

9-1-1994

Microfilming the Baron Guenzburg Collection of Hebrew Manuscripts in the Russian State Library in Moscow

Benjamin Richler

Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, Israel

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

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Information Literacy Commons](#), [Jewish Studies Commons](#), and the [Reading and Language Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Richler, Benjamin. 1994. "Microfilming the Baron Guenzburg Collection of Hebrew Manuscripts in the Russian State Library in Moscow." *Judaica Librarianship* 8: 142-144. doi:10.14263/2330-2976.1258.

RARE BOOKS

Microfilming the Baron Guenzburg Collection of Hebrew Manuscripts in the Russian State Library in Moscow*

Benjamin Richler

*Jewish National and University Library
Jerusalem, Israel*

Abstract: After the fall of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, large depositories of Hebraic manuscripts in the former Soviet Union were opened to Western scholars. In this paper, the major collections are surveyed, with special emphasis on the Baron Guenzburg collection in the Russian State Library in Moscow and the microfilming activities of the Jewish National and University Library in Russia and Ukraine in general and in Moscow in particular.

Introduction

In many areas of Jewish studies it is impossible to undertake comprehensive research without consulting manuscript sources. As recently as three decades ago, a scholar doing research had to visit libraries all over the world in order to read manuscripts, or spend a large part of his budget acquiring expensive photocopies from dozens of libraries. The lot of the Judaica researcher improved enormously with the establishment in 1951 of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts (IMHM), which began to systematically collect microfilms of all the Hebrew manuscripts extant in public and private libraries throughout the world. Over the past forty-three years, the IMHM has built up a collection of 50,000 Hebraic manuscripts (i.e., manuscript books written in Hebrew, Yiddish, Judaeo-Arabic, and other languages in Hebrew characters). Together with the 10,000 original manuscripts in the adjacent Manuscript Department at the Jewish National and University Library (JNUL), the scholar visiting Jerusalem has access to approximately 80% of all the Hebrew manuscript sources extant in the world.

Until recently, there remained one great lacuna in the collection of microfilmed manuscripts. Since the First World War, libraries in Russia had in effect closed their gates to scholars from the West. Only a select few managed to visit some of these libraries and occasionally obtain photocopies of manuscripts from the former Soviet Union.

Major collections of Hebrew manuscripts exist in four libraries in the former Soviet Union: the Russian State Library in Moscow houses the Guenzburg collection of 1900 manuscripts, and more than 350 manuscripts are housed in other collections; the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg is home to the Firkovich collections, which include over 17,000 items (several thousand manuscript books and several thousand fragments or parts of manuscripts) as well as the Antonin collection of over 1000 Geniza fragments and other, smaller collections numbering a few dozen manuscripts; the library of the Oriental Institute of the St. Petersburg branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which houses over 1100 Hebrew manuscripts; and the Vernadsky Library of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Kiev, which also holds several hundred manuscripts, Geniza fragments, and communal *pinkasim*.

History of the Guenzburg Collection

Three generations of the Guenzburg family amassed one of the largest private collections of Hebrew books and manuscripts in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. Begun by Joseph Guenzburg (1812–1878), the library grew under the patronage of his son Horace (1833–1909) and especially his grandson Baron David Guenzburg (1857–1910), who, it seems, acquired over half of the 2000 manuscripts which the collection numbered at its peak.

David Guenzburg was a Judaic scholar and Orientalist who resided both in Paris and St. Petersburg. He specialized in the study of philology and medieval Arabic

poetry, taught Hebrew literature and published many papers on Judaic studies. Baron David followed his father as head of the Society for the Promotion of Culture among the Jews in Russia and was active in other Jewish organizations, among them the Mekize Nirdamim Society, which was dedicated to the publication of Hebrew texts from manuscripts.

