

# Isidor Brenson (Brennsohn)

Born: 27 Sep 1854, Jelgava (Mitau)

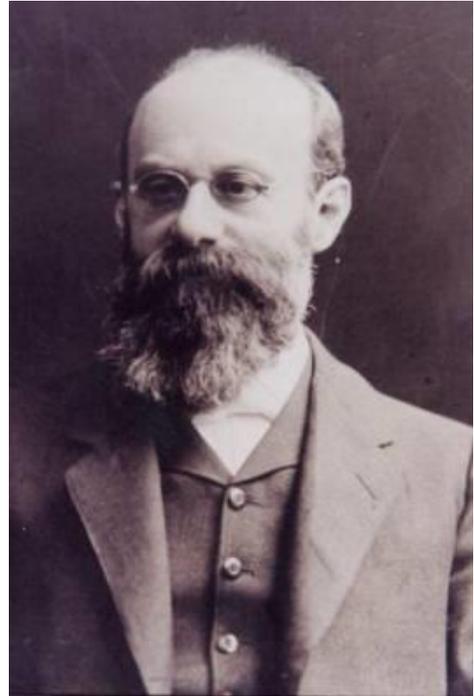
Died: 31 Dec 1928, Riga

**Historian of medicine and author of  
biographical dictionaries**

**"The Doctors of Courland,"**

**"The Doctors of Livland,"**

**"The Doctors of Estland"**



## About the student years in Dorpat (Tartu)

From the memoirs of Isidor Brennsohn.

Our thanks to Nina Kossman for permission to post this excerpt.

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### STUDENT YEARS

In mid-August 1875 I traveled to Dorpat with Leo Goertz, Wilhelm Cruse, and Kostja Kupffer. Since we already felt halfway like students—we weren't high school pupils anymore, not yet college students, but according to the vernacular of the time *Muli* (from *mulus*, mule)—beer couldn't be lacking. With the exception of Cruse, who even then could hold his own in beer drinking, we couldn't develop a taste for it, though, but nevertheless we took turns at the railroad stations getting a few bottles of beer into our compartment. In Dorpat we parted ways; they entered a fraternity, and I joined a Jewish circle. Student life in Dorpat held great charm for me. All the students called each other *du* [were on a first-name basis] and formed a student state, to which all students had to belong, with student and honor courts. The "wild ones," who had not joined any fraternity, had to affiliate themselves with some fraternity. Whoever did not recognize the "Comment," that is, student law, was blackballed; the same for those who had done something defamatory. A blacklist was delivered to all students from time to time. You couldn't associate with those who were blackballed; neither could satisfaction be exacted from them through a duel. Forced dueling did not exist at the time. The antiduellists, the "moral ones," did not recognize the duel. It was considered fair, however, particularly by the fraternity brothers, not to withdraw from a duel. Rapier duels were customary; rarely pistol duels for especially serious insults. Poles accepted only pistol duels. During my

student years a number of promising young lives became the victims of this medieval custom. Even a rapier duel ended in death through injury of the chest artery (*arteria mammaria interna*).

As a Kurländer I affiliated myself with the Curonia and to that end I visited the Kurland pub, "the Bone," in Compagnie Street. There I was immediately pulled over to a pretty large round table, where I had a good time. It would not have taken much persuasion at the time to win me over to the Curonia. But back in my lonely little room I had nobody I could tell my impressions to, and so this wish dissolved. I retained a friendly relationship with several members of the Curonia, though, such as with the unforgettable Adolf Katterfeld, who was murdered during the revolution in November 1895<sup>1</sup> in Irmlau-Waldheim, where he practiced as a physician. When I stood just before the Rigorosum exam, deprived of all resources, he nominated me for Curonia's student stipend, which kept my head above water for a while.

My student years went about the same as my high school years. I worked hard at my studies and gave a lot of private lessons. Although from the second year on I received two stipends from Mitau, which together amounted to 250 rubles a year—from the Wunsch and Friedlaender memorial funds—and got free tuition at the same time, I still could not make ends meet on this amount, particularly because I gave part of the money to my mother and grandmother. Therefore, I had to spend much time and energy on private tutoring. Yet I had some time for a social life. When I came to Dorpat, I found about fifteen Jewish students there, who appeared to stick together really well and gathered at one of the students' homes by turns. For the moment I joined this circle. Just as all Jewish life is serious, the efforts of the young Jewish students were also centered on serious things. We had founded an elementary school for poor Jewish children, and thereby contributed much to an improvement in the spiritual and mental level of the Jews of Dorpat, who because of their great poverty and ignorance lived in great darkness at that time. We students ourselves taught at the school without pay and chose from our midst a school principal. I functioned as such for several semesters. The means for the school's maintenance, such as rent, heat and operation, school supplies, and often also clothes for the children, we obtained partly by self-taxation, and partly through a subsidy of 100 rubles per year from the honorary curator we had chosen for the school, attorney Theodor Wulffius, JD, who magnanimously contributed considerable sums of his own money. When I was principal, besides Wulffius, Professor Allexander Oettingen, author of moral statistics, and jurist Professor Heinrich Mühlau also served as honorary curators.

