe. Following the devastation of the Shoah and the Second World War, the recruitment of rabbis faced new challenges. Overall, the rabbi recruitments were in congruence with the social and cultural development of the Helsinki community, yet respected its Orthodox roots.

Introduction¹

The liturgical customs of the Jewish Community of Helsinki were codified in 2001, when the long-serving rabbi Moshe Edelmann compiled an extensive manual entitled *The Traditional Order of Synagogue Service in the Jewish Community of Helsinki*. In the preface, Edelmann (2001) notes that this tradition, *Minhag Polin*,² has been passed down

from generation to generation from the Cantonists,³ the former Jewish soldiers who established the community.⁴

stein 1997: 63, 74). According to Edelmann (2001), Helsinki has always held on to the traditions of the forefathers (Heb. *minhag avotenu be-yadenu*).

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3 Jewish soldiers from the time of Nicholas I were generally referred to as 'Nicholas's soldiers', and among them only those who had attended a Cantonist school were called Cantonists. In Finland, however, the term is often applied to *all* Jewish soldiers who served in the tsar's army (Muir 2004: 20).

2 *Minhag Polin* represents the eastern version of the Ashkenazi liturgical rite (Lowen-

4 There are many alternative spellings for Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian towns, reflecting the geopolitics of the area. In this article, we use those place names that were mostly used at the time of the life of the individual, and, when needed, show in brackets their modern names. The transliteration of Yiddish follows the general guidelines of YIVO standard spelling, and Hebrew the *SBL Handbook of Style*.

Who were the rabbis employed by the Cantonists that ingrained Minhag Polin in the Jewish Community of Helsinki? What kind of Orthodoxy did they represent and how did the rabbinate develop over time? How have local sources described their backgrounds and what did they do after leaving Finland? These are the questions we seek to answer in this article. We aim to give the first overview and analysis of the origin of rabbis and the development of Finnish Jewish Orthodoxy; our approach is historiographical and is based on existing literature, rather than historical documents. Our focus is on the Jewish Community of Helsinki, which was and still is the biggest Jewish congregation in Finland. Jewish soldiers had served in Helsinki since 1827, when the law enabling Jewish recruitment was passed, but the actual congregation seems to have been founded in 1858. In this year, the former Jewish soldiers, many of whom had served twenty-five years in the tsarist army, were allowed to settle in the towns where they had served.⁵

There are few local sources on the rabbis' lives during their time in Finland. None of the rabbis died in Finland, and it seems that many of them took their personal archives with them when they left the country (Edelmann 2006: 24). One of the few early sources about the religious and cultural life of the Jewish community during the Russian period and beginning of Finnish independence, gained in 1917, is the unpublished manuscript, 'Commemorative Chronicle', written in 1956 by the Helsinki-born merchant Jac Weinstein (1883–1976) in honour

of the fifty-year jubilee of the Helsinki synagogue. Weinstein provides the first description of the development of religious life with its institutions and a list of rabbis up to the mid-1950s. He had studied law at the Imperial Alexander University in Helsinki, and worked for several years as the secretary of the Jewish congregation and researched the history of the community (Muir 2010). Unfortunately, his 1956 chronicle does not provide much information about his sources. There are big gaps in the Finnish Jewish archives at the National Archives of Finland relating to the late nineteenth century, and it is likely that besides oral history and his own memories, Weinstein had to hand documentation that no longer exists. Weinstein does not supply any information about the backgrounds of the rabbis before their arrival in Helsinki.

Weinstein's manuscript has served as a source for later studies and works concerning the Helsinki community. The political historian Taimi Torvinen's *Kadimah. Suomen juutalaisten historia* ('The History of Jews in Finland', 1989), which still is the most comprehensive work on the history of the community, relies mostly on Weinstein when discussing the evolution of the Finnish Jewish religious establishment. Torvinen's work, though, focuses on the historical development of the community, civil rights and Jewish refugees during the Second World War, and in general pays little attention to religious life and customs.

Moshe Edelmann, the previous chief rabbi of Finland, was the first to study Jewish religious life in Helsinki. His work has resulted in many publications, such as *The Traditional Order of Synagogue Service* (mentioned above) and several collections of rabbinical responsa literature, sermons and lectures, many of them concerning Finland. Besides Weinstein's manuscript, Edelmann

5 Before 1809, Swedish law forbade Jews from living in Finland, and after Finland's annexation to Russia in 1809, the old Swedish constitution remained in force until Finland became independent in 1917. On Jewish soldiers in the Russian army, see, e.g., Petrovsky-Shtern 2008.

had access to some previously unused archival material. In 2006, Edelmann published articles about three rabbis in Helsinki in the Jewish journal *Hakehila*, and revised versions of these articles were later published in the *Kansallisbiografia* ('Finnish National Biography').

Besides this literature on the rabbis in Helsinki, a few other sources in Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish and English are available. Some works and several entries in encyclopedias have been written about some of the more prominent rabbis, for instance about Naftali Amsterdam, who was a student of Rabbi Israel Salanter, the father of the Musar movement, and Simon Federbusch, who was one of the founders and leaders of the religious-Zionist Mizrachi movement in Galicia, Poland. One of the rabbis, Mika Weiss, wrote an autobiography, where he also reflected on his time in Finland. In addition, Meliza Amity's genealogical website offers invaluable details about the life of the Finnish Jewish community, including the rabbis.

Sometimes our depictions of the rabbis remain somewhat limited owing to a lack of details in our literature and sources. We discuss the rabbis' families, especially the wives, who were sometimes the main providers for their families.⁶ We also examine how

6 Rabbis' wives (known in Yiddish as the *rebetsin*) have always played an important role in Jewish societies. However, depictions of these wives or Jewish women in general are brief in the literature dealing with the rabbis, and historical works written by the women themselves are rare. For a rare depiction of the changing role of Jewish women and family in nineteenth-century Russia on the threshold of modernity, see the memoirs of Pauline Wengeroff (1833–1916) (Wengeroff 1908). In 1866–70, Wengeroff lived in Helsinki with her family among the Cantonist soldiers in Sveaborg as her husband worked as a supplier in the Russian army.

the rabbis interacted with local religious life and encountered modernisation in the small Jewish community, confronting, for example, the pressing problems of mixed marriages and their consequences, including conversion procedures.

The article covers a long period of time, during which major changes were taking place in East European Jewish society. According to the historian Marc B. Shapiro:

By the last two decades of the nineteenth century, although most east European Jews were still traditional, the guardians of tradition were confronted with an entirely new challenge, and never before had it been so difficult to retain the allegiance of the young [...] and important elements of traditional society [...] began to be questioned. (Shapiro 1999: 1)

Even though it was on the periphery, away from the Jewish centres, this change was taking place in Helsinki too: as we show, at the beginning of the twentieth century there was a shift in the rabbinate from traditional East European Orthodoxy towards modern Western Orthodoxy. After the Shoah, finding suitable candidates for the rabbinate in Helsinki from Europe became extremely challenging, and the Jewish community turned its eyes towards Israel.

We show that the case of Helsinki – and Finland – is unique: because Finnish Jewry survived the Shoah more or less intact, its Orthodoxy represents a direct continuum from the establishment of the community up to today. We also demonstrate how the Shoah indirectly influenced the community and the recruitments of the rabbis in Helsinki. We can thus analyse how the rabbinate continued and developed after the Shoah in a community that originally represented East European Orthodoxy. In what

follows, we analyse the historiography of rabbis in Helsinki, from the first known rabbi in 1867 until the last rabbi trained in Europe left his office in 1982. We have divided this time into three periods: 1) rabbis during the Grand Duchy of Finland (the ‘Spiritual’), 2) rabbis after the independence of Finland (the ‘Academics’), and 3) rabbis during the Cold War (the ‘Shoah survivors’) (see the chart ‘Rabbis in Helsinki 1867–1982’ at the end of this article).

The Spiritual: rabbis during the Grand Duchy of Finland

In his ‘Commemorative Chronicle’, Weinstein describes the early state and development of religious life among the Cantonist soldiers in Helsinki. He indicates that there was already a prayer house on the fortress island of Sveaborg (Suomenlinna), which guarded Helsinki, in the middle of the 1830s. In 1858, when the former Cantonists were granted permission to settle in the towns where they had served, a specific location was designated for general synagogue services in mainland Helsinki that was also visited by new Jewish recruits (Halén 2004: 27). The first persons nominated to the post of rabbi were themselves former soldiers, who seem to have lacked proper qualifications to act as rabbis.⁷ In 1870, what Weinstein calls ‘the first actual synagogue’ in Helsinki was

established in Langén’s villa on Siltasaari Island, and as a consequence the synagogue in Sveaborg was closed down. The rent for the synagogue was paid by the Russian officials as part of the privileges of the former Cantonists (Weinstein 1956, 1964.)