The Guenzburgs purchased manuscripts from many sources, among them the estates of deceased scholars such as Seligmann Baer, Eliakim Carmoly and Nathan Coronel, as well as private booksellers. The collection excels in medieval Hebrew manuscripts, but also includes many books of more recent date. Most were copied during the years 1250–1650. The subject matter is varied: biblical texts and commentaries, works of Jewish ritual law (Halakhah) and Talmud, prayerbooks, mystical works of Kabbalah alongside books of Jewish and Aristotelian philosophy, and texts on astronomy, medicine, and magic. Several Karaite works, mainly for use in the synagogue, including Biblical translations in the Judeo-Tatar dialect, are among the later acquisitions.

Many of the manuscripts are unicums. A few examples serve to illustrate the wide variety of rare or unique works: R. Isaiah de Trani's *Nimuke Humash*, which contains more material than the printed version, is an example of an important work of Biblical exegesis. Talmudic commentaries abound, some of which—such as a collection of ancient Tosafot on the tractate Shabbat, completely different from the published Tosafot—have never been published. A large collection of responsa by Geonim and Rishonim will interest students of Halakhah. Historians of science may find unknown commentaries on Ptolemy's *Almagest* and an Arabic work in Hebrew letters by the early Jewish astrologer Sahl ben Bishr. In other fields of study, mention may be made of a version of the dispute between Jehiel of Paris and the apostate Donin in Paris in 1240, different from the published edition,

*Revised and updated version of a paper originally published in the periodical of the Jewish National and University Library, *On Books and People*.

and the original version of R. Moses Haim Luzzatto's *Sefer Mesilat Yesharim*, perhaps the best-known book of Jewish ethics, first written in the form of a dialogue between a Righteous Man and a Wise Man. This last work was recently published from this manuscript (Jerusalem: Ofeq Institute, 1994).

In his will, Baron David Guenzburg requested that his library be sold to a Jewish academic institution. After his death in 1910, the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) of America in New York began negotiations to purchase the collection from Guenzburg's widow; but when Alexander Marx, the librarian at JTS, finally set out for St. Petersburg in 1914, the War broke out and all roads to Russia were blocked. A few years later in 1917, a group of Russian Zionists signed an agreement to purchase the library and send it to the Jewish public library in Jerusalem (which later became the Jewish National Library), but the outbreak of the Russian Revolution prevented the removal of the books to the Holy Land. Eventually the Guenzburg library was appropriated by the Soviet government and sent for safekeeping to the Lenin State Library in Moscow.

Access to the Collection

From 1917 until the recent *perestroika*, hardly any Western scholars were permitted to examine the collection. The few who were allowed access to the Guenzburg library had to work under dismal conditions. The lack of Jewish reference sources in the Lenin State Library made serious study impossible. During the 1950s, the Lenin Library sent the IMHM microfilms of 200 manuscripts and prepared copies of several hundred for Prof. Abraham Katsh of New York University. Altogether, about 400 manuscripts were filmed, and over the past three decades they served as an important source for dozens of scholarly papers and publications. An additional 1500 manuscripts remained unavailable for scholarly research, however.

At the dawn of *perestroika* in Russia, various organizations approached the Lenin Library and attempted to gain access to the Guenzburg collection. A few scholars were allowed to examine the manuscripts in the library, but no progress was made in acquiring microfilms of the collection. In the summer of 1991 the Jewish National and University Library succeeded in establishing contact with the library in Moscow, and in October an agreement was signed, allowing the JNUL to microfilm all the manuscripts in the Guenzburg collection, including those that had already

been filmed on microfilm of inferior quality. Shortly after the agreement was signed, a new director was named to head the Lenin Library: Prof. Igor Filipov, a professor of history at the Moscow University. Even though he was very busy trying to solve the serious problems of the Russian State Library (RSL)—as it is now called—Prof. Filipov was very cooperative and did all he could to ensure that the microfilm project would be implemented and completed on schedule.

In February 1992, Israel Weiser, deputy director of the Reprographic Department of the JNUL went to Moscow in order to assess the manuscript collection and to prepare the logistics of the project. Mr. Weiser flew from Russia to the U.S., where he purchased some of the photographic equipment. Other pieces of equipment were constructed in the Reprographic Department and shipped to Moscow. In April 1992, Mr. Weiser and I traveled to Moscow in order to begin the microfilming.