All three gentlemen were invited to the final exam. I had drilled the little girls so well in biblical history that they recited their answers like clockwork. Things went just as well with the other subjects. The honorary curators were delighted and could not express their praise enough. They were hardly gone, when they sent large tureens of steaming hot chocolate and the most delicious cake from the nearest pastry shop as an expression of their satisfaction. The enthusiasm was so great that I pretty well had to give in to the wish of the children for a little dance, in which a few of the teachers participated. The seed we scattered then, fertilized by our zeal, bore good fruit. Enlarged and better financed, the school existed until the World War (1914).

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<sup>1</sup> Must be 1905 (November 1905 revolution in Russia). Adolf Katterfeld was a doctor in Waldheim (Courland). He was murdered at 25.11.1905 [M.R.]

Another charitable institution we created was the foundation of a Jewish student aid fund, also financed through self-taxation. The minimum contribution was 50 kopecks a month at that time. This creation also continues to exist today, significantly expanded. In my first year in Dorpat I had become friends with Josef Hamburg, who appealed to me because of his spirit, his ability, and his brilliant piano play. After one year, however, he went to Berlin, where he completed his studies and settled down as a physician. In frequent letters he tried to persuade me to follow his example. We remained friends, although separated by great distances, and our friendship endured till his death in the year 1912. The friendship of his wife and his three daughters left me with a rich legacy.

When I came to Dorpat, I rented a room with board in the home of university caretaker Wissor in Peterburg Street. The room, however, was more of a rathole. Swarms of rats and mice chased and squealed from all holes, and on the floor of my room a truly wild hunt raged all night. Since I didn't feel at all comfortable there, I was happy to accept the offer to become roommates with my fellow student Theodor Lemonius, the son of the principal of a Petersburg gymnasium.

[ ..... ]

Through Doctor Isak Feiertag, later a physician who was universally held in high regard in Bobruisk, who had at the time just passed his Rigorosum examination, I got acquainted with the family of Julius Henningson, a man of independent means, who occupied a large dwelling in the Köhlers' house in Compagnie Street not far from city hall square, and for whom I began to work as the tutor for two boys, his own son Robert, and his nephew Eugen. The conditions were 40 rubles per year in the beginning, later only 25 rubles, besides free lunch and dinner. I had a very hard time, however, and it took the better part of my leisure time. For several hours a day I had to busy myself with the boys, one of whom did not want to learn, while the other was less than gifted.

Because of the drills with the boys, I soon understood the catechism of the Lutheran religion, with all its questions and answers, by heart. On the other hand, I found a social circle with this family and their friends and relatives, so that these moments reconciled me to my extremely difficult and physically exhausting and stressful job. I enjoyed particularly spending time with Mrs. Amalie Henningson, whose bright and lively little daughter Else attracted not only me, but also the much older university and city gymnastics teacher Paul Buro.

In the Köhlers' house I lived with Lemonius on the top floor in an apartment consisting of two rooms. The front room, our work- and drawing-room, was a huge space with five windows looking out on the Embach, from where we had a wonderful view of the city and far out onto the land, in the direction of Carlowa. Lemonius was very gifted in music, could express his fantasies on the piano for hours, but had never actually received piano lessons. A spinet was procured and our friend Josef Hamburg (Josef Hamburg, later a practicing physician in Berlin, died 1812), chosen as the piano teacher. The huge room, however, and our music gave us the peculiar idea to organize a ball, a *pidu*. We made careful preparations, sent out invitations to all the nice housemaids and cooks in the neighborhood, and arranged for ample good food and drink. The gentlemen, besides the two of us, were Lemonius' friends from the "Estonia" fraternity, physicians Leo Wenndrich and Mischa (Michael) Sologub, jurist Victor Enmann, historian Alexander Enmann, physician Woldemar

Berg, jurist Richard Raudith, pharmacist Karl Grimm, and theologian Max Lemonius.. Dancing was lively; Hamburg bounced around to his heart's content and had a great time. It was all respectable. At three o'clock in the morning the ball ended, the ladies went home, but we stayed together and exchanged funny and witty comments about the cheerful evening.

