

4-15-2014

The Bibliothèque Medem: Eighty Years Serving Yiddish Culture

Gilles Rozier

Bibliothèque Medem, gilles.rozier@yahoo.fr

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ajlpublishing.org/jl>

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [Information Literacy Commons](#), [Jewish Studies Commons](#), [Other French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Reading and Language Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rozier, Gilles. 2009. "The Bibliothèque Medem: Eighty Years Serving Yiddish Culture." *Judaica Librarianship* 15: 25-34. doi:10.14263/2330-2976.1042.

OUR COLLECTIONS

The Bibliothèque Medem: Eighty Years Serving Yiddish Culture

GILLES ROZIER

ABSTRACT

The Bibliothèque Medem (or Medem-Bibliotek, in Yiddish), in Paris, is the largest Yiddish library in Western and Central Europe, as well as a major Jewish cultural center. Founded in 1928 by a group of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who were aligned with the socialist Bund, its trajectory over eight decades (including the four years of the German occupation) is chronicled here. Today, the collections of the Bibliothèque Medem comprise 20,000 volumes in Yiddish and 10,000 titles in the Latin alphabet dealing with Jewish culture. In addition, it maintains about 30,000 uncataloged book volumes, extensive serial holdings, 300 posters, archives of a number of Yiddish authors, and a sound archive containing 7,500 recordings. Together with the libraries of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Séminaire Israélite de France (SIF), the Bibliothèque Medem is a principal partner in the Réseau Européen des Bibliothèques Judaïca et Hebraïca (European Network of Judaïca and Hebraïca Libraries), which administers their union catalog and sponsors digitization projects of their holdings.

ROOTS

The Bibliothèque Medem has its roots in the history of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. Its existence has for many years also been intertwined with the activities of the Jewish Labor Bund in France. The massive immigration wave, which began in 1880, experienced its first heyday before the First World War, a period when political parties and labor unions were organized. In 1904, a mutual aid society, *Arbeter-fareyn Kemfer* [the Fighters' Labor Union], started up, which included a library and a small theater troupe at its core. The library had its quarters at 27, rue des Ecouffles, in the heart of the Marais district.

In 1922, immigrants of various political stripes—Communists, Bundists, Left Poale Zionists—established the *Kultur-lige* [League of Culture], and a library was at the core of its activities. In 1925, the Communists took control of the *Kultur-lige*, and they retained control of its library. The Bundists then founded their own organization: the *Arbeter-klub oyfn nomen Vladimir Medem-farband* [The Vladimir Medem Union's Workers' Club], after the Bundist ideologist, who was born in Latvia in 1879 and died in New York in 1923.

FOUNDING

In 1928, seven young immigrants from Eastern Europe, members of the Medem Union, established a new library, which from the start was called the *Nomberg-bibliotek baym Medem-farband* [Nomberg Library of the Medem Union], after the Yiddish writer and journalist Hersh-Dovid Nomberg, who died in 1927. A photograph, taken on February 16, 1929, which presided over the library's reading room, united its seven founders: Yitzhok Blumenstein, Meir Mendelsohn (the only one of them to possess higher learning), Haim Golub, Leyb Tabatchnik, Av. Zusman, Eli Shvirinski, Dovid Leiber, and Kiwa Vaisbrot. [Figure 1.]

Initially, the library was located at 50, rue des Francs-Bourgeois, in the 3rd Arrondissement of Paris, close to the *Pletsl*, which is how Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe at that time referred to the Jewish quarter of the Marais.

In order to raise the necessary funds to purchase its first volumes, a cultural evening was organized in 1928, in which the writers David Einhorn, Sholem Asch, Zalmen Shneour, and Peretz Hirschbein participated. The proceeds made it possible to buy furniture at the Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville (BHV), a large store that was quite close by, together with the first books. The writer Sholem Asch offered 200 books, and Baruch Charney Vladeck, president of the *Yidisher arbeter-komitet* [Jewish Labor Committee] in New York undertook to send 300 books.