During Russian rule, Jewish communities had to have a rabbi officially approved by the state. These rabbis were known as ‘crown rabbis’ (Russian *kazionnyi ravvin*), who maintained the Jewish population register and represented the community to the authorities, enforcing loyalty to the Empire and its laws. Many were trained in Russian-language rabbinical seminars with an emphasis on secular education, and hence lacked authority in religious matters (Kaplan Appel 2010; Shapiro 1999: 19). According to Weinstein (1956), the only crown rabbi in Finland was Jakob Jakobowitsch (1849–1922),⁸ who held the position from the mid-1870s to the early 1900s.

Edelmann (2010b) claims that the crown rabbis’ knowledge of Jewish law was often poor and that they were ‘morally dubious from a traditional religious point of view’. Congregations preferred their own employees, the traditional rabbis selected by the congregants, known in Russian as *dukhovnyi ravvin* (‘spiritual rabbi’). Weinstein lists four such rabbis serving the Jewish Community of Helsinki during the Russian rule: Naftali Amsterdam, Avrohom Schain, Aba Werner-Homa and Schmuel Noson Bukantz.⁹ As we show below, all of them originated from

7 According to Harry Halén (2004: 27–9), at the request of the community the Russian officials nominated rank-and-file Zelig Voislovski as a rabbi on 19 February 1858. Ten years later, 31 July 1868, the community applied for permission to invite a qualified person to run the services. Until August that year, the war invalid Israel Morduch (Mordock) had been in charge. In September 1868, Rabbi Hirsch Rain arrived from Vyborg (Viipuri) to lead the synagogue.

8 According to Meliza Amity’s genealogical website, Jakobowitsch was born in Lututów, Łódź province. Besides acting as a ‘Jewish priest’, he was also registered as a soldier and a tailor (see Amity 1).

9 We do not know whether this is a complete list of rabbis who served during this time. Weinstein himself refers to lack of documentation when listing religious workers in general.

Lithuania, and three of them were trained in the famous Lithuanian *yeshivot*. The available literature does not provide information on how or by whom they were recruited. However, research on the origins of Jewish soldiers in Helsinki shows that a majority of them also originated from Lithuania, north-east Poland and Belorussia, in other words from the realm of Lithuanian Jewish, or Litvak, culture (Harviainen 1998: 297; Muir 2004: 21–6). A study on the varieties of Yiddish spoken in Helsinki also shows the predominance of the Lithuanian dialect, and certain cultural traits of the community are Litvak, for instance, not seasoning the *gefilte fish* with sugar as was customary in Poland (Muir 2004: 29, 139).

Litvak culture encompasses much more than ethnicity or linguistic and cultural characteristics: it refers to *non-Hasidic* Jewish Orthodoxy. From the late eighteenth century onwards, East European Judaism had been divided into two camps: Hasidism with its strong dynasties of charismatic leaders, Rebbes, and teachings emphasizing social involvement and devotedness to God, and Mitnaggedim, the mainly Lithuanian opponents of Hasidism. While the Hasidic movement had swiftly gained ground across Poland, Ukraine and Belorussia, the major cluster that held sway against Hasidism emerged in Lithuania: Elijah ben Shlomo, the Gaon of Vilna, opposed the changes brought to Jewish leadership through the charismatic Rebbes and the ‘anti-intellectual’ stance of Hasidic innovators.¹⁰ As we shall see below,

10 These relations were, obviously, more nuanced from early on, and during the nineteenth century the boundaries separating Hasidim and Mitnaggedim become more blurred (Wodziński 2018: 31–2). Nevertheless, both groups also developed and maintained their own educational systems.

the Finnish Jewish religious establishment has its roots in this Orthodox-Litvak tradition: the earliest rabbi in Helsinki had studied in Litvak *yeshivot* and followed the teachings of prominent Litvak teachers.

According to Jac Weinstein (1956) and Santeri Jacobsson (1951: 97–100), many of the Cantonists had become estranged from Judaism during their twenty-five years of service but tried their best to fulfil their religious duties. One may ask why they opted to continue with Orthodox Judaism: probably they lacked other options, as this was the only form of Judaism they had known in their youth. Arriving from the lower strata of society in the *shtetls* of the Pale of Settlement, they were not familiar, for example, with the Reform movement that was only starting to emerge in the major cities of the Russian Empire.¹¹ Most of the Jewish soldiers were recruited from the area surrounding the Vilna province, where Hasidism had not gained a foothold.

Naftali Amsterdam (1832–1916), rabbi 1867–75

The first known spiritual rabbi in Helsinki, Naftali Dov Amsterdam, was born in Salantai, Lithuania, in 1832. According to Edelmann (2010a), not much is known about his birth family, but he used the patronym Shlomo, or Shlomo Zalman. At a young age Amsterdam became one of the most prominent students of Israel Salanter (1810–83), the founder of the Musar movement, a Lithuanian Orthodox reaction against the reforming forces of the Maskilim on the one hand, and the success

11 At this point, religious reform was mostly successful in those (mostly West European) countries where Jews could aspire to equality; in Russia, this was in general more difficult (Meyer 2010).



A picture of two influential figures of Lithuanian (Litvak) Judaism, the Gaon of Vilna and Yitshak Elhanan Spektor of Kovno, was found in the cellar of the Helsinki synagogue in 2005. Most of the Jewish soldiers arriving in Finland in the nineteenth century originated from the Litvak communities and recruited the first rabbis from the area. Finnish Jewish Archives, National Archives of Finland.

of Hasidism on the other.¹² As discussed by Shaul Stampfer (2012) and Immanuel Etkes (1993), the proponents of the movement launched an educational reform in the *yeshivot* they established in various locations in Lithuania, most notably in Slobodka in the suburbs of Kovno. Salanter himself had been heavily influenced by the ideas of the earlier Litvak intellectuals Hayyim of Volozhin and the Gaon of Vilna.

Amsterdam studied in seminaries founded by Salanter in Kovno and in Vilna, and throughout his life he remained in close

contact with his teacher (Mirsky 2010). After marrying, Amsterdam opened a bakery in Kovno, but Salanter urged him to continue his Torah studies, and his wife Rivka (née Ittelson, d. 1902) operated the bakery.¹³ At this point, Amsterdam's involvement with the Musar movement and Salanter impeded his career path: when Salanter tried to get his student employed as a rabbi in Moscow, local Hasidim acted against his appointment. The case reflects the strained relations of Hasidim

12 The movement emphasized ethical behaviour based on the sound learning of halakhic works as well as ethical treatises. For more on the Musar movement and Salanter's ideological development, see Etkes (1993).

13 In nineteenth-century Poland and Lithuania, a young woman's ability to support the family and conduct business was a valued skill in the marriage market: in a family of a Talmudic scholar, the wife was often the only breadwinner (Etkes 1989: 166–7).

and Mitnaggedim in mid-nineteenth-century Russia (Edelmann 2010a).

In 1867, Amsterdam accepted a rabbinical position in Helsinki. Edelmann correctly speculates that his decision was based on financial reasons: in letters to his friend Yitshak Blazer, the chief rabbi of St Petersburg, Amsterdam describes the difficulties of combining Torah study and supporting the family. Salanter, however, had opposed Amsterdam's decision to work in the bakery and recommended that he should rather find a rabbinical post, which entailed separation from the family. Following Salanter's advice, Amsterdam had been actively looking for a position until finally landing in Helsinki (Etkes 1989: 167–8, 174).

Amsterdam remained in office in Helsinki for six years, but continued to look for better positions. In 1871, he was briefly appointed as a rabbi in one of the centres of the Musar movement, Novogradok (Navahrudak) in the Grodno region, returning, however, to Helsinki a mere year later. At the time he also exchanged letters with Yitshak Elhanan Spektor, the rabbi of Kovno, a Talmudic scholar and yet another friend of Salanter (Edelmann 2010a).¹⁴ During Amsterdam's assignment in Helsinki, the legal status of the Jews (the 'Jewish question') was intensely debated in the Finnish Senate from 1872 onwards (Jacobsson 1951: 152, 155). Throughout his years in Helsinki, Amsterdam's wife ran the bakery in Kovno, and he did not bring her or their children to Helsinki.¹⁵

14 In many of his surviving letters, Amsterdam wrote about the life and ideas of Salanter; for excerpts, see Etkes (1993).

15 Rivka did visit Helsinki in 1872. Later Amsterdam tried to find business opportunities for her in Helsinki but failed (Etkes 1989: 168).

