Books of the people: Jewish Cultural Reconstruction books in the Baltimore Hebrew Institute Collection at Towson University

Nadia Nasr
Santa Clara University, nnasr@scu.edu

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Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Books in the Baltimore Hebrew Institute Collection at Towson University

The Beth Israel Congregation Sisterhood and Towson University Special Collections and Archives

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When Allied forces moved across German-occupied territories in 1945 they discovered looted Jewish cultural works squirreled away into various storehouses in Germany and across Europe. The Office of Military Government, United States (OMGUS) took responsibility for surveying the various storehouses and repatriating the items to their original owners. Toward that end the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD) was established and set up in a building that was formerly part of the I. G. Farben Corporation. Its mission was to act as a clearinghouse for collecting, sorting, identifying provenance, and shipping materials back to original owners.
Plunder and Restitution: The Largest Jewish Library Ever Assembled

Selected photographs documenting the confiscation and restitution of European Jewish cultural property.
Religious books concealed behind a wall in the Great Synagogue in Amsterdam, Holland, in an attempt to safeguard them against seizure or destruction. They were confiscated in 1943 by German soldiers and set aside for special German research institutes. These books were possibly among those that passed through the Offenbach Archival Depot.

Thwarted Efforts to Conceal

From “An album that documents the confiscation of cultural property by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg,” by Captain Isaac Bencowitz, Director of the Offenbach Archival Depot. Photograph courtesy of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority.
Seized cultural materials, including books, were loaded onto vehicles for transport to storage or research institutes. In this particular photograph workers in Vilna, Poland, are unloading Smolensk Archives that just arrived after transport from Smolensk, Russia.

From “An album that documents the confiscation of cultural property by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg,” by Captain Isaac Bencowitz, Director of the Offenbach Archival Depot. Photograph courtesy of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority.
Seized books were sent to storage or set aside for special German research institutes such as the Reichsinstitut für Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands. In this photograph, workers at one of the German research institutes carry out the registration of books seized by German soldiers.

From “An album that documents the confiscation of cultural property by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg,” by Captain Isaac Bencowitz, Director of the Offenbach Archival Depot. Photograph courtesy of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority.
Once books arrived at the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD) they were sent to the General Sorting Room. OAD workers processed up to 30,000 books per day by examining them for marks of ownership. Identifiable books were returned to Jewish libraries and communities. Unidentifiable or ownerless books were sent to the second floor until a decision could be made regarding their distribution.
This photograph taken in 1946 shows unidentified books set aside for final sorting. These books either had no marks of ownership or their owners could not be located. In April 1947 the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc. was established to take custody of these books and distribute them among Jewish centers of learning or Jewish cultural heritage institutions.

Unidentifiable books. 300,000 of them awaiting final sorting and unknown ultimate destination.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hebrew books</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German language, Hebrew religions and historical subjects</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German language, classical literature</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian language, Jewish cultural subjects</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various other languages, Jewish cultural subjects</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various other languages, general subjects</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From “An album which documents postwar efforts of the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD) to restore cultural property that was confiscated by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR),” by Captain Isaac Bencowitz, Director of the Offenbach Archival Depot. Photograph courtesy of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority.
While awaiting decisions about their future, approximately 25,000 unidentified books were temporarily loaned to the American Joint Distribution Committee for everyday use by Jewish refugees in displaced-persons (DP) camps. In this photograph Professor Koppel S. Pinson and workers and volunteers of the Offenbach Archival Depot select books for use in the DP camps.

Borrowed Books Used to Restore Daily life

From “An album which documents postwar efforts of the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD) to restore cultural property that was confiscated by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR),” by Captain Isaac Bencowitz, Director of the Offenbach Archival Depot. Photograph courtesy of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority.
As part of the sorting activities wet books and manuscripts were sent to the Care and Preservation Room for drying before being packed and shipped to their final destination.

From “An album which documents postwar efforts of the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD) to restore cultural property that was confiscated by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR),” by Captain Isaac Bencowitz, Director of the Offenbach Archival Depot. Photograph courtesy of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority.
When books were ready for return to their original owners they were sent to the Packing Room for packing. Offenbach Archival Depot workers in the Packing Room received as many as 10,000 books and archival material for packing per day. At the end of each day as many as 50 crates were packed, sealed, and sent to the Shipping Room.

From “An album which documents postwar efforts of the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD) to restore cultural property that was confiscated by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR),” by Captain Isaac Bencowitz, Director of the Offenbach Archival Depot. Photograph courtesy of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority.
Crates in the Shipping Room of the Offenbach Archival Depot await transport via rail to barges for their final journey home. These crates contain about 200,000 books and documents of more than 500 different Russian libraries.