Filming the Collection

During the first days of our stay in Moscow, we encountered innumerable bureaucratic and logistical problems, but could rest assured that Prof. Filipov was sincerely interested in carrying out the agreement. Within two weeks, the cameras were set up and our staff began filming. With the aid of two local camera operators and two librarians from the Department of Manuscripts in the Russian State Library, the filming proceeded efficiently and ahead of schedule. Photographers from the staff in Jerusalem came for stints of several weeks to operate one of the cameras. After working from dawn to dusk in a small, cramped room without air-conditioning in the heat of summer, the Israeli staff continued to work during the evenings, developing the films in the laboratory they had set up in their rented apartment. Within four-and-a-half months, almost 1900 manuscripts were filmed. The collection had originally included 1,913 manuscripts; only a few dozen are missing. Some of the missing items are printed volumes with manuscript glosses, and it is possible that they are kept among the printed books in the Guenzburg collection. Two or three volumes were in restoration, and the others may have been lost or misplaced before the collection reached the library or during the 75 years that they were stored in the library.

Back in Jerusalem, the Reprographic Department prepared copies of the films, and they were immediately made available for examination by readers and scholars in the IMHM.

Catalogs of the Collection

There is no printed catalog of the Guenzburg collection. Senior Sachs prepared a brief handwritten list of MSS 1-830, called *Bet Yosef*, which appeared in a very limited lithographic edition sometime between 1866 and 1878. A later catalog in a different handwriting (perhaps that of Samuel Wiener), describing the remaining MSS (831-1913), was compiled in the early 1900s and is extant in the Steinschneider collection in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Copies of both catalogs are found in the IMHM. Both catalogs are very brief, and inaccuracies or false identifications are, understandably, not rare. Aron Freimann used the catalogs in compiling his *Union Catalog of Hebrew Manuscripts and their Location* (New York, 1964-73). Freimann's catalog can serve as an index to the Guenzburg collection, even though it cannot be more reliable than the handlists it is based on. In his *Catalog*, Freimann refers to the Guenzburg collection as GI (= Sach's catalog) and GII (= the serial numbers in the second catalog. Adding 830 to the serial number yields the Guenzburg numbers).

Cataloging at the IMHM has begun, using the ALEPH program. Anyone with access to the Hebrew ALEPH catalog in the JNUL can enter the catalog of the IMHM and review the entries to date. It will take at least two or three years to complete the description of such a huge and varied collection of manuscripts. Copies of the entire set of microfilms (235 reels) are now available for purchase. Individual reels containing 8-10 manuscripts may also be purchased. Libraries or institutions interested in acquiring the Guenzburg collection are invited to apply to the IMHM for further details.

The filming of the Guenzburg collection paved the way for similar projects in the Russian State Library and other Russian libraries. The so-called Schneerson collection of close to 300 manuscripts in the RSL was recently filmed; a collection of close to a hundred manuscripts confiscated by the Nazis from Jewish libraries in Germany and Eastern Europe and recovered by the Red Army during World War Two is now being microfilmed. The Schneerson collection consists mainly of copies made in the nineteenth century of writings by the Lubavitcher Rebbes, but also includes manuscripts of different provenances, among them a few from the Strashun collection in Vilna and the Karaite National Library in Eupatoria. The vast collections of the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg and the Oriental Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in that

city are currently being microfilmed, a project that will probably not be completed until the end of 1995. The JNUL and the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences have signed an agreement to film the Hebrew manuscripts and other material in the Vernadsky Library in Kiev. Upon the completion of these projects, the IMHM will be close to achieving its objective of bringing together the entire legacy of Hebrew manuscript writings scattered throughout the world.

Acknowledgments

Without the assistance extended by the Research Institute for Soviet Judaica established by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz and Yeshivat Mevor Hayyim that Rabbi Steinsaltz established in Moscow, the project could never have been realized. The Institute handled all the administrative details as well as the technical procedures, and also helped finance the project. The Mevor Hayyim Yeshiva supplied us with storage facilities in Moscow, housing, food, and other necessities, but most important, an address that we could contact and rely upon for assistance any time we encountered unexpected problems.