In 1932, the Medem Union—which had meanwhile established the *Arbeter-ring* [Workmen's Circle (Cercle des travailleurs, in French)], a mutual aid society that also ran the “people's university” and the *tsugob-shul* [supplementary school]—moved into 110, rue Vieille-du-Temple, also in the 3rd Arrondissement. Their quarters occupied a large, third-floor apartment. The library took up two rooms, the larger of which was the reading room and the smaller one serving as a reception area for readers. The books were kept enclosed in the famous cabinets purchased at BHV, and several years later these would play a key role in the library's fate. During the Thirties, the library's collection was regularly augmented by the acquisition of new books, primarily from Poland and the United States, and by the integration of the 800-volume library of the Hat Makers' Union.

In 1939, Paris possessed six Yiddish libraries affiliated with political or cultural movements, and two libraries that owed their origins to private initiatives. The largest of these, boasting 6,200 books in Yiddish and Hebrew, was the *Bibliotek untern nomen Yefim Pernikov* [Yefim Pernikov Library], administered by



FIGURE 1. The founders of the H. D. Nomberg Library of the Vladimir Medem Workers' Club, Paris, February 16, 1929.

the Fédération des Sociétés Juives de France. The successor to the *Kultur-lige*, Communist in its orientation, was the *Yidishe folks-bibliotek untern nomen Sholem-Aleykhem* [Sholem Aleichem Yiddish People's Library], with 3,800 volumes. The Nomberg Library—the future Bibliothèque Medem—held 3,300 volumes and had 185 regular readers. The most important of the private libraries was the Bibliothèque Kouliche, established by a philanthropist and located on the rue de Turenne, also in the 3rd Arrondissement.

DURING THE TIME OF PERSECUTION

After the German army occupied Paris in June 1940 and the *Statut des Juifs* [law concerning the Jews] was enacted in October 1940, reading became a less urgent matter than the delivery of relief. A canteen in the Bund's quarters provided free meals to Jews in distress, especially to families of prisoners of war. After the roundup of July 16 and 17, 1942 [*la rafle du Vel'd'hiv'*, in French], which resulted in the arrest and deportation of close to 13,000 Parisian Jews, it became clear to many Jews that it would not be safe to remain in Paris. The majority of the Bundist groups' left the capital, some joining the Resistance and others taking refuge in the "Free Zone."¹ In the autumn of 1942, the Gestapo paid a visit to

¹ Editor's note: The "Free Zone" was the portion of France under Vichy rule that was not occupied by the German army until November 1942.

the Bund's quarters on rue Vieille-du-Temple. The canteen continued to operate. Boxes of canned goods were stored in the library, half the height of the book cabinets, blocking access to them. The Germans vowed to return within a few days to ransack the cabinets. In the face of this emergency, Nathan Shachnovski, one of the only Bundist comrades who remained in Paris, and his wife Myriam, a non-Jewish German, moved the books to the building's sub-cellar with the assistance of the janitor.

Sealed in wooden boxes and stored underground, the 3,000 books escaped destruction.

Paris was liberated on August 24, 1944. The library reopened on Saturday, October 14th. Of the seven founders, two—Leyb Tabatchnik and Eli Shvirinski—had been deported and did not return.

The library then changed its name. The Medem Union no longer existed; the *Arbeter-ring* (known in French as the Cercle Amical de Secours Mutuel) continued, but more than ever its ideological activities took second place to its function as a mutual aid organization. The more fervent Bundists objected to seeing Vladimir Medem's name disappear, so the library was renamed the *Medem-bibliotek baym Arbeter-ring* (Bibliothèque Medem auprès du Cercle Amical). During the immediate postwar years, numerous survivors from Eastern Europe made their way to Paris. Some remained there, while for others it was merely a way station en route to the Americas or the new State of Israel. Activities in Yiddish proceeded on an intense level at that time. The library's audience consisted both of immigrants who had arrived in France before World War II and *grine* (greenhorns)—often quite young—who arrived after the war. The library continued to grow. During the summer of 1965 it moved to 52, rue René-Boulanger, in the 10th Arrondissement, and transferred 10,000 books in the process.