From “An album which documents postwar efforts of the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD) to restore cultural property that was confiscated by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR),” by Captain Isaac Bencowitz, Director of the Offenbach Archival Depot. Photograph courtesy of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority.
The building housing the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD) was adjacent to rail lines used to transport crates of books over land or to barges for overseas travel for return to their homeland. In this photograph Captain Isaac Bencowitz (far right), OAD Director, stands with two Soviet Restitution Officers in front of a freight train carrying the first shipment of Soviet Books sent home from the OAD.

From “An album which documents postwar efforts of the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD) to restore cultural property that was confiscated by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR),” by Captain Isaac Bencowitz, Director of the Offenbach Archival Depot. Photograph courtesy of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority.
The [Literary] Remains of a Decimated Civilization

Selected JCR books from the BHI Collections.
Nazi Propaganda & Research Institutes

Many seized books were stamped and set aside to be used for anti-Jewish propaganda in special German research institutes. This book is stamped with the eagle emblem of the Nazi state surrounded by the text Reichsinstitut für Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands (Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany). The Reichsinsttitut had a special department for study of the so-called “Jewish Question.”

Moses Maimonides. Mishneh Torah. Amsterdam: ‘Emanu’el ben Yosef ‘Atias, 1702. BM520.84.Az 1702 / RBR710 v. 4 c. 1
Books donated by the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc. (JCR), are identified by a special bookplate usually applied to the inside front cover. Many of them are also identified by the round stamp of the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD). This book has both the JCR bookplate and the OAD stamp on its inside front cover.
Something Unexpected

Among the books seized by the Nazis were a number of non-Jewish religious texts, such as this edition of Martin Luther’s German translation of the Bible printed in Nuremberg in 1700. The BHI Rare Books collection also contains a 1704 edition printed in Leipzig and a 1758 edition printed in Halle.

Martin Luther. *Biblia, das ist die gantze Heilige Schrift Altes und Neues Testaments Verteutscht von Martin Luther[…].* Nurnburg, 1700. RBR529
In Support of Daily Living

This particular book was temporarily borrowed from the Offenbach Archival Depot by the American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) for use in DP (displaced-persons) camps. Providing a library with religious books was one of many ways that the AJDC worked to restore the daily life of Jewish refugees who had survived the Holocaust. In addition to the JCR bookplate this book is also stamped “AJDC Library.”

Many JCR books are old and worn from handling or were damaged due to poor storage conditions. Volume 1 of this set of books is stored in a special box because it has lost its cover and its spine is extremely deformed. Despite this the block of pages is in relatively good shape, a testament to the quality of the materials used in its making.
The Lost Ones and the Survivors

In the midst of war loss is inevitable. These two books are part of a five volume set of a commentary on the Pentateuch. It is uncertain what happened to the other three volumes. Although this set is incomplete the volumes that remain speak to the existence of the ones that were lost.

Moses Mendelssohn. *Hamishah humshe Torah: ‘im targum Onklos ve-Ḥamesh Megilot ‘im perush Rashi ... : ye-hosafti ... ha-Ba ‘al ha-Turim ve-gam ha-Be ‘ur ‘im Targum Ashkenazi*. Prague, 1801. RBR310 v. 2
Survivor’s Talmud

This volume, known as the Survivor’s Talmud, is one of one hundred copies printed in Heidelberg, Germany, in 1949. It is dedicated to the U.S. Army who arranged for its printing on behalf of Jewish refugees in DP (displaced-persons) camps. On the title page scenes of Israel are depicted above scenes of barbed wire and a work camp.

Preserving the Past to Ensure the Future

Caring for books in the Baltimore Hebrew Institute Joseph Meyerhoff Collection.
BHI’s rare books are stored in the Towson University Special Collections department on the fifth floor of Cook Library. The storage facility is climate controlled, and the Special Collections reading room allows researchers access to these rare and unique materials.
Special Collections staff create customized enclosures to house books when they’re not in use. These enclosures support and stabilize books and provide extra protection from exposure to light, dust, and temperature or humidity fluctuations.
Specialized Care

Specialized enclosures only go so far. Many books in the collection are in need of restoration work best completed by professional conservators trained in book and paper restoration.
How You Can Help

- Sponsor a Restoration – estimates for restoration work on selected BHI rare books are available
- General Collection Care Fund – provide funding to secure and stabilize books by contributing funds to purchase general supplies
- Spread the Word – Tell others about this White Gloves Session