

# **The "Widow and the Ram Brothers Printing House" (1789-1940): Bibliographic and Historical Aspects / Tchiya Dagan**

## **Abstract**

The popular nickname to describe the Jewish people is "the people of the book" and not without reason; Books have accompanied it since its founding, starting with the book of books - the Bible - and then throughout the generations.

Researcher Gershom Shalom points out that:

"The Jewish people, who in terms of their biological being almost did not deserve more attention than any other people from the ancient Near East who have long since disappeared and passed from the world, appeared on the scene of history together with his book. The people and the book were involved in the self-consciousness of the Jews and the consciousness of the world" (Shalom, 1959, p. 160)

The enormous revolution that took place at the end of the fifteenth century with the invention of printing contributed, in dimensions that are difficult to estimate, to the spread of knowledge and its accessibility to large parts of the world's population. For the Jewish people, People of the Book, it was a significant milestone. Starting from this period, the nation of Israel in all its diasporas established printing houses wherever possible and permitted by the authorities. The collection of books produced by these printing houses serve as historical documentation, and provide a glimpse of the cultural, religious, intellectual and social aspects of Jewish communities in different periods and places

In addition, the collection of books reflects the interrelationships between the Jewish communities and the various cultures that surrounded them. Translations of texts from local

languages into Hebrew, the addition of works dealing with contemporary issues or the appearance of secular literature serve as an example of how Jewish printers responded to influences from home and abroad. Through the collection one can learn about the life of the Jews, about all the changes and challenges they faced throughout history. This idea is the basis of the present research.

The aim of this research is to trace the years of existence of the printing house known as "The Widow and the Ram Brothers Printing House", which operated in Vilnius between the years 1789-1940, a family printing house that left an indelible mark on the cultural heritage of the Jewish community. So that it would be possible to get an impression of the spirit of the Jewish community during a period of changes and transformations, we wanted to see how things are reflected and expressed in the books collection of this central printing house that operated for about 150 years.

During this impressive period, the owners of the printing press knew pressures and changes from home and abroad. Governmental decisions that directly affect the status of the printing house on the one hand and changes in the religious mindset and outlook of the house on the other hand.

The collection that was built for examination in this research is in accordance with the findings of the National Library, it contains 1870 titles, but it is quite possible that there are additional titles that were not included in this file but were published by this printing house. However, the picture obtained from the findings that emerged will certainly not be affected by this.

In the present research, a collection of 1870 items were examined. The investigated was done according to the French school of thought, known as "Book and Society", a school that represents the development of scientific thinking in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is characterized, among other things, by the interdisciplinary approach, meaning openness and cross-fertilization between different fields of thought.

"Researchers of this school of thought, in contrast to bibliographers, the traditional book researchers, consider the "book" not only a subject of research in itself on its artistic and historical sides, but an important source for understanding social and cultural processes and changes." (Brochson, 1989, p. 41)

This type of research is no longer satisfied with informative-chronological questions referring to the history of printing, but turns to questions from the sociological-economic aspect and tries to find out the influence of the books and their status in the society under discussion over a period of time.

The research works done according to the "book and society" school are usually based on background data that are fixed parameters, such as: population and government. With reference to the period covered by the present study - the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - this is a period in which many changes of government took place and with them the laws concerning the rules of printing for the Jews within the realm of their rule. The main goal then is to gain insights into the multifaceted processes that shaped society during this significant historical period.

As part of the research, bibliometrics was used, which is a branch of research that uses data collection and processing techniques of text and information and their analysis with statistical tools. In order to understand the composition of the collection, sub-questions were asked that deal with different aspects and areas of interest that the printed titles deal with. Examining these aspects with bibliometric tools broadened the view of the image of the book collection and provided the required information.

The main diagnosis was a division between the holy books and the those who are not holy books. At the same time, other characteristics were examined, such as: some books from the collection were a collection of first printings and some of the books appeared in reprints; What is the variety of languages in which the books were printed; Was there a reference to the target audience of these books; Were "agreements" "*hsscamos*" printed for the books, and if so to which of them?

Another facet examined is an area known as "paratext" - which does not refer directly to the content of the book but to other elements of the book that also contribute to the reader's experience, such as: the title, cover page, introduction, keys.

The segmentation of the various variables was presented in appropriate tables and charts. The analysis of the data presented the interpretation arising from them and their significance regarding the central research question.

The findings of the research revealed that despite the changes that took place during the years of the printing house's existence, both in the external environment and in the internal processes that took place within Jewish society, still the bulk of the books were those belonging to the field of holy books. The fact that the printing house also printed books of poetry, scientific prose, and biographies indicates that the spirits of the Enlightenment that blew during the period did not pass over the printing house either, although to a lesser extent compared to the sacred literature. This figure shows on the one hand the desire of the print managers for generations to position themselves in the conservative consensus and on the other hand allows us to assume that the educated population, at the same time as the conservative one, consumed basic sacred literature at least for basic Jewish rituals that still existed.

It can be said that the book's collection of the "Widow and Brothers Ram" printing house reflects the dynamism of Jewish life, the adaptations, challenges and cultural richness of the Jewish communities throughout the time period in question and contributes to the understanding of Jewish life across time and space.

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