TOWARD A CULTURAL MISSION

The 1970s was a pivotal decade. Due to linguistic assimilation and the weak state of Jewish education in France following the war, the ranks of the readership were not replenished. The library developed collections in French, while its Yiddish collections attracted different readers: students, researchers, cultural professionals. In 1979, its leadership decided to establish a not-for-profit association (according to the French law of 1901), the Association Bibliothèque Medem, so that the library could pursue its cultural mission independently from the Cercle Amical. This was no longer exclusively a question of catering to a readership consisting of the general public but, increasingly, to one comprising students and researchers specializing in Yiddish. The phenomenon became more marked after the arrival of Yitskhok Niborski. Born in Buenos Aires in 1947, the leadership invited him in October 1979 to set up a subject card catalog and assist Kiwa Vaisbrot, who had been in charge of the library since the end of the war. Having initially come for a period of three months, Yitskhok Niborski was invited by Yiddishist groups to remain in France. Henceforth he would be

one of the guiding forces behind the renewal of Yiddish studies in France and thanks to the impetus that he provided, the Bibliothèque Medem assumed an important role in the transmission of Yiddish in Paris. Enrollments in the Yiddish courses that he developed constantly increased. Singers, researchers, students, and media personalities were able to benefit from his valuable suggestions.

A NEW DIRECTION

In 2002, the Bibliothèque Medem moved out of the *Arbeter-ring's* quarters in order to establish, jointly with the Association pour l'Étude et la Diffusion de la Culture Yiddish (AEDCY), the Maison de la Culture Yiddish- Bibliothèque Medem. The institution moved into temporary quarters at 18, passage Saint-Pierre Amelot in the 11th Arrondissement of Paris. Since then, it has developed considerably and at the end of 2008 it acquired quarters situated at 29, rue du Château-d'eau (10th Arrondissement), with 650 square meters (7,000 square feet) of floor space, where the institution was to relocate in the autumn of 2009.

SOME IMPORTANT BEQUESTS

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Union des Juifs pour la Résistance et l'Entraide, the once-large organization of Jewish Communists during the postwar period, faced its final years. The organization was breaking up for lack of members, and its library had to be dismantled for lack of readers. The majority of its Yiddish collection—6,000 volumes—was donated to the Bibliothèque Medem in 1993 (other portions of this library's collection were absorbed by the library of the Alliance Israélite Universelle [AIU] and the library of the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine—now the Mémorial de la Shoah). The most valuable segments consist of the *Kultur-lige's* acquisitions dating back to the beginning of the 1920s, plus a fairly complete collection of Soviet editions.

That same year, 3,000 volumes from the Kouliche library were also integrated into the collections.

In 1997, the library acquired the Yiddish collection of the library of the Fédération des Sociétés Juives de France (6,000 titles). That same year, the Foyer Ouvrier Juif (*Arbeter-heyem*, Left Poale Zion in orientation, located on rue Béranger) donated 2,000 titles from its library, containing especially interesting holdings relating to Zionism. In 1997, as well, Didier Fraenkel donated a collection that had been built up at the beginning of the last century by his grandfather, the Yiddish bookseller and librarian Betsalel Fraenkel, in Jaffa and then Alexandria. It consists of about a thousand particularly rare books that shed interesting light on Jewish popular culture, notably a collection of 200 titles of *shund-literatur* (sentimental novels from the second half of the nineteenth century).

In 1999, the archives of the Parisian Yiddish newspapers *Undzer vort* and *Undzer veg* further enriched the collections.

Thanks to these bequests, the Bibliothèque Medem has become the largest Yiddish library in Europe. It carries on the dual mission of *folks-bibliotek* (popular library) and heritage and scholarly library—which confer upon it an undeniable originality.

THE COLLECTIONS

Books

The collections of the Bibliothèque Medem today comprise 20,000 volumes in Yiddish and 10,000 titles in the Latin alphabet (French, English, Polish, etc.) dealing with Jewish culture. In addition, it maintains about 30,000 uncataloged volumes, often duplicates of cataloged titles, salvaged from public and private libraries.