In 1875, Amsterdam finally returned home. Two years later, he became the deputy of Yitshak Blazer in St Petersburg, and from 1880 onwards he worked as a rabbi in the Kovno district. After a few more years of service, he finally dedicated himself to Torah study with the support of his wife's bakery (Edelmann 2010a). Amsterdam remained close to the *yeshivot* of the Musar movement in Kovno and Slobodka and published articles on education in the Orthodox newspaper *Ha-Levanon*¹⁶ (Lipetz *et al.* 1967: 29).

In 1906, the widowed Amsterdam moved to Jerusalem and opened a school focusing on Musar teachings, and his charitable work in Jerusalem was praised in a letter sent to Amsterdam by Avraham Yitshak Kook, later the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine. Amsterdam passed away in 1916 in Jerusalem (Edelmann 2010a).

Avrohom Yitzchak Schain (1841/2 – after 1907), rabbi 1876–81

Avrohom Yitzchak Schain (Schunman, later Shyne) was born in 1841 or in 1842 in Novo Aleksandrovska (Zarasai), in north-eastern Lithuania. There is no information about his rabbinical education: he was employed as a rabbi in Helsinki from 1876 to 1881. He had three children with his wife Sara (b. 1845), and the family lived on Laivurinkatu 23 in southern Helsinki (Amity 2). According to Weinstein (1964), in 1879 he founded Hevra Bikkur Holim, the first Jewish society in Helsinki for the care of the infirm congregants. In the early 1880s Schain left Helsinki and moved to the United Kingdom to work as the rabbi of the Jewish community in Gorbals (1885–1907) in Glasgow,

16 *Ha-Levanon* (Jerusalem, 1863–86) mainly published news about the Old Yishuv but later on expressed sympathy to the early Russian Zionist movement Hovevei Zion.

Scotland. At this point his surname was anglicised as Shyne (Alderman 1992: 144).

In Gorbals, Schain became, in the true sense of the word, the 'spiritual' rabbi of the community. As a Yiddish-speaker Schain was never officially nominated to the position of chief rabbi. However, owing to his popularity among the older, Yiddish-speaking immigrants he became an unofficial 'chief rabbi' responsible for *kasbrut* supervision: his congregants volunteered to collect money for his weekly salary. In 1898, Schain was one of the founders of the first Zionist organisation in Glasgow. After the murderous pogrom in Kishinev in 1903 he collected funds for the victims. After his wife's death in 1907, Schain emigrated to Palestine (Collins 1990: 53, 88–9, 117–19).¹⁷

Abraham Werner-Homa (1836–1912), rabbi 1881–91

Most of the information about Abraham (Aba) Werner-Homa¹⁸ is derived from one source: the history of the Machzike Hadath community in London, written by Homa's grandson, Bernhard Homa, in 1953. Abraham Homa was born in 1836 in Telšiai, in north-eastern Lithuania, to the family of Ya'akov Hayyim and Faiga. In 1854, he married Sima Gittel Lipschitz (1837–1906), and the couple eventually had eleven children. Homa received his *smikbah* (rabbinical ordination) in 1857 in Žagarė and was first employed as a rabbi in Vegeriai and in 1858 back in Telšiai. In 1865, he was appointed as the *av-bet-din*¹⁹ of Telšiai and received a

second *smikbah* from Josef Raisin, the previous *av-bet-din* of the town (Homa 1953: 18). Like Naftali Amsterdam, Homa was connected to the Litvak elite members of the Musar movement: in 1880, Homa exchanged letters with Salanter, who affectionately addresses him as Reb Abtchik. His grandson describes him as a devoted Mitnagged, who followed the teachings of the Vilna Gaon, sharing his negative view of Hasidism and penchant for secular sciences (*ibid.* 19, 22).

Homa's later years in Telšiai were marred by a conflict between him and some of the congregants, and in the early 1880s the community neglected to pay his wages. During one of Homa's trips to Kovno, his opponents hired another rabbi in his stead.²⁰ In the aftermath, Homa was forced to leave Telšiai and accepted an offer for a rabbinical position in Helsinki (Zalkin 2017: 222–3). Bernhard Homa (1953: 18) succinctly notes that 'in Tels my grandfather received a call from Helsingfors to become Chief Rabbi²¹ of Finland' and that he moved to Finland in the early 1880s.²²

of the time, typically a synonym for a rabbi of a larger district.

20 This rabbi was the former student of Israel Salanter, Eliezer Gordon, who in 1883 became the head of the Telšiai (Telz) *Yeshivah*; on the early years of this influential *Yeshivah*, see Stampfer (2012: 286–336).

21 According to Meliza Amity's genealogical website, Homa arrived in Finland in 1881 and was appointed as the 'chief rabbi' (of Helsinki?) in 1885. However, the position of chief rabbi of Finland is used for the first time only in the 1930s when Simon Federbusch arrived in Finland.

22 There is some discrepancy in the chronology: according to Weinstein, Homa began his service as a rabbi in Helsinki in 1884, and according to Amity, in 1885. The year 1880/1 is derived from Homa's grandson's memoirs, although this may refer only to his move to Helsinki.

17 See also 'Rabbi Shyne: Scottish Jewish Archives Centre'.

18 After arriving in the United Kingdom, Homa changed his name to Werner, following his son who had moved there earlier (Homa 1953: 17).

19 A judge of a rabbinical court; in the Russia



A picture of the third spiritual rabbi in Helsinki, Abraham Werner-Homa, taken in St Petersburg. He served in Helsinki during the Grand Duchy of Finland and represented Lithuanian (Litvak) Jewish tradition. Finnish Jewish Archives, National Archives of Finland.

Homa worked in Helsinki for the whole decade, until in 1891 he emigrated to the United Kingdom to become the first rabbi of the Lithuanian Orthodox Machzike Hadath community in London. In Helsinki he was sorely missed: 'the Community was most reluctant to let him depart for England, and even after he had left they tried to persuade him to return' (Homa 1953: 18–19). When he visited Helsinki in 1899, the congregation presented him with a silver goblet and a Hebrew poem praising his qualities. From London, Homa took part in early Zionist activities and attended the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1898 (*ibid.* 22.) A few years after Homa's death in 1912 (Amity 3), the next rabbi chosen to lead Machzike Hadath was the famous Rav Avraham Yitshak Kook.

Schmuel Noson Bukantz (1857–1938), rabbi 1892–1924

The last of the four rabbis during the Grand Duchy of Finland was Schmuel Noson Bukantz. Bukantz was born in 1857 to Leiser Bukanetz and Feige and grew up in Sheta (Šėta) and Kovno. According to Edelman (2010b, 2009/10: 192), he received his rabbinical education in various Lithuanian *yeshivot*. In Kovno, Bukantz studied under Yitshak Elhanan Spektor and Israel Salanter, and in the famous *yeshiva* of the Musar movement, Slobodka,²³ he studied under the guidance of Avraham Schenker, one of the students of Israel Salanter, and with Yitshak Blazer, the close friend of Amsterdam (see also Schenker 1931). Thus Bukantz, like Amsterdam and Werner-Homa, was linked to the Lithuanian Orthodox elite. In 1877, Bukantz married Rachel Lea Vershovski (1854–1923), and they had four children. He received his *smikhhah* in 1884.

Although there is no information on how Bukantz was recruited as a rabbi in Helsinki, his term lasted for more than thirty years and witnessed essential changes in the status of the Jewish community. The first statutes of the congregation in Helsinki were approved by the governor of the province in 1903, and the synagogue was built in Helsinki in 1905–6. In 1906, several turning points in the community reflected its change from a traditional society into a modern Jewish community. The community reacted with cultural renewal to such new ideologies as Zionism: the members founded a reform *heder*,²⁴ a

23 On the Slobodka Yeshiva, see Stampfer (2012: 255–85).

24 These schools were part of a Modern Hebrew school system fostered by the Russian proto-Zionist Hovevei Zion movement. Compared to the traditional *badarim*, the curriculum contained also

sports association Stjärnan (later Makkabi), and a Yiddish-language cultural club. The changes were initiated by the young members of the congregation and challenged the old rabbinical authority. Some of the young Jews also took part in the third conference of Russian Zionists, which convened in Helsinki in 1906, later prompting the founding of Finnish Zionist associations (Muir 2004: 32; Torvinen 1989: 79).

The building of the synagogue in the early 1900s sparked a debate between those who wanted to follow the style of the Reform congregations in Sweden and in Germany, and those who held on to traditional Judaism. The debate became public in the Russian Jewish journal *Hamelitz* in early 1901,²⁵ and Bukantz was among the signatories on the side of the traditionalists. Indeed, some members of the congregation had a desire to appear modern in the eyes of Finnish society: when the synagogue was festively opened on 30 August 1906, the Reform rabbi Gottlieb Klein from Stockholm was among the invited speakers. There were, in fact, two separate opening ceremonies: the bringing of the Torah scrolls in the morning, where both Bukantz and Klein spoke, and a second ceremony in the afternoon, targeted at the general public, with Finnish Christian guests present, and only Klein held a sermon in Swedish. What is more, the prayers were conducted in Swedish instead of Hebrew, and organ music was played (Muir 2006). Despite the presence of

secular subjects, all taught in Hebrew (Muir 2004: 92–3).

