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## The Bulgarian State Collection of Hebraica\*

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**Abstract:** Based upon a visit in 1993, the author provides a description and brief survey of the holdings in the Bulgarian State Collection of Hebraica, currently under the jurisdiction of the General Department of Archives and housed in a warehouse seven kilometers outside Sofia. The collection, comprised of printed books, manuscripts, and archival documents, includes rare pre-modern Hebraica reflecting Sephardic and Balkan collecting interests. Issues of bibliographic import are highlighted and reference is made to the physical situation of the collection. The future of this Bulgarian State Hebraica Collection is yet to be determined.

Over the last five years, and especially since the disintegration of the Soviet empire, considerable interest has been displayed by Western and Israeli scholars in the long-closed Hebrew and Jewish research collections of Eastern Europe. Despite broad interest in former Soviet libraries, the Jewish collections in once-communist East Central Europe (other than Hungary) and the Balkans remain virtually unknown to outside scholars.

In February 1993, during leave from the British Library, I had occasion to examine the Bulgarian state collection of Hebraica, which is held in the General Department on Archives at the Council of Ministers, Sofia. The visit was sponsored by the Valmadonna Trust Library, London, and I was accompanied by Mr. J. V. Lunzer, Custodian of the Trust. During the visit we were met by Mr. Panto Kolev, Deputy General Director of the General Department on Archives, as well as various archivists in the Department.



Talmudic novellae by Elijah b. Abraham Ventura of Vidin (Bulgaria), *Kohva di-shevit* (Salonika, 1799). BL 1915.c.9

\*This article first appeared in The British Library OIOC Newsletter, no. 48-49 (Autumn 1993), pp. 12-13.

The Bulgarian state collection of Hebrew printed books, manuscripts, and archival documents is comprised of the amalgamated holdings of Jewish communal libraries (other than that of the Central Synagogue, Sofia) and some private libraries, which were brought together by the postwar Communist government and then deposited in the Institute of Balkan Studies, Sofia. The collection was later transferred in its entirety to the General Department on Archives, under whose jurisdiction it is still held.<sup>1</sup> (The state collection of Hebraica is not to be confused with the collection held in the Central Synagogue in Sofia, which has been described elsewhere in some detail.<sup>2</sup> It was not possible to see the latter during this visit, as the Synagogue is now under restoration.)

The collection has for some years been stored in the Department's warehouse, or annex, in the village of Biri-Mirtsi, some seven kilometers outside Sofia. The building is unheated—a small storage heater was turned on during one of our visits—but the collection, like others in the same repository, is dry, albeit cold. The books and documents are maintained, like other documents in the repository, in archival storage boxes, with any number of books, and sometimes pamphlets, contained in a single box.

A handwritten inventory,<sup>3</sup> unsigned and undated, but probably prepared by E. H. Eshkenazy not long before the printed survey appeared in 1966, lists nearly 9,500 titles of printed books and serials, some 60 or more manuscripts, and a large number of communal and personal documents, especially legal contracts. The manuscripts, only sketchily identified in this inventory, are apparently late, of the 17th to 19th centuries, but not without interest for the student of Balkan and oriental Hebrew and Jewish literature. An example (sig. E.8939/68) is a finely written drama in Judeo-Spanish by Joseph Abraham Papo, entitled *La Reyna, o la fin de los hasmonaim* (Rustchuk, 1895). Some other manuscripts, containing religious or liturgical texts, appeared to be of oriental origin.

The inventory of printed books, despite some inaccuracies and misidentifications, is generally a useful guide to the contents of the collection, though incomplete. There are many more unlisted titles, perhaps numbering in the thousands, but these are apparently modern printed books and pamphlets. The listed items, largely rare and pre-modern Hebraica, reflect the orientation of Sephardic and



Commentary on the Pentateuch by Solomon b. Jehiel Salem of Sofia, *Divre Shelomoh* (Frankfurt on the Oder, 1753). BL 1963.f.13

Balkan Hebrew libraries as developed over time, indeed centuries. The inventory lists over 1,000 volumes printed in Salonika, 500 printed in Constantinople, over 400 in Leghorn, 265 in Amsterdam, 200 in Smyrna (Izmir) and 200 in Venice. There are a few imprints from Adrianople (now Edirne, Turkey), and there is some oriental printing from Egypt and Jerusalem.

