

The National Library collections : historical research, a sample representation and recommendations for future collections / Galia Richler Grebler

Abstract

This study, entitled The National Library Collections, Historical Research, a Sample Representation and Recommendations for Future Collection Methods, focuses on the study of the processes involved in the development of a collection of Hebrew incunabula, as a test case for the development of a flagship collection, the Judaica Collection, which is a major category in the National Library. The development of the collection was examined from two aspects: the historical aspect – the development of the collection against the backdrop of the history of the National Library, and the individual aspect – the ways in which collectors typically build their collections and the circumstances surrounding the donations.

For the sake of comparison, two flagship collections that are considered by the Library to be high priority were chosen as a control group: the Gershom Scholem Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism Collection which is also part of the Judaica Collection, and the Eran Lior Ancient Cartography Collection from the major category 'Israel'.

The research method is qualitative and, with regard to early historical material, is based on various written information sources – books, articles, archival items and newspapers; modern day information was also collected and in-depth interviews conducted with “key figures” from among past and present Library staff members.

The study gathered information about the collectors who were identified in the course of the research and about the circumstances surrounding the donation in their biographical context.

The collections and the nature of the collectors' ties with the Library before and after it became affiliated with the Hebrew University were described. The research studied nine donors, five of whom were explored in depth: Joseph Chazanowicz, Salman Schocken, Harry Friedenwald, Abraham Shalom Yahuda and Israel Mehlman. The other donors identified in the course of research, namely Moshe Yehuda Hellman, Marcus fechheimer, Mordechai Chamizer, Schmitzer and Ludwig Jesselson, who made a financial contribution for the purchase of an item, were only mentioned on the timeline and for the purpose of the research structure.

The study indicates that the Library must maintain its positioning as the central, most important entity in Israel and in the Jewish world for the collection and preservation of Jewish heritage. The Library must develop cordial relations with collectors in the field and inspire a willingness to make donations in various specific contexts: for example, to encourage donations in honour of an event marking a milestone in its history; to be responsive to potential donors wishing to perpetuate their memory or the memory of family and friends; to meet the needs of collectors looking for a place for their own collections, taking into consideration patriotic sentiments and their desire to make the material accessible to the public; to be responsive to the need to safeguard the collection after the demise of the collector. In such a case, the Library must prove that it is capable of handling the collection in a professional manner, which entails the preparation of a detailed catalogue of the donation, publicizing it and making it accessible to researchers.

The National Library must maintain its status as the chief library serving researchers in this field. It must develop working relationships with research institutes and ensure that its staff consists of researchers who are experts in their fields and also skilled professionals, both in working with researchers and in their ties with donors.

The discussion also addressed the reasons for the collection's success. It transpired that a good collection is based, among other things, on a great deal of information collected from informants in the field, and that, in order to continue developing the collection, it must be separated and individuated from other items in the Library and financial and human resources must be allocated for this purpose.

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