In this apartment we stayed only for the first semester of 1876, however, since the landlord, pharmacist Köhler, needed the home for himself. I decided to live alone, to be able to work undisturbed for the "half-Philosophikum" exam. We separated, but our friendship continued and has lasted through the years. In the second semester of 1876, the third of my college days, I lived on Riga Street on the Stationsberg [station's mountain], near the Henningson family, who had gone there to be able to more conveniently supervise the construction of their house, which later belonged to Dr. Ottow, in Pepler Street. In this house I wasn't very comfortable, however, because my landlady ran a lunch business for students; and the little gold ring Martha Höpker had given me was stolen from me there. In spite of this, I worked for the exam, which I passed, except in zoology, for which I hadn't prepared. From the fourth semester on I lived in a turret room in the Nicolais' house on Alt Street by Barklay Square, where later university dean Lieven had a nice house built. In this castle I spent three semesters of undisturbed, happy solitude, worked for the second half of the Philosophikum exam, which I passed in December 1877. Since I owned a skeleton, many fellow students visited me to work on anatomy together. For my birthday present on 15/27 September 1876 I got a Turkish nightshirt, a fez, and a Turkish pipe from my mother and friends in Mitau. In a boisterous mood we dressed the skeleton in these things, and stuck the pipe in its mouth. Because it stood close to the window and could be seen from the street, and we also often sat by the open window to work and to chat, the whole neighborhood knew us. Once I received a long, anonymous letter, written in verse, which began as follows:

Just let the poor guy alone

who there from morn to night

stands at the window of your little room

dressed up to mockery and slight.

So now, at the wish of the Children from Eva's Realm, as the poem was signed., we moved the skeleton from the window farther back into the room.

My undisturbed and happy solitude was soon to come to an end. The Taube family in Mitau, whom I esteemed highly, came to me with the request to take in their son Julius, my erstwhile pupil, now a disciple [student of] in medicine, as a roommate. Since the apartment I was living in was too small for two people, I rented another apartment in Petersburg Street, where until shortly before my Rigorosum I roomed with Julius Taube, who later became an esteemed physician in Moscow, Since I now absolutely had to be alone, to be able to work for the exam, Taube moved to another apartment.

Now came months of wonderful, albeit also exhausting mental labor with the rapturous feeling of a steady increase in knowledge. To this day, I remember with delight the happy days I then spent alone with my thoughts and in the company of

my books. The winter of 1880/81 was severe and long; January and February brought a frost as low as 28 degrees R. [Réaumur] and I limited my errands to visits to the nearby restaurant in Petersburg Street where I ate my dinner. Just then I was plagued by material worries. For the first time in my student years, I had to live on debt. The good-natured waitress who provided my breakfast and a scanty evening meal advanced me the money out of her own pocket. I couldn't pay off my debt until I had accepted the position of physician in Subbath. My main worry was dinner times. By subscription you got ten dinner tickets for 3 rubels. When the tickets were all gone, you hustled some from a fellow student, and at worst you owed the waiter a few tickets. In spite of all these material difficulties I was still in good spirits and happy and worked on indefatigably. Without particular incident—with the exception of the dry pharmaceutical chemistry with Dragendorff, which kept me in Dorpat three extra weeks—I passed the Rigorosum exam for the degree of doctor of medicine, and was asked to submit my dissertation.

I should mention a matter of pedantry here, which was still common in my days: the *Klausurarbeit*, a written examination that came after the actual examination was completely finished. This written exam, a medical treatise written behind closed doors, in Latin, was a remnant of the Middle Ages, when Latin was still the language of scholars. In Dorpat, doctoral dissertations were still written in Latin till the end of 1859. The last Latin dissertation was written by Karl Julius Zepernik about *Meletemata de Cataracta*, Dorpat 1859. The first German-language dissertation was written in the beginning of the year 1860 by Riga citizen August Albanus on the theme: *Experimentelle Untersuchungen über die Beziehungen des Halsstranges des Sympathikus zur Temperatur des Kaninchenohres* [experimental examination of the relationships of the spinal cord of the sympathetic nervous system and the temperature of a rabbit's ear].

As far as our *Klausurarbeit* was concerned, what took place was the same as I spoke of with the high school final exam in mathematics in Mitau. After every one of us had drawn a question, the appropriate *Leibfuchs* [assistant, freshman gofer] appeared, received the topic through the keyhole, and took it to two students who had been previously selected for this purpose, a physician, who was to compile the test from the textbooks, and a philologist, who was to translate it into Latin. The name of the physician who wrote down the test for me, has escaped me, but the philologist was Joseph Treu. While we were locked in, we amused ourselves as pleasantly as possible, and received the completed tests back in the same way. Now we had passed all parts of the exam.

