

# **From Nazi Germany to the Hebrew University: Reception of the "Diaspora Treasures" books at The National Library of Israel / Daniel Lipson**

## **Abstract**

Building a library collection should be conducted according to a collection policy tailored to the needs of the readers and budget constraints of the institution. Things are more complex in the case of a national library where the collection must reflect the literary work in that country throughout its years of existence. When a national library is also a university library it is even more difficult to establish even a basic policy.

The National Library of Israel began its journey in the late 19th century as the Midrash Abarbanel Library, a small library based on donations from whatever was available. The desire of its founders was to define it as the national library of the people of Israel, a library that collects the Jewish literary and cultural creations from past generations. In practice, it served the residents of Jerusalem and provided them mainly with Torah literature, old science books and simple reading books, mainly in Hebrew. When the library passed from the ownership of the Bnei Brit organization to the management of the Zionist movement, it was clear that it needed a professional and budgeted collection policy. In 1925, the Hebrew University started to operate, and the library became an academic institution. Arguments between its leaders and the bodies responsible for its management lasted a long time and what ultimately determined the building of its collections were book deliveries from the university and the library's support organizations, mainly in Germany and Poland. Thanks to these books most of which were carefully selected by the director of the National Library, the library grew rapidly in the 1930s and was able to faithfully serve its researchers and the general public as well.

The flow of books from Europe ceased with the outbreak of war. The books destined for Israel, along with other Jewish libraries and collections in Germany and occupied European countries,

were confiscated by the Nazis. Like their owners, most of these books were destroyed. But leading figures in the Nazi elite understood the importance of books both for ideological and security research. Nazi research institutes in Berlin, Frankfurt, Munich and other places began collecting sorting and cataloging books. Millions of books were stolen by the Nazis during the war from all enemies of the regime, and especially from the Jewish communities in Germany and the occupied territories.

A large portion of these books were discovered after the war by the Allied armies who invested much time and effort in returning them to their countries of origin. Hundreds of thousands of books from Jewish institutions and private collections were left without owners. The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, which saw itself as the new cultural center of world Jewry after the Holocaust, demanded trusteeship for the books whose numbers were much higher than those of the National Library at the time. Despite the support of other Jewish organizations, the military government in Germany refused and finally gave the responsibility to the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Corporation (JCR) which took upon itself the distribution of books throughout the Jewish world. 191,423 of them arrived in Israel. At the request of the JCR, most of the books were given a label bearing the name of the organization that saved them, which was pasted inside. The JCR label indicates that these books were stolen from their Jewish owners during the Holocaust.

Many books were also discovered outside the borders of Germany and representatives of the National Library worked for many years to collect hundreds of thousands of books and bring to Israel what was then called the "Diaspora Treasures". Tens of thousands of them are housed in the National Library building to this very day.

The Washington Conference on Nazi-looted Art, held in 1998, endorsed a number of principles dealing with artwork stolen during the war. These principles relate to the detection, identification and marking of property looted during the Holocaust and now found in galleries and museums around the world. Many conferences and research studies have dealt with this subject over the last twenty years. Most of them refer to art, but today many libraries, especially in Germany and Austria, conduct provenance research among their collections and have succeeded to locate

books that were stolen during the Holocaust. Thousands of them have already been returned to the descendants of the original owners.

This kind of provenance research has never been done at the National Library of Israel.

In this study, we tried to locate the "Diaspora Treasures" books that came to the National Library in order to try and understand the library's collection policy during those years. It was assumed that the types of books, their language and subjects would indicate the needs of the library during this period of the establishment of the state of Israel.

Locating the books will also meet international requirements and allow for exploration of provenance and other research. In addition, we also wanted to understand the attitude of the library and Hebrew University management towards the books they so longed for, and to the position assigned to them in their new home in Jerusalem.

In order to carry out the research it was necessary to find a way to collect the details of the books. These books were cataloged and added to the National Library collection like any other book. There was no mention in the catalog records about the origins of the books and they could not be found by search, neither in the card catalog at the time, nor with the online catalog. It was also important to gather documentary information regarding the activities of the "Diaspora Treasures" Committee and the library's activities on the subject, in order to understand the chain of events.

We searched for information about the "Diaspora Treasures" books and their treatment in the archives and internal records of the National Library.