25 See *Hamelitz* (16.1.1901 and 23.1.1901). *Hamelitz* (1860–1903) was the major Hebrew newspaper of Russian Jewry. Ehud Luz (1988: 7) describes its significance: ‘All the various streams, and the bitter wars of words that involved Russian Jewry, found expression in this publication, which played a more important role in Jewish public life than any of its rivals.’

such openly ‘Reform’ elements in the second ceremony, the congregation continued to follow East European Orthodoxy; Edelman (2010b) interprets this as due to Bukantz’s influence.

Edelman (2010b) shares some pieces of information about Bukantz’s term as a rabbi from the archives of the congregation: a year after the Jewish school of Helsinki had been founded in 1893, Bukantz suggested that all Jewish children attend the school, including the children of the families that could not afford tuition. The rabbi’s salary also created problems for the economically struggling congregation: extra money had to be collected from the congregants or via loans.²⁶ In 1915, Bukantz established a society for a daily study of the Talmud (*Hevra Shas*): on the first leaf of the society’s *pinkas* (records), Bukantz is titled as *ba-Rav ha-Gaon*, ‘the Great Rabbi’ (Edelman 2010b).

After the death of his first wife Rachel, Bukantz married Ester Levit (b. 1890) in 1923. He retired in 1924, and two years later the couple emigrated to Jerusalem, where some of Bukantz’s children were already living. Bukantz passed away in Jerusalem in 1938 (Edelman 2010b).

In a draft for his ‘Commemorative Chronicle’, Weinstein draws some interesting conclusions about the formation of Finnish Jewish Orthodoxy during the time of these four rabbis representing Lithuanian Orthodoxy:²⁷

26 According to Weinstein (1956), the money for the salaries was collected through *karobke* (tax on kosher meat), *pushke* (alms box) and *neyder* (self-made pledge).

27 Several draft versions exist of Weinstein’s ‘Commemorative Chronicle’, and it appears that he cut and revised some parts quite extensively.

With Bukantz going on pension in 1924 and him leaving the country two years later, a nearly sixty-year-long period of *rabanim* of the old generations came to a conclusion, a period during which the congregation became stabilised as an Orthodox Jewish community, with institutions based on the religious-ethical principles: 'Torah, worship and social help'.

A Yiddish version of the same text, found among Weinstein's drafts, in many ways renders the same information in a different tone altogether: Weinstein claims that with Bukantz's leaving 'our golden chain of pious rabbis was broken'.²⁸ One gets the impression that, according to Weinstein, until then the community had had strong spiritual leaders, but this state of affairs changed radically after Bukantz left. The Jewish community, now in the independent state of Finland, had new and different ideas about what they expected from the rabbinate.

The Academics: rabbis after the independence of Finland

After the independence of Finland in 1917, the status of the Finnish Jews changed drastically. Besides granting Jews the right to apply for Finnish citizenship, the Law for the Citizens of Mosaic Faith, passed on 12 January 1918, allowed Jews to establish congregations officially (Torvinen 1989: 107, 243). On 19 December the same year, the Helsinki city council accepted the statutes of the Jewish Community of Helsinki and the congregation was added to the register of the religious communities in Finland (Weinstein 1956). According to Weinstein, after the

independence of Finland the community wanted to employ 'an Orthodox, academically trained rabbi'. It was desired that the rabbi should 'correspond to the higher cultural development of the community'. We may ask whether there was also some societal pressure for the Jewish community to employ academically trained rabbis as was the case among the Lutheran ministers in Finland, who routinely held degrees from Finnish universities.

Linguistically and culturally, Jews in Helsinki were acculturating themselves to the Finnish-Swedish middle class and some had achieved high-school and university-level education (Ekholm 2013: 70; Muir 2009: 538). In 1918, the community founded a modern Hebrew and Swedish-language co-educational school (Kantor *et al.* 2018: 27), and the years to follow saw the establishment of many new cultural and political associations. Many were supporters of various fractions of Zionism, mostly moderate General Zionism (Torvinen 1989: 128; Muir 2004: 32, 47–8). Very tight Orthodoxy simply did not fit the lifestyle of Jews in Helsinki any more. Revealing is the notion by the Latvian author Herman Morat (1928), who visited Helsinki at the end of the 1920s, that only half of the Jews in Helsinki were *frum* (Yiddish 'religious'), the rest being *halb-frum* ('semi-religious').

Apparently the idea of having a modern Orthodox rabbi arose much earlier. Around the mid-1890s the Jewish community sent Abraham Engel (1877–1928), who was considered as an *illui*, a Talmudic prodigy, to the Slobodka Yeshiva in Kovno, to follow in the footsteps of Werner-Homa and Bukantz (Kantor *et al.* 2018: 24). However, after a while, the community decided to send him to continue his rabbinical studies in Berlin. Engel enrolled in the Berlin Rabbinical Seminary, directed by Asriel Hildesheimer.

28 In Weinstein's own Latinisation: 'hot sich bai uns obgebrochn di goldene keit fun rabonim-zadikim'.

This seminary, reflecting a positive attitude towards Western culture, had become the centre for training Orthodox rabbis in Europe. The curriculum contained academic study of Judaism, and it was expected that the students should continue their general education at a university level. Hildesheimer believed that they had to directly confront views opposed to tradition and to be convinced that Orthodoxy was in accord with the highest standards of modern scholarship (Shapiro 1999: 76–8). However, Engel abandoned the plan to become a rabbi and continued his studies in a university, eventually earning a doctor's degree in chemistry (Kantor *et al.* 2018: 30).

So strong was the desire to begin the new era with a clean slate that when Bukantz retired in 1924, the community leaders did not want him to remain in Finland. According to Weinstein's drafts for his 'Commemorative Chronicle', this was done 'so that his remaining would not, God forbid, disturb the work of the new rabbi'. Both Weinstein and Torvinen discuss three Orthodox rabbis with an academic background who served the Jewish community between the world wars and during the immediate post-war years. These rabbis were Scholem Treistman, Simon Federbusch and Elieser Berlinger.

Scholem Treistman (1892-1963), rabbi 1928-9

Scholem Treistman's nomination launched the period of the 'Orthodox, academically educated rabbis' in Helsinki. Treistman was chosen precisely for having a doctoral degree and a rabbinic education in Germany, the hub of Modern Orthodoxy. The congregation was so thrilled to have Treistman as their new rabbi that they received him with a Torah scroll as his ship docked in Helsinki (Weinstein 1956).

Scholem Treistman was also the first rabbi in Helsinki with a Polish Hasidic background. He was born in Żelechów, in south-eastern Poland, in 1892, to a family of Gur Hasidim. Treistman's father, Eliezer Leib Yehuda (d. 1920), had been the leading rabbi of Łódź, first substituting and after 1912 replacing the famous rabbi Eliya Hayyim Maizel (Kirshenboim 2007: 157). Edelman (2006d) sheds further light on Treistman's biography: in 1912, he married Chana (b. 1894), the daughter of a wealthy industrial, Mordechai Münzberg, and studied for two years in the *yeshiva* of Ostrowiec,²⁹ supported by his father-in-law. During the First World War, Treistman stayed in Łódź, where his father was employed as the chief rabbi. In his youth, he had become acquainted with the 'Illui of Warsaw', Hayyim Heller, and in 1923–6 he studied in Heller's Bet Midrash ha-Elyon in Berlin together with his brother Simha (b. 1904). This highly exclusive school for rabbinical studies attracted Lithuanian and Polish *yeshiva* graduates, including the famous Modern Orthodox philosopher J. B. Soloveitchik in the late 1920s. There is no information about where Treistman received his doctoral degree.³⁰

After Bukantz's retirement, the congregation had sent Abraham Engel to Berlin to examine three candidates for the rabbinate in 1927 (Edelman 2006d: 24). The chosen rabbi was Treistman, who came to Helsinki in 1928 with his family. His wife Chana became a member of Hevra Biqqur Holim,

29 There are several towns called Ostrowiec in Poland. Most likely this Ostrowiec was located in the Radom district in eastern Poland.

30 According to Edelman (2006d: 25), Treistman had studied in universities in Berlin and in Vienna; the newspaper *Karjala* (23.11.1931), discussing Treistman's case, adds the University of Würzburg.

and their children enrolled in the Jewish school (Amity 4). Treistman's appointment in Helsinki lasted one year only: according to Edelmann (2006d), the congregation began to doubt Treistman's *smikhab* and raised suspicions concerning his doctoral degree.³¹ After an investigation, they claimed that his diplomas were not sufficient for the position.³² In 1929, Treistman was fired, accused of having misled the congregation with false information (Weinstein 1956).