Most of all we are grateful to Mr. Hayyim Aaron Feigenbaum, the administrative director of the Yeshiva, and to Dr. Saul Stampfer of the Hebrew University, who served as coordinator of the activities of the Institute for two-and-a-half years. Dr. Stampfer was our liaison with the Russian State Library. Whenever problems arose, he was always ready to leave his other duties and rush to the library to resolve misunderstandings. We extend our gratitude as well to the Institutes founded by Rabbi Steinsaltz, and the staffs of the libraries and the reprographic departments in Moscow and Jerusalem, whose devotion to duty allowed us to complete this important undertaking so efficiently.

Benjamin Richler is a librarian and researcher of Hebrew manuscripts. He is Assistant Director of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, where he has worked for over twenty-five years. Mr. Richler is the compiler of Guide to Hebrew Manuscript Collections (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994).

HILL

(Continued from p. 141)

2. Cf. Isac Moscona, "The Books in the Library of the Central Synagogue in Sofia." In: *Annual [of the Social, Cultural and Educational Organization of the Jews in the People's Republic of Bulgaria]*, vol. 9 (1974), pp. 167–200. The original Bulgarian text of this survey, "Knizhniyat fond na Sofiiskata tsentralna sinagoga," appeared in the Organization's *Godishnik* 19 (1974), pp. 181–200.

3. *Inventarna kniga za spets. fond na Sektsya ebraistika pri Instituta po Balkanistika pri BAN*. Unpublished manuscript, 2 vols.

4. A. Yaari, *Reshimat Sifre Ladino [Catalogue of Judaeo-Spanish Books in the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem]* (Jerusalem, 1934 = Special Supplement to *Kirjath Sepher*, Vol. X). Cf. J. Zedner, *Catalogue of the Hebrew Books in the Library of the British Museum* (London, 1867; reprinted 1964), p. 566; M. Kayserling, *Biblioteca Española-Portuguesa-Judaica: Dictionnaire Bibliographique des Auteurs juifs, de leurs ouvrages espagnols et portugais, et des oeuvres sur et contre les juifs et le judaisme* (Strasbourg, 1890), reprinted in *Biblioteca Española-Portuguesa-Judaica, and other studies in Ibero-Jewish Bibliography . . .*, selected by Y. H. Yerushalmi (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1971), p. 11; and M. Marx, *History and Annals of Hebrew Printing in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1982, on microfilm), reel 8 (The Balkans, Asia, Africa), entry under Salonica 1564.

5. There are two volumes incorrectly identified in the inventory as incunable editions: Nahmanides (Lisbon, 1489), and Moses of Coucy

(Soncino, 1489) [inventory nos. 6309, sig. 2267, and 8140, sig. 2351]. These are to be identified correctly as the Pentateuch with Rashi, Nahmanides, and Ibn Ezra (Salonica, 1522) and Moses of Coucy (Venice, 1522), respectively.

6. As a tragic consequence of war and revolution over the last three-and-a-half years, the national libraries of Sarajevo and Bucharest were destroyed by fire. Both institutions were known to contain rare Hebraica.

7. Among the local guides are *Bulgarski knigi 1878–1944: bibliografski ukazatel. Tom VI: Izdaniya na chuzhdi ezitsi* (Sofia, 1983), pp. 345–348 ('evreiski ezik' [i.e., mostly Judeo-Spanish]), and also the compilation by M. Donkova, *Anotiran spisok na evreiski periodichni izdaniya i edinichni listove, publikovanna Bulgarski ezik, 1878–1992 godina: bibliografska spravka* (Sofia, 1992), 10 pp.

8. Cf. *Bulgarski periodichen pechat, 1844–1944: anotiran bibliografski ukazatel* (Sofia). Tom 3, p. 324. I am grateful to Dr. Boreana Hristova, specialist in Church Slavonic manuscripts and bibliography, for bringing this and other bibliographic guides to my attention, as well as for showing me two Scrolls of Esther acquired recently by the National Library.

Brad Sabin Hill is Head of the Hebrew Section, Oriental and India Office Collections, The British Library, London.