My studies were over. Now I had to enter real life. So was the life I had led up to now not a real life? Was it only a preparation for life? I dwelled on this thought in my quiet study. "You, Thor," I told myself, "what is your hurry? Enjoy every moment quietly, for everything you live through, activity, rest, work and relaxation, your 'preparation' for life—everything is 'life.'" Like a revelation this thought suddenly came to me, and now each moment of my life appeared precious. Such considerations, however, did not withstand the bustle of life. On sad and difficult days, in the turmoil of a physician's profession, these thoughts—children of the quiet study—passed and evaporated.

My inner man had experienced a great transformation. The faithful, fervently praying boy who strictly observed the ritual customs had become, not without heavy inner struggles, the freer-thinking student of the upper grades. At the start of my high

school years I didn't carry my books to school myself on Saturdays, and I avoided even writing on those days. When the latter later turned out to be incompatible with school attendance, I took up the pen perforce, convinced that I was committing a great wrong. I carried the books myself, too, in the beginning hidden under my shirt, but then, angry over my hypocrisy, out in the open. It went the same for me with the dietary laws. When I ate a meat dish for the first time, at the Höpkers', I had to throw up. The Sabbath rest was so sacred to the Jews that even during war they did not always put up a defense. It is said that the Romans launched the last attack on the Holy City on a sabbath day because they assumed that resistance would be minimal. The many hundreds of barely observed [also: hard-to-observe] commandments and prohibitions with which the noble core of Jewry is fenced in as though by a thick, insurmountable hedge, have saved the Jewish people from extinction during many centuries of the most cruel and unprecedented persecution and repression; they have, however, held back the development of Jewry, so that it has petrified, as it were, through two millennia. From this the Jews will not fully recover until they can shape their lives voluntarily in their ancestral land, the land of their fathers, free from the fear of assimilation. "Such a throng I'd like to see/ free people standing on free soil."

To achieve this lofty goal, the totality of Jews on the entire earth must work together. Every Jew, without exception, whatever language he speaks, whatever philosophy or party he may belong to, must be Zionist-minded. It is absolutely incomprehensible how a person can be a Jew and not be a Zionist. The Zionist conviction by no means excludes love and loyalty toward your homeland, where you were born and raised. On the contrary, it is intimately connected with it. An example of this is given by Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, when, inspired by his burning love for his fatherland, England, in his youthful works he glorified Jewry and Zionism. Only through Zionism will the presently splintered and scattered Jewry awaken to a new life and be healed. Only, Zionism must not degenerate into chauvinism.

Although busy with studies and teaching, I did not withdraw from the society and the joy of student life. On the one hand I maintained friendly contacts with the Jewish students, with whom I was connected by common interests and suffering and the above-mentioned charitable foundations, and on the other hand I possessed a small circle of friends I had gained in living with Lemonius. Besides the already mentioned fellow students, I want to name Georg Schnering, now in Reval; Eugen Loev, later educator at the Alexander gymnasium and teacher at the Katharinen School in Petersburg; Victor Enmann, deceased on September 15, 1910 while president of the Warsaw commercial court; his brother, historian Alexander Enmann, and later assistant librarian at the library of the Academy of Science in Petersburg, Johann Salomon. The latter was very dear to us, and was held in high esteem everywhere because of his delightful piano play. He was also a frequent guest in the home of curator Saburow. When he played he forgot everything around him and woke up as if from a dream when he finished playing. Through him I got to really know Schumann.

With alcohol I had to be careful, since both my stomach and my head reacted violently to massive amounts. But once, for Salomon's birthday, I took the bad consequences into the bargain so I could really celebrate the occasion. The result was that the next morning I found myself in bed without the slightest idea how I had gotten there. Lemonius had taken me home, up the stairs, and into bed. We didn't enjoy Salomon long. At the beginning of the Russian-Turkish war he went to the

military hospital Professor Wahl was in charge of in the Danube theater of war, and there he became ill with typhoid. Back home, he died on September 17, 1877, deeply mourned by all his friends, who held a wake for him. I still remember the eerie night before his burial, which I spent keeping watch by his casket, with his mourning and moaning mother in the next room.