Despite the unpleasant episode in Helsinki, Treistman began a successful career as a rabbi in Poland, working at least in Warsaw (Fuchs 1961: 134).³³ Already in his youth in Łódź, Treistman had been a religious Zionist activist (Edelmann 2006d), and in the 1930s he became the co-founder of a society called Yeshurun, politically close to right-wing Revisionist Zionists. When the Second World War broke out he fled to Białystok. In 1940, Treistman was arrested by the Soviets and sent to a labour camp in the Arkhangelsk region, where he survived the war. His wife

and two of his four children perished in the Warsaw Ghetto or in Treblinka (Fuchs 1961: 134).³⁴

After repatriation from the Soviet Union, Treistman had a central role in rebuilding religious life in Poland and became a member of the chief rabbinate (Fuchs 1961: 134). He was the first director of the Religious Union of the Mosaic Faith in Poland, founded in 1949 and financed by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Aleksiu 2003: 840). In 1952, Treistman moved to Israel, publishing articles for the Yiddish-language newspaper *Letste naves* and writing poetry in Yiddish and in Hebrew. Treistman died in Tel Aviv in 1963 (Fuchs 1972: 36).

Simon Federbusch (1892-1969), rabbi 1931-40

Simon Federbusch was the next academic rabbi that the congregation in Helsinki recruited. Federbusch was born in Narol, eastern Galicia, in 1892. At the time, Narol had its own Hasidic dynasty. Federbusch's father Zwi was a scholar and a lawyer, and his mother Cherna an offspring of a prestigious family of rabbis (Edelmann 2006b). Federbusch received his first *smikhab* at the age of 17 from the Hasidic rabbi of Berezhyn, Sholom Mordechai Schwadron (1835-1911). In Berezhyn, 180 kilometres east of Narol, Schwadron headed the local *yeshivah*, Tushiya. There is no information on where Federbusch resided during the First World War but it is evident there were major changes in his life: in 1923, he obtained another *smikhab* from the Israelitisch-theologische Lehranstalt, a Conservative rabbinical teachers' seminar founded in 1893 in Vienna. He also held a

- 31 Treistman had presented recommendation letters from several rabbis. In the traditional East European Jewish context, receiving *smikhab* did not require attendance in a certain school but, rather, gathering relevant amounts of information from classic Jewish sources and being examined by a (prestigious) rabbi who would then give the *smikhab*. On this process, see Stampfer (2012: 41).
- 32 According to Edelmann (2006c), when Treistman was employed in Helsinki, the congregation felt that he was not keeping his end of the contract, for example by not showing up at synagogue service.
- 33 Information about Treistman's later circumstances comes from the works of Chaim-Leib Fuchs (1897-1984), a Yiddish journalist and author who after the war wrote about East European Jewish history, especially in Łódź.

- 34 Treistman's grandniece Dor Treistman has submitted pages of testimony to Yad Vashem concerning the fate of the family.



Rabbi Simon Federbusch, on the first row with a black hat and a cane, attending the meeting of the Scandinavian Jewish Youth Association (SJUF) in front of the Finnish Parliament in Helsinki in 1936. Federbusch represented rabbis with academic and Western education during the first decades of Finnish independence. Finnish Jewish Archives, National Archives of Finland.

doctoral degree but there is no information about which university it was from.³⁵ After his graduation in 1923, he moved to Lwów (Lviv) and became an editor at several Zionist publications. In 1928, he married the daughter of a Viennese rabbi, Taube Toni Horowitz (1906–2006) (Edelmann 2006c: 40; Edelmann 2009/10: 235; Sherman 1996: 64).

Federbusch arrived in Finland in 1931, and in 1933 he was appointed as the first chief rabbi of Finland.³⁶ At the same time a new organisation, the Central Council of Jewish Communities in Finland, was established to cover all the Finnish Jewish congregations

(Torvinen 1989: 115–16). Soon Federbusch became a visible figure in Finnish society as well as internationally, making public statements, for example, against the rise of anti-semitism. He wrote a work dissecting the famous Russian hoax, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and in the Finnish Parliament acted against the plans to outlaw ritual slaughter. In 1935, he took part in a European conference of chief rabbis in London, which dealt with the Nazi threat, and initiated joint conferences for Nordic rabbis: the first meeting convened in Copenhagen in January 1937 (Edelmann and Muir 2010).

Since his youth, Federbusch had been active in several religious Zionist organisations and would continue to be a devoted Zionist for the rest of his life. Already as a student in Vienna he founded a Zionist

35 He had studied in universities in Vienna, Kraków and Lwów (Fuchs 1968: 411).

36 This is apparently the first time the title is used.

youth group, and in 1922 he was elected to the Polish Sejm as a representative of the Jewish national wing.³⁷ Two years later he became the head of the religious Zionist organisation Mizrachi of Galicia. In the 1930s, Federbusch represented the Finnish Jewish community in the meetings of the Zionist World Congress (Edelmann and Muir 2010). An avid promoter of Modern Hebrew, Federbusch became a founding member of *Ha-qlub ha-ivri* ('Hebrew club') as well as increasing the role of religion in the Jewish school in Helsinki (Kantor *et al.* 2018: 47). As has been discussed above, during the 1930s the Finnish Jewish community was becoming increasingly secularised. Federbusch continued a strongly Orthodox stance and was outspoken against assimilation. In 1937, he submitted a *taqqanah* (religious ruling) forbidding husbands in mixed marriages to rise to the podium to read the Torah or to take part in the celebration of *bnei mitsvah* (Torvinen 1989: 127).

At the end of the Winter War (1939–40), Federbusch emigrated to the United States, and his departure left many of the congregants feeling abandoned. During the Continuation War (1941–4), when Finland was de facto allied with Nazi Germany, Finland's indigenous Jewish population took part in the country's war efforts against the Soviet Union. After the deportation of eight Jewish refugees on 6 November 1942 to Nazi Germany, rumours about the precarious situation of Jews in Finland started to circulate in the American press. On 17 December 1943, Federbusch sent a telegram to the Finnish Foreign Ministry urging them to rebut these rumours by publishing an article in the American press (Torvinen 1984: 220).

37 He was a member of the Sejm between 1922–8 (Hadas 2007: 727–8).

In New York, Federbusch became the head of a Bronx-based *yeshivah* named after Israel Salanter, the founder of the Musar movement, and took part in the activities of several religious Zionist organisations. Federbusch died in New York in 1969 and was buried in Jerusalem (Edelmann and Muir 2010).

Elieser Berlinger (1904–1985), rabbi 1946–51

Elieser Berlinger is clearly a case of his own in the series of Finnish rabbis: he was the only one born in Germany. Berlinger was born in Illingen, Saarland, in 1904, and graduated from the Berlin Rabbinical Seminary in 1928, the same school where the Finnish Talmudic prodigy Abraham Engel had studied in the 1890s. Berlinger worked as a rabbi first in Schönlanke (Trzcianka), Posen (1923–32),³⁸ and in Malmö, Sweden (1932–46). During the war, he took part in the rescue operation of Danish Jews in 1943, and after the war he helped Jewish refugees in Malmö.³⁹

From Malmö, Berlinger was invited to Helsinki to be the main speaker when the Finnish president, Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, visited the Helsinki synagogue on 6 December 1944.⁴⁰ In his speech, Berlinger commemorated the fallen Jewish soldiers and expressed gratitude towards Mannerheim (Weinstein 1956). Incidentally, the event mirrored the opening ceremony of the Helsinki synagogue in 1906 with some non-Orthodox elements: both occasions included Finnish esteemed guests, an invited speaker from Sweden and prayers in Swedish.