The "Diaspora Treasures" books were marked when they were recorded in the inventory books of the library before they were cataloged. These markings, some of which are incorrect, do not appear in the catalog. Beyond the accidental discovery of a book with a JCR label, the information in the Inventory books, which is not accessible to the public, is the only official evidence that the books are "Holocaust survivors".

We collected 10,281 items from the inventory records during the years 1950-1959 and filtered out the irrelevant books or ones that could not be analyzed. The analysis itself was based on the bibliographic and catalog information of 8,368 books remaining after screening. In order to retrieve the information from the library's Alma integrated library system, it was first necessary to convert all the shelf numbers listed in the inventory to system numbers. With the help of

Oracle Analytics and MARC Edit software, we prepared a detailed database of the books and their bibliographic description, which includes subject, year, language, publisher and place of printing.

In order to understand the types of books absorbed in the collection, it was necessary to group their 2,365 unique subjects, into a number of general topics that contained many sub-topics. We did this using the Open Refine software. We presented the final findings with graphs created using pivot tables in Excel.

We tried to understand the data revealed in the graphs and the conclusions derived from them in light of the archival documentation. This documentation includes minutes of the "Diaspora Treasures" and JCR committee meetings as well as correspondence between committee members. The story revealed between the lines changes throughout this period.

It is influenced by the understanding of the magnitude of the Holocaust and the great immigration that followed, along with the establishment of the State of Israel and the collaboration with international Jewish organizations and Israeli institutions in Israel.

At first the university demanded trusteeship to all the books. It certainly could not accept them all and it was clear that a distribution would be offered. But from the archival material of the first years of the committee's activity it appears that the library's concerns were chiefly for the enrichment of its own collections. Other reports and letters indicate a different approach. The university understood its responsibility towards the Jewish people in the country and saw itself committed to transferring the historical Jewish culture from the Diaspora to the State of Israel, the new spiritual center of the nation.

Emissaries went to Europe to choose books for both the National Library and the other institutions in Israel, but here again, many of the documents emphasize the needs of the library only. The letters sent, tell of difficulties and even disputes regarding the distribution of the books among the Jewish organizations, even before they arrived in Israel.

The interim conclusion was that the library was looking for quality and important collections, as well as a large and varied selection of Jewish works that had been published throughout the history of printing. The rest of the books, much of which were liturgical and rabbinical religious literature, were required by Torah and religious institutions. Other books reached public libraries and schools.

Most of the data we processed dealt with the topics of the books that were collected. Unlike what we would have expected from a university library, we discovered that about 50% of the books absorbed into the library's collections, were in the fields of liturgy, Literature and Jewish law. In other fields like Bible, Rabbinical literature, science, history etc. there were far less books. We were also surprised by the number of books in Yiddish (35% of the books collected), a language that was shunned by many at the Hebrew University during its early years.

This data seems to contradict the archival material which describes the efforts made in Europe by library representatives to find books appropriate for the university's needs.

From our graphs we learn that the library had absorbed many editions of identical books, seemingly worthless, unnecessary and unsuitable for its needs. Books such as Siddurim, Machzorim, Psalm books, Yiddish Folk Literature and more, were desperately needed outside the library walls but we still find them being cataloged en masse in the National Library during this period, something we did not see in the years before the Holocaust.

In our opinion, the explanation for this phenomenon and the explanation to the apparent contradiction can be understood not through the content of the books and their subjects. Rather, their importance can be explained from a historical perspective and from the recognition of the need to preserve and document the educational needs, academic level, faith and culture of pre-Holocaust Jewry as documented by the book market.

No official collection policy of the library was discovered for those years and there probably was none. The library certainly did not have comprehensive collection ambitions like it has today. It did try to collect books necessary for the national collection and academic research, but at the same time there seemed to be an understanding that even useless and worthless books can, through their bibliographic description, indicate trends in knowledge consumption, cultural and religious changes and stages of Hebrew book history from the invention of print in the 15<sup>th</sup> century until the closure of the Jewish printing presses during the Holocaust.

These books, seemingly superfluous, were necessary for the establishment of the Bibliography of the Hebrew book project, an idea that was proposed even before the Holocaust, came up again after it and was finally established in the 1960s.

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