The Yiddish collection is subdivided as follows:

Yiddish literature

Novels and novellas	3,400
Poetry	1,600
Theater	500
Anthologies	200
Children's literature	350
Literature translated into Yiddish	1,400

History

General works	500
Works relating to the Holocaust	700
History of Jewish communities	1,000

Various subjects

Reference works	350
Philosophy	450
Religion	450
Social sciences	1,500
Science	300
Theater, fine arts	500
Literary history and criticism	1,100

Serials

PERIODICALS

This part of the collection comprises about 1,000 distinct titles. The holdings of the most important periodicals of the Yiddish world are complete (200 titles). The holdings of other periodicals (1,800 titles) are in the process of being completed.

NEWSPAPERS

Complete runs of the major newspapers from Warsaw, *Haynt* and *Moment*, on microfilm.

Complete runs of the Parisian newspapers *Undzer shtime*, *Arbeter-vort*, *Undzer veg*.

70% complete run of *Undzer shtime*.

70% complete run of *Undzer vort*.

20% complete run of *Naye prese*.

SOUND ARCHIVES

The Bibliothèque Medem holds 7,500 recordings, in various formats, of klezmer music, Eastern European synagogue chants, lectures in Yiddish or about Yiddish culture, and radio broadcasts. These holdings were assembled in the following manner:

- ◇ The AEDCY collection of recordings, established in 1987, was transferred to the library as a result of the 2002 merger: 3,000 recordings of Yiddish songs on cassettes. Each cassette is accompanied by a libretto that includes the text of the song, its transliteration, and its translation into French (and sometimes English).
- ◇ Items collected systematically by the Bibliothèque Medem since 1990: 3,500 LP recordings (completely digitized) and 600 recordings on 78s.
- ◇ Yossele Testiler, announcer for the weekly broadcast *Di yidishe sho*, on Radio J from 1982 to 2006, donated recordings on cassettes in 2006.

These collections are in the process of being digitized. That work is to be finished during the course of 2009. Digitized items are gradually being incorporated into the Rachel online catalog and can be listened to from a computer in the library's reading room.

Writers' Archives

The Bibliothèque Medem holds the literary archives of about fifteen Yiddish writers, most of whom lived in France (Moyshe Waldman, Menuha Ram, Elkhonen Wogler, Rivke Kopé, etc.), as well as prominent Yiddish writers whose children donated their archives. This is the case, notably, with the archives of Alter Kacyzne and Moyshe Broderzon, who were among the most important Yiddish writers in Poland between the two world wars.

Posters

A collection of 300 posters, in Yiddish and French, dealing with Jewish life during the three most recent decades, rounds out the library's holdings.

RARE HOLDINGS

Several national and university libraries (e.g., Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and national and university libraries in England, the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria) have copies of rare works in Yiddish, above all medieval manuscripts and first editions of Old Yiddish literature. But the holdings of the Bibliothèque Medem, taking into account the number of volumes and the diversity of their provenance, together with the subjects treated in them and the periods covered, represent a unique corpus in Europe.

Among the rare items several editions of Old Yiddish literature can be cited, for example *Sefer Yosifon* (Dyhernfurth, 1799), *Sefer Or Yisroel* (Clèves, 1760), *Sefer Simkhes-hanefesh* (Amsterdam, 1723), *Sefer khakires-halev* (Amsterdam, 1731), a series of five volumes of festival prayers (Amsterdam, 1768), and *Sefer Lev tov* (Amsterdam, 1720).

Also to be noted is the collection (already noted) of more than 200 novels of *shund-literatur* (sentimental popular literature) published in Eastern Europe, mainly in Vilna, at the end of the nineteenth century.