38 Bart Wallet, personal communication.

39 See 'Eliezer Berlinger is dead', in *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 6.11.1985.

40 At this point, Finland had signed the Moscow Armistice, and the Continuation War had ended.

After Federbusch's departure the congregation had been left without a rabbi for the duration of the war. Weinstein (1956) notes that during the times when the congregation was left without a rabbi, Mordechai Schwartzman (1875–1951), who came from Šiuliai, Lithuania, was seen as its spiritual head: he worked as the *mohel* (circumciser), *shohet* (slaughterer) and *kantor* for forty-five years (1901–46). Berlinger received an invitation for the rabbinate during his visit in Helsinki, and in 1946, he was appointed as the chief rabbi. With a *smikhab* from a Modern Orthodox seminary in Berlin, he obviously met the requirements of the congregation. During his time in Helsinki, Berlinger in some cases approved children born to non-Jewish mothers as Jewish after *tevilah*, immersion in the ritual bath, between the ages of four and seven (Czimbalmos 2018: 169). In 1950, Berlinger sent a question to the former head of his alma mater, Berlin Rabbinical Seminary, Yehiel Jacob Weinberg (1884–1966), asking whether it was permitted to continue the tradition of the Qiddush ritual (sanctification blessing recited over wine) in the Helsinki synagogue after the pause caused by the war: Weinberg's answer was affirmative (Edelmann 2009/10: 58–9).⁴¹

After the war, trials against German perpetrators and their collaborators began. In Finland, Berlinger was involved in one of the cases. Maks Szcześliwy, a survivor of the Shoah living in Finland, had been the head of the Food Supply Department in the Łódź Ghetto and a close associate of Chaim Rumkowski, the infamous Jewish leader of the ghetto. The Central Council of Jewish Communities in Finland decided in 1949 to

set up a tribunal with Rabbi Berlinger and two lawyers, referred to in some documents as a *bet din* (rabbinic court), to investigate Szcześliwy's actions during the war. The goal was to decide whether Szcześliwy had committed crimes against humanity. If deemed guilty, his application for membership of the congregation would be declined. The investigation dragged on until 1953 when Szcześliwy was accepted as a member (Muir 2016b: 239–46).

Berlinger decided to leave Finland in 1951⁴² and moved to Amsterdam to work as a rabbi. Three years later he was appointed as the chief rabbi of Utrecht, covering most of the Netherlands, excluding Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague. Berlinger was a moderate Orthodox and an activist in the religious Zionist movement Mizrachi, and he strove to value the customs specific to the Dutch Jewish community.⁴³ Berlinger died in Utrecht in 1985.

In the draft versions of his 'Commemorative Chronicle', Weinstein is open and critical towards Treistman, Federbusch and Berlinger. Weinstein writes:

Unfortunately one cannot say that the new era with 'Orthodox, academically trained rabbis' resulted in an elevation of the religious life in the community; quite the opposite. This is because none of them, during the last thirty years since Bukanz left the community, acted as its spiritual leader, or seemed to live up to their calling.

41 Berlinger was hesitant because the renewal of the ritual may be understood as a blessing recited unnecessarily. The correspondence is published in Weinberg's classic *responsa* collection, *Seride esb*.

42 Weinstein (1956) claims that the relations between Berlinger and the congregation had become strained, without, however, supplying any details.

43 Bart Wallet, personal communication; see also van Bekkum and Brasz 2007: 108.

Weinstein was especially critical of Federbusch, saying that during his time he was more 'Dr Federbusch than Rabbi Federbusch'. It is interesting why Weinstein, who himself was not so religious and had studied in a university, would be so critical towards these academic rabbis and so positive about the old-school Orthodox rabbis. Similar thinking was, however, widespread. According to Shapiro (1999: 35), 'Nostalgic yearning for the days of old when the authority of the rabbi was thought to have been unquestioned and held sacred by his flock has always been the rabbinic response to communal usurpation of the rabbi's power'. Ultimately, for Weinstein, and possibly for many others of his generation, the three academic rabbis were not 'a beginning for a new golden chain of rabbis' but the decline of the 'golden age' of the rabbinate.

The Shoah survivors: rabbis during the Cold War

During the Second World War, the Finnish Jewish community lost contact with the former Jewish communities in the Baltic countries and Poland, where the members of the community originated from and where the rabbis and religious workers had previously been recruited from. Jewish communities and centres were in ruins, and the surviving remnant was soon cut off from the West by the Iron Curtain. Though among the Western countries, in the post-war volatile political situation Finland fell into the Soviet zone of interest, which affected Finnish foreign policy throughout the Cold War. Torvinen (1989: 178–86) shows how the Finnish Jewish community tried to navigate between the East and the West, in order not to upset the delicate relation Finland had with her eastern neighbour. In practice this meant that the Finnish Jewish communities and the

Central Council of Jewish Communities in Finland, from the early 1950s on, abstained from joining organisations, accepting invitations to international meetings and signing communiqués that criticised the Soviet Union for its treatment of Jews. This new post-war situation made the recruitment of rabbis and people with expertise in Judaism in general even more challenging. It became obvious that for foreign Jews, Finland, where there were several periods of fear that the Soviets might occupy the country, was not a desirable destination (Muir 2016a: 199).

Between 1956 and 1982 three rabbis served in Helsinki: Mika Weiss, Shmuel Beeri and Mordechai Lanxner. Even though these rabbis came to Finland via various countries, there were several things they had in common: they had studied in Europe, they had Hungarian background, and they were Shoah survivors. So far, very little has been discovered about their background: Torvinen mentions them only in passing and Edelmann did not include them in his series of articles in *Hakehila*. We have gathered information about these rabbis from one autobiography and our contacts abroad, as well as encyclopedias.

Mika Weiss (1913–2001), rabbi 1957–61

After Berlinger's departure for Utrecht in 1951, the congregation was left without a rabbi for six years.⁴⁴ The next recruit had been ordained as a rabbi in Budapest in 1941,

44 Difficulties in hiring rabbis were quite common in other European congregations, as well. For example, the congregation of Machzike ha-Dath in London where Homa served as a rabbi had similar problems: when Homa's successor Rav Kook left office 1919, the next rabbi was hired only in 1932 (see Machzike ha-Dath community, 'Rav and History').

and held a doctorate from the Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest. As a modern, academic rabbi, he met the previous requirements of the congregation for the position well. As a new turn of events, however, Weiss also became the first rabbi with openly liberal leanings, and his *smikhab* was from a Neolog seminary in Budapest.

Weiss described the main phases of his life in his autobiography (2005).⁴⁵ Mika (Miksa) Weiss (originally Weiszman) was born in 1913 in Kiskunfélegyháza, 135 kilometres south-east of Budapest. Weiss came from a strictly Orthodox home: his father Ferenc Weiszman had studied in Frankfurt under an Orthodox rabbi, and his mother, Teréz Hollander, came from a family of rabbis. Weiss had four siblings; half of the family perished in the Shoah (Weiss 2005: 13–14).

From a young age Weiss was attracted to liberal versions of Judaism despite his family's Orthodox background. While Weiss's upbringing was strictly Orthodox, he notes that he always yearned to be a 'modern, flexible, conservative'⁴⁶ Rabbi' (Weiss 2005: 10–11). For his rabbinical education he enrolled in the National Jewish Theological Seminary, a Neolog rabbinical seminary in Budapest, established in 1877. Even before graduating, Weiss accepted a position as an assistant rabbi in the small town of Orosháza. As rabbis were exempted from the harsh labour camps forced by the state on Hungarian Jewish men, he had obtained a false *smikhab* from a 'diploma mill'. In 1941, Weiss finally received his rabbinical ordination, and was officially appointed as the

chief rabbi of Orosháza in one of its Neolog congregations (*ibid.* 10–11, 46–7).

In 1943, despite being a rabbi, Weiss was taken to forced labour for a period of a month. When Nazi Germany began to exterminate Hungarian Jews in spring 1944, Weiss was imprisoned, taken to Austria and marched through various labour camps, including Mauthausen. After the war, he returned to Hungary and became the chief rabbi of the Debrecen Neolog congregation. Almost everyone in his original congregation in Orosháza had been murdered in Auschwitz (Weiss 2005: 81, 103).

The post-war years were hard for the surviving Hungarian Jews, struggling with the immense loss after the Shoah. Weiss describes several antisemitic incidents and seizure of Jewish property in Debrecen by the Communist regime. After the 1956 revolution, Weiss with his wife Marika (née Brüll, b. 1924) and a newborn baby began to look for rabbinic positions outside the country. He received a reply from Kurt Wilhelm (1900–65), the chief rabbi of the liberal Jewish congregation in Stockholm, and learned about a position in Helsinki. He was invited for an interview in June 1957 and soon received the official offer for the rabbinate. Weiss moved to Finland with his family, and in 1959, he was appointed as the chief rabbi of Finland.