My family life was limited to the Henningson family and their friends and relatives. It went without saying that I participated in all festivities in the entire circle of friends and family. What I liked best was spending the evenings quietly in my room, reading an interesting book. Besides medical books, I read historical works about the Jewish and Baltic past, as well as brochures about the burning issues of the day. At that time, the lay population of western Europe had come out against animal experiments in medicine, and a fierce fight had flared up. The waves of this struggle had spread into the Baltic states, where chief pastor Lützens in Riga and Baron Lüdingshausen-Wolff in Mitau eagerly branded animal experiments as needless torture of animals. Then, the answer to these attacks in the form of four open letters from Alexander Schmidt, our highly deserving professor of physiology, hit like a bomb. In a sarcastic manner and in strong words he logically and convincingly explained the necessity of animal experimentation for medicine and also for all of humanity. With eyes lit up and hot cheeks I read that piece, which from that hour silenced all attacks against scientific medicine. And now Karl Schirren's "Livonian Answer," because of which he had to flee Dorpat in the dead of night. Each word hit Juri Samarin's attacks like a club. Those who know Schirren's writing style and temperament, can imagine what impression this "treasonous" forbidden book left on youthful minds. I followed politics also, in which a great change began to take place. At the end of the seventies, the new conservatism was born, which held off the development of liberal thinking for many decades.

My roommate of that time was the already noted Julius Taube, a well-brought-up, very kind and pleasant fellow student. At home he was quiet and introverted, and he didn't thaw out till company came. In general he was solid and industrious, but once a month he took off. When he got money from home that was meant for the entire month, he went out, didn't come back till the next morning and was then broke the entire month.

I have already mentioned my relationships with the students. Outside the small circle of friends of German students and a few Jewish fellow students I had made friends with, I maintained few relationships in the student community. Occasionally I attended the sessions of the student court and admired the dashing language, the eloquence, and cleverness of the students and the student judge. With the honors court I had nothing to do, either. The *fraternitas rigensis* was considered anti-Semitic. According to statute, no Jew was allowed to bear the colors of the Rigensis. Physician Leon Bernstein from Kischinew held that honor so high that he converted to Christianity to obtain the colors. The only fraternity that had Jewish color bearers was Curonia. During my college years Curone was the son of a Jewish shoemaker from Mitau, Alexander Sander, who was highly esteemed, but died as early as June 1878 in the Danube war theater as a victim of typhoid. After I left the university, Julius Klein from Mitau became a fraternity brother. The Poles were not very popular and were feared because of their pistol duels. The only one of the Jewish students who associated with them was Boris Ssolz from Kowno, later a physician in Georgenburg. Only with Wilhelm Mieszowski, subsequently a reformed [protestant] preacher in Birsén, did I enter into a closer contact. Then again I lived with a

Russian, the son of a clergyman from Wjatka, Gregor Popow, quite congenially. Pupil of a religious seminary, Popow had come to Petersburg to study medicine. During the chance visit of a student he had been arrested with him and suspected of being a revolutionary, locked up in the Peter-Paul fortress. Set free after two years in prison, he received permission to study only in Dorpat. Dorpat was then considered the stronghold of loyalty to the Emperor. He had only learned German in the fortress, indeed, from a scientific book, the physiological letters of Karl Vogt. Our studies were the connecting link between us; bonds of friendship, which rested upon mutual respect, soon followed. He was a richly gifted human being, an enormously hard worker, and possessed amazing medical knowledge for a student, so that at his examination pathologist Professor Arthur Boettcher thought he had the then already well-known Petersburg physiologist Popow before him. He became a star of Russian science, but died as an assistant at the Oldenburg hospital in Petersburg in December 1883 of diphtheria, with which he had become infected by a sick child when he conducted a scientific experiment.

Of course, singing was something we enjoyed doing in Dorpat. Fraternity members did not sing the student songs, but the "wild ones" sang them passionately. Even in my old age they still sound in my ears. Artistically, the Estonian quartet was accomplished; it consisted of Ernst Hoerschelmann, physician in Petersburg, and later in Wesenberg (heroic tenor); Arthur Baetge, physician in Reval; William Frey (died young); and Adolf Bergmann, inspector of Annen School in Petersburg. Even now I can hear one of their songs:

Hail, o gracious beauty,

This song is dedicated to thee,

To thee our tones resound

Hail, thou gracious maiden 60

Hail, hail, hail, many thousand times

From the flowers that blossom there

Who, awakened from sweet rest

softly glow in morning light,

Thou art the most beautiful rose.

My relationship with the professors was good, but because of my reserve I did not get close to most of them.

[ ..... ]

The concerts in the university auditorium, which I attended whenever possible, were memorable. I never missed the rehearsals of the amateur orchestra, which consisted mainly of professors, in addition to a few professional musicians. It was amusing to see how the professors handled the individual instruments. Arthur Oettingen and historian Brückner.