Turning to modern Yiddish literature, the Bibliothèque Medem possesses some very rare editions, including books by modernist Yiddish authors containing illustrations by some of the great names of modern art: works by Peretz Markish, Uri-Zvi Greenberg, Dovid Hofshateyn, and Der Nister, illustrated by Marc Chagall, Yoysef Tshaykov, El Lissitzky, Henryk Berlewi, etc. Among these, the edition of *Khad gadye* illustrated by El Lissitzky, is an especially rare book because its original cover is intact. Some of these books were displayed at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme during the exhibition "Futur antérieur: l'Avant-garde et le livre Yiddish, 1914–1939" (February 11–May 17, 2009).²

COMPUTERIZATION OF THE HOLDINGS: THE RACHEL CATALOG

In 2004, the Bibliothèque Medem was one of the founding members, together with the libraries of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Séminaire Israélite de France (SIF), of the Réseau Européen des Bibliothèques Judaïca et Hebraïca ([European Network of Judaïca and Hebraïca Libraries] REBJH). The goal of the network is to secure the computerization of the three founding libraries' cata-

² Editor's note: See the published catalog of this exhibit, *Futur antérieur: l'Avant-garde et le livre Yiddish*, edited by Nathalie Hazan-Brunet (Paris: Flammarion, 2009).

logs, as well as all print collections in the domain of Hebraica and Judaica in public and private libraries.

Each of the founding libraries has a long history and a distinct institutional identity. All three were profoundly affected by the lunacy of Nazism: the collections of the AIU and the SIF were “deported” to the Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question, in Frankfurt, by Reichsleiter Alfred Rosenberg’s task force [Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, or ERR, in German]. After the war, the library of the AIU was reconstituted and it became one of the foremost Jewish libraries in Europe, even more so after its renovation in 1989. As for the SIF library, which was renovated at the beginning of the 1960s, it entered a period of decline notwithstanding its exceptional holdings of rabbinica, and it confronted difficulties that prevented it from keeping up its collections in a satisfactory manner.

In 1996, the AIU launched the computerization of its catalog, using the ALEPH 300 program. In 2000, the Bibliothèque Medem joined this experiment, thereby setting the stage for cooperation on a larger scale. The rescue operation of the SIF library, which was brought to a successful conclusion in 2003–2004 by the SIFRIA association, encompassed not only the transformation of its physical facility and the preservation of its books in order to ensure the high-quality conservation of its holdings, but also the complete computerization of its catalog. This rebirth gave added impetus to the projects that were underway.

In view of the conjunction of projects and needs—and thanks as well to technological developments—networking became the obvious solution. This made it possible to pool resources, tools, and areas of expertise while at the same time ensuring each library’s administrative autonomy and cultural choices.

Since 2004, the REBJH has overseen the computerization and maintenance of the online Rachel catalog (<http://www.rachelnet.org>), which combines the bibliographical catalogs of these three libraries, together with that of the media library of the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire du Judaïsme, which joined the network at the beginning of 2008.

The Rachel catalog thus includes more than 200,000 records on Jewish topics, making it one of the principal bibliographical databases on Judaism worldwide. It is recognized by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France as a cooperating network. This computerization project, which uses the Aleph collection management software, was made possible thanks to a particularly fruitful collaboration with the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the Jewish National and University Library (now the National Library of Israel), the Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, the Conseil Régional d’Île-de-France, and the Mairie de Paris.

The Rachel catalog obviously makes the holdings of the Bibliothèque Medem more widely known. The librarians have adapted to the new computer environment without major difficulty, and they assist those readers who are not accustomed to searching with this tool. With the encouragement of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France the REBJH is currently embarking upon a new phase, involving the digitization of its member libraries’ holdings. The increasing availability of collections over the Internet raises the question, to be sure, of

the Bibliothèque Medem's future reading public: Who will frequent its quarters when the documents in its holdings become available over the Internet? That is why, more than ever before, services to readers and the bibliographical assistance that is their due remains at the heart of its mission.

A TOTALLY INDEPENDENT INSTITUTION

And so, for eighty years, a Yiddish library has managed its affairs in a very independent manner, attached to both the Yiddish language and to Jewish culture (along secular lines)—a highly original institution, one that has nonetheless become indispensable to the Parisian Jewish scene and that fully intends to be reckoned with during the decades to come.

Gilles Rozier is the Director of the Bibliothèque Medem, in Paris.

This article was translated by Zachary M. Baker, with the assistance of Roger S. Kohn.