In his autobiography, Weiss repeatedly states that he is not Orthodox (for example, Weiss 2005: 128). Why did he choose to come to Helsinki to work for an Orthodox congregation, and why did the board in Helsinki hire a Neolog rabbi from Hungary and later nominate him as the chief rabbi of Finland? These questions puzzled Weiss himself, who notes (*ibid.* 152) that the board made a conscious choice by choosing a non-Orthodox rabbi. During his interview in Helsinki, Weiss succinctly notes the Litvak features of Finnish Orthodoxy: 'They

45 The book is based on a Hungarian version *Amíg erǔmbǔl telik* published in Debrecen in 1995.

46 Weiss's term 'conservative' refers to Neolog Judaism, a movement formed in Hungary in the mid-nineteenth century, influenced by German Conservative Judaism.

practiced their Judaism very strangely' (*ibid.* 138). For the Jews of Helsinki, Weiss also appeared 'strange'. At the synagogue, one of the congregants jokingly cast doubts on the 'Jewishness' of the future rabbi in Yiddish: 'Rabbi, you don't know what *gefилte fish* is? You don't speak Yiddish? Tell me, are you really a Jew?' (Weiss 2055: 136).⁴⁷

Against the backdrop of Finland's own volatile political situation it is intriguing that Weiss chose to come to Finland. On the other hand, his autobiography shows that the family lacked other options. The ambiguity of Weiss's situation is observable between the lines: although he repeatedly commends Finland as a 'free country', he also refers to a constant feeling of 'uncomfortableness' (Weiss 2005: 137–8, 151). During his 1961 trip to the United States, his wife sent him a telegram from Stockholm warning him not to return, as the 'Russians have threatened Finland', and claiming that most Jews had already fled the country⁴⁸ (*ibid.* 183). Weiss never returned to Helsinki and applied for a green card. The congregation in Helsinki was reluctant to see the family leave, and Weiss (*ibid.* 189–91) later regretted leaving without a proper goodbye and sent a letter explaining his decisions.

In the United States, Weiss was first hired as a rabbi in Flemington, New Jersey, and later in the Conservative Temple B'nai Hayim in Sherman Oaks, California. Settling in the United States, he also worked as a chaplain

in hospitals and prisons until his retirement in the 1990s (Weiss 2005: 193ff.).

Shmuel Beeri (1905–?), rabbi 1961–3

After Mika Weiss's departure, Shmuel (Samuel) Beeri with a *smikhab* from a Central European Orthodox *yeshivah* represented a return towards Orthodoxy. Like Weiss, Beeri was a Hungarian Jew; he was, however, the first rabbi to arrive in Helsinki from Israel.

Beeri was born in 1905 in Sziget (Sighetu Marmăției) in Máramaros (Maramureș), then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and after 1920, of Romania. Not much information is available about Beeri's background: his father's name was Josef Beeri (Stein),⁴⁹ and he was married twice; with Meriam Weisberg he had one daughter.⁵⁰ Beeri received his *smikhab* from the prestigious Pressburg Yeshivah,⁵¹ established in 1803 by the rabbi and scholar Moses Sofer (Hatam Sofer). Pressburg (Bratislava) was one of the most influential *yeshivot*, educating generations of Hungarian Jewish rabbis and cultivating Hungarian Orthodoxy.⁵²

Before the Second World War, almost 30 per cent of the population in Sziget were Jewish. In 1940, Máramaros was annexed back to Hungary with serious implications for local Jews: as many of them had

47 At the time the congregation was also becoming increasingly secular: an Israeli Hebrew teacher at the Jewish school in Helsinki, Yaakov Frank (1956), claims that hardly anyone kept the Shabbat.

48 Marika Weiss probably referred to the so-called Note Crisis in October 1961, a political crisis worsening Soviet–Finnish relations. It is not known whether any Jews left Finland because of the crisis.

49 According to a Dutch genealogy site, the father's last name was Stein; see 'Family page' at DutchJewry.org website.

50 See Amity 5 and 'Family page' at DutchJewry.org website. The famous Israeli-American *hazzan* Joseph Malovany (b. 1941, Tel Aviv), is the son of Beeri's sister, Freyda (née Stein) (see 'Joseph Malovany').

51 Bart Wallet, personal communication.

52 Traditionally, there were three types of Orthodox *yeshivot* in Europe: Hasidic, Lithuanian and Hungarian (Stampfer 2012: 10).



Rabbi Shmuel Beeri in the middle of the picture with Cantor Abraham Schwartzman on the left. Beeri, born in Sziget in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1905, was a survivor of the Shoah and arrived in Finland in 1961 after working as a teacher and a rabbi in Israel. Finnish Jewish Archives, National Archives of Finland.

Galician roots, many were deported as ‘foreign’ to Poland and consequently murdered, and young Jewish men were imprisoned in Hungarian labour camps (Gross and Cohen 1983). There is no information how Beeri survived the Nazi mass murders that began in spring 1944.⁵³ After the war he emigrated to Israel, where he worked as the head of a *yeshiah* in Safed and as a high-school teacher in Ramat Gan.⁵⁴

In 1953, Beeri travelled to Asmara (now the capital of Eritrea) to found a school for the local Jewish community as part of the initiative of the president, Yizhak Ben-Zvi, to connect Ethiopian Jewry to the State

53 We lack any details about his whereabouts during the Shoah, although, according to some sources, he suffered a great deal during the Shoah and afterwards (see, for example, *Ha-Tsofeh*, 6.8.1958).

54 Bart Wallet, personal communication.

of Israel. He also co-authored a book on Jewish holidays with the first leader of the Ethiopian Jewish community, Yona Bogale, in Amharic.⁵⁵ Beeri stayed in Ethiopia until 1956 (Bard 2002: 11).

In the early 1960s, Beeri was invited from Israel to Helsinki to work as a rabbi. This was the beginning of recruitment of rabbis with an Israeli background and later on, with Israeli rabbinical education (Torvinen 1989: 187). In 1961, Beeri was appointed as the chief rabbi of Finland. The most public event during his assignment was his memorial speech after the death of President Ben-Zvi in the synagogue with President Urho Kekkonen present in April 1963 (Torvinen 1989). After serving only two years, Beeri, mirroring the path of Berlinger, left Helsinki to be appointed as the

55 *Hage yisrael: rosh ha-shanah, yom ha-kippurim, sukkot* (Asmara, 1954).

chief rabbi of The Hague in 1963. There is no information about the year of his death but he probably returned to Israel after retiring in 1970.⁵⁶

Mordechai Lanxner (1914–83), deputy rabbi 1968–73, rabbi 1973–82

Like Weiss and Beeri, Lanxner was a Hungarian survivor of the Shoah who lost many members of his family during the war. Like Beeri, he was from Máramaros and came to Finland via Israel. As opposed to the other two Hungarian rabbis, however, Lanxner was educated in Hasidic *yeshivot* in Hungary and Romania, and in his obituary he is designated as ‘an old-school Hasid’ (*Hakehila* 3/1983).

Mordechai Shimon (Marku Schimon) Lanxner (Veis) was born in 1914 in Ruszkova (Ruscova), 50 kilometers south-east of Sziget. Most of the Jewish population in Ruszkova were Vishnitz Hasidim. The town boasted a large *yeshivah* founded in the late 1920s by Abraham Shlomo Katz. The *yeshivah* followed the style of Hungarian *yeshivot* in its teaching schedule but with strong Hasidic influences. In the memorial book of the Shoah victims of Ruszkova, Lanxner – as the rabbi of Helsinki – is counted among the pupils of the school (Moskovitz 1969/70: 10–15, 20–1). Lanxner continued his studies in the Kishinev Hasidic *yeshivah*, and in 1938, received his *smikbah* at the age of 24 (*Hakehila* 3/1983).⁵⁷

In 1940, Máramaros was annexed to Hungary. As mentioned above in Beeri’s case, even before the Nazi deportations to Auschwitz began in 1944, Jews in Máramaros were expelled en masse as ‘foreigners’⁵⁸ to the

Nazi-occupied Galicia in the north, where thousands of Hungarian Jews were murdered in 1941. There is no information whether Lanxner’s family was under a threat of expulsion or whether Lanxner was taken to forced labour.⁵⁹

In 1944, many of Lanxner’s family members were murdered in Auschwitz. Lanxner supplied the names of the Lanxner-Weis family in the Ruszkova memory book (Moskovitz 1969/70: 108) and in the Yad Vashem Central Database of Shoah Victims. In 1950, Lanxner emigrated to Israel and worked as a licensed *shohet* (*Hakehila* 3/1983). Lanxner was married to Miriam Hazenfratz (b. 1914), and they had three children (Amity 6).

After Beeri had left in 1963, the congregation in Helsinki was actively trying to find a more permanent rabbi: both Weiss and Beeri had stayed in Finland for only two years. In 1967, Lanxner moved from Israel to Finland to become the *shohet* of the community (*Hakehila* 3/1983). Lanxner did not speak Finnish or Swedish and held his sermons in Yiddish (Muir 2009: 540), and while he was respectfully referred to as *kantor rav*, in the late 1960s the congregation continued to search for a rabbi.⁶⁰ Finally in 1973, Lanxner was nominated for the full position.

During Lanxner’s term, synagogue services suffered from a lack of participants, causing difficulties in establishing *minyán* (ten men required for Jewish public worship). Many congregants called for a more equal status for women during the synagogue

to Ruszkova from western Galicia in the nineteenth century (Moskovitz 1969/70: 10–11).

59 The same questions could be asked of Beeri, who was born in Sziget and whose circumstances during the Shoah are not known to us.

60 Mercédész Czimbalmos, personal communication.

56 Bart Wallet, personal communication.

57 Kishinev (Chişinău, the present capital of Moldova) had a Hasidic *yeshivah* in operation since 1860 (Moskovich 2010).

58 Most of the Jews of the town had migrated

service, and the rising rate of intermarriages caused debates (Torvinen 1989: 212–13, 216.) During the 1970s and 1980s, more than one hundred persons joined the congregation after converting (Harviainen 1989: 164–5). According to Lanxner's obituary in *Hakehila* (3/1983), he 'showed great flexibility and adaptability towards changed conditions in a way that fortified the continuity of the congregation, without breaking halakhah'; nevertheless, some of his decisions – probably on conversions – were apparently criticised outside Finland. After retiring in 1982, Lanxner moved back to Israel, where he died in 1983 (*Hakehila* 3/1983).

All three rabbis of our last period were Hungarian Shoah survivors. In the 1990s, Weiss was interviewed about his experiences during the Shoah and was able to describe them in retrospect in his autobiography. Beerli and Lanxner, however, emerge from our sources as more enigmatic cases. There is not much information available about what happened to these two survivors from Máramaros during the war or in the immediate years following it. Before the 1980s, silence surrounding the trauma of the genocide was not uncommon among the survivors, and in the Finnish sources of the late 1950s up to the early 1980s, the wartime experiences of these three rabbis are never discussed. The silence over the Shoah is palpable, for example, in the fact that in Lanxner's 1983 Finnish obituary in *Hakehila* his survivor background is not mentioned.

Each of the three rabbis represented a different type of a spiritual leader for the Helsinki congregation. Weiss with his Neolog background seemed to herald a turn towards liberal Judaism, while Beerli had a traditional Hungarian Orthodox education,

and Lanxner was an 'old-school' Hasid. Their appointments reflect how difficult it was for the Helsinki congregation to find a common line in its recruitment policy. After the Shoah, old connections in Europe had been severed, and in the case of Beerli and Lanxner, the congregation now turned towards Israel in its search for rabbis.

Conclusions

We have shown that through its rabbis the small Helsinki Jewish congregation, ostensibly on the periphery of the wider Jewish world, was closely connected to the Jewish centres in Eastern and Western Europe as well as the Middle East. Beginning from its early days, the community became involved in the major internal developments of European Jewry.

All of the ten rabbis recruited to Helsinki between 1862 and 1982, except for one, were Orthodox. The first rabbis, who during the Grand Duchy of Finland rooted the *Minhag Polin*, the traditional Ashkenazi synagogue service, in Helsinki, represented East European and Lithuanian Orthodoxy. After Finnish independence in 1917, the community sought academically trained rabbis that represented Modern Orthodoxy: this was in congruence with the social and cultural development of the community. Whereas Jac Weinstein, Taimi Torvinen and Moshe Edelmann have offered fairly extensive descriptions of the rabbinate during the Russian rule and the first decades after 1917, the third period of the rabbis in our periodisation has so far remained less well known. On the basis of various existing accounts we have demonstrated that after the Second World War the community struggled to keep a consistent line: among the three rabbis, all of whom were Hungarian-born Shoah survivors, one was a liberal Neolog rabbi, one was

modern Orthodox, and one had traditional Hasidic background.

Almost all the rabbis of Helsinki were active in religious Zionist movements. Among the 'spiritual rabbis', Aba Homa attended several Zionist conferences and was indirectly connected to Rav Kook, the emblematic figurehead for religious Zionism. Later in life, Amsterdam, Schain and Bukantz migrated to Jerusalem. After the 1906 Zionist conference in Helsinki, the Finnish Jewish community was becoming more aware of the various political streams of Zionism. All three 'academic' rabbis were Modern Orthodox and active in religious Zionist parties promoting Jewish nationalism, or were even founding members of Zionist societies both in Finland and abroad. Of our last series of rabbis, Beeri and Lanxner had migrated to Israel after the war, and both returned there after retirement.

Whenever possible, we have paid attention to the families and wives of rabbis. Naftali Amsterdam's wife Rivka, for example, was for a long period the sole person in charge of the family's bakery while her husband worked as a rabbi. This reflects an economical pattern typical for East European Jewish families with *yeshivah* graduates as son-in-laws. However, often our sources are completely silent about domestic issues: more research is needed on the women's role in a world apparently dominated by men, especially in the Nordic context during the period we have studied.

Despite secularisation, acculturation, mixed marriages and several discussions about changing the denomination of the congregation to become more liberal, the community has upheld Orthodoxy and employed Orthodox rabbis to this day.⁶¹ A possible

61 The Jewish Community of Helsinki has continued to employ Orthodox rabbis, most of who have studied in Israeli *yeshi-*

contributory factor here may be that for small communities Orthodoxy functions as a common denominator, while a Reform congregation would exclude Orthodox Jews.⁶² As we have shown, the first debates about the denomination took place as long ago as 1901, when a group of congregants wanted to adopt Reform Judaism, as was the case, for instance, in the capital of the neighbouring Sweden that the Helsinki community held in high regard. Similar debates about changing the denomination have appeared on the pages of the community's journal *Hakehila* at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as congregants have discussed the discrepancy between the official Orthodoxy of the congregation and the daily religiosity, lifestyle and views of its members.

As we have demonstrated, the rabbis and their backgrounds in many ways reflect the community and the changes that have taken place among the Jews of Helsinki. However, more research is needed to understand how the rabbis influenced the religious customs and the 'lived religion' of the congregants. The Jewish Community of Helsinki is unique with its Cantonist history and roots in East European Litvak traditions. Perhaps it is this legacy and identity that has upheld, despite everything, a continuous string – a 'golden chain' – of Orthodox rabbis. ■

not. Since 1982 Ove Schwartz (1982–7), Lazar Kleinman (–1992), Michael Aloni (1995–6), Moshe Edelman (1999–2012) and Simon Livson (2012–) have served in Helsinki. Besides the rabbi of the Jewish Community of Helsinki there is currently also a Hasidic rabbi, Rabbi Benjamin Wolff (2003–) of Lubavitch Finland.

62 We can see a similar situation in the Oslo Jewish Community, where the synagogue is Orthodox while most of the members are not (Stene 2012: 149).

Rabbis in Helsinki 1867-1982

Name	Rabbi in Helsinki	Born in	Rabbinical education*	Denomination**	Academic studies	Destination after Finland
Naftali Amsterdam	1867-75	1832, Salantai, Lithuania, Russian Empire	Rabbinical studies in Vilna and Kovno	Lithuanian Orthodox	No	Lithuania, Palestine
Avrohom Schain	1876-81	1841/2, Novo Aleksandrovsk (Zarasai), Lithuania, Russian Empire	Not known	Lithuanian Orthodox	No	Scotland, Palestine
Abraham Werner-Homa	1881-91	1836, Telšiai, Lithuania, Russian Empire	Rabbinical studies in Žagarė and Telšiai, Lithuania	Lithuanian Orthodox	No	UK
Shmuel Noson Bukantz	1892-1924	1857, Šėta, Lithuania, Russian Empire	Slobodka Yeshivah, Kovno	Lithuanian Orthodox	No	Palestine
Scholem Treistman	1928-9	1892, Żelechów, Poland, Russian Empire	Ostrowiec Yeshivah / Bet Midrash ha-Elyon, Berlin	Hasidic / Modern Orthodox	In Berlin and in Vienna (apparently without a degree)	Poland, Israel
Simon Federbusch	1931-40	1892, Narol, Galicia, Austria-Hungary	Berezhyn Yeshivah / Israelitische theologische Lehranstalt, Vienna	Hasidic / Conservative	PhD but no information where from	USA
Elieser Berlinger	1946-51	1904, Illingen, Germany	Berlin Rabbinical Seminary	Modern Orthodox	Not known	The Netherlands
Mika Weiss	1957-61	1913, Kiskunfélegyháza, Austria-Hungary	National Jewish Theological Seminary, Budapest	Neolog (Hungarian liberal and modernist)	PhD from Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest	USA
Shmuel Beeri	1961-3	1905, Sziget, Austria-Hungary	Pressburg Yeshivah, Bratislava	Hungarian Orthodox	Not known	The Netherlands, Israel
Mordechai Lanxner	1968-82	1914, Ruszkova, Austria-Hungary	Ruszkova Yeshivah / Kishinev Yeshivah	Hasidic	No	Israel

* In the case of the earliest, 'spiritual' rabbis we often lack information about where they had attended a *yeshivah*.

** By 'denomination' we refer to the rabbinic education the rabbis had received in *yeshivot* or at rabbinical seminaries.

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