Of particular significance for South Slavic Hebrew and Judeo-Spanish printing history are 150 entries in the inventory for Belgrade imprints, and, for Bulgaria itself, nearly 100 imprints from Sofia, 25 from Rustchuk (Ruse), and 10 from Plovdiv (Philippopolis).

The collection also includes a large number of Central European imprints from Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, and the German lands, including Prague, Brno (Brünn), Vranov, Bratislava (Pressburg), Uzhorod (Ungvár), Bucharest, Krajova, Czernowitz, Budapest, Berlin, Fürth, Sulzbach, Dyhernfurth (Brzeg Dolny), and Stettin (Szczecin). There are likewise a large number of imprints from

towns in Eastern Europe, especially Poland, including Warsaw, Cracow, Lemberg (Lwów), Józefów, Piotrków [Trybunalski], and Żółkiew. There are many hundreds of titles of books printed in Vienna—an important source of Balkan Hebraica—but a considerable portion of these are duplicates or in multiple copies.

The inventory lists over 150 books from the 16th century (a few of them duplicates), mostly Italian and Ottoman imprints. The majority of these are from Venice, but some are from Salonika, Constantinople, Mantua, Sabbioneta, and Cremona, and there is one each from Rimini, Bologna, Padua, and Basle. Some of the early imprints examined were missing first and/or final leaves, but otherwise they were in good condition. Most of these early titles could be located by their shelf-numbers or signatures, but a few listed in the published catalogue were unlocatable, such as Isaac Arama, *Megilat Ester* (Constantinople, 1518). A few titles were said to be undergoing restoration, e.g. Bahya (Constantinople, 1517) [inventory no. 9244, sig. 2534]. There is a valuable early Judeo-Spanish book,

Almosnino's *Regimiento dela vida* (Salonika, 1564) [no. 5498, sig. 3251], which is not described in Yaari's *Catalogue of Judaeo-Spanish books*.<sup>4</sup>

There are apparently no incunables in the collection.<sup>5</sup> Although it was not possible to make statistical counts of the 17th- or 18th-century books, the collection was unquestionably rich in latter Salonika imprints in particular.

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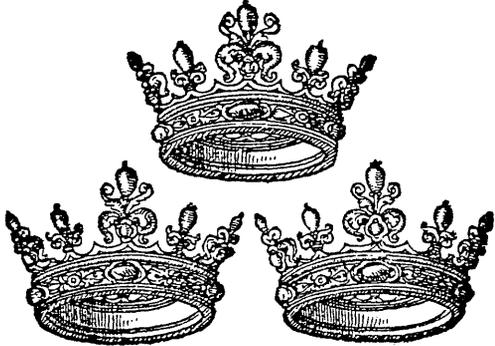
The future of the Bulgarian state collection of Hebraica is not entirely certain. The Jewish community of Bulgaria has, since the fall of communism, expressed some interest in it, and is concerned about its conservation and accessibility. Its warehoused state, unheated and at far remove from the capital, as well as the absence of any specialist curatorial staff in the General Department on Archives competent to handle or identify the material, are most unfortunate. Indeed, since the deaths of Drs. Eshkenazy and Ghichev, there appears to be no scholar or bibliographer anywhere in Bulgaria with real expertise in Hebrew booklore. Recently, some Bulgarian and Israeli researchers have taken an interest in certain books and manuscripts, but there has been no systematic attempt to complete the cataloging of the printed books or further to identify the manuscripts, which have not yet been filmed by the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in Jerusalem. There appeared to be no reference books for Hebraica accessible either at the warehouse repository or in the Department's offices in Sofia.

For the time being, there is no agreement to repatriate any part of this large "nationalized" collection to the Jewish community. The archival documents, such as the communal registers and contracts, are of considerable importance to Bulgarian Jewish historiography, and it is under-

# שלחן ערוך

## מטור אבן העזר הנקרא בית יוסף

חברו הגאון מופת הרור החכם השלם מטרר יוסף קארו נרו בן מטרר אפרים קארו  
זצ"ל אשר אור תורתו זורחת כאור היום בעיר צפת תוכב ומעוני תורתו נפוצת  
ביהודה ובישראל נודע שמו: וחבר הספר הזה קיצור סחיבורו הגדול  
אשר עשה על הארבעה טורים אשר קראם בית יוסף אשר  
בם כח מעשיו הגיד וכל יקר ראתה עינו כדי שכל  
מבקש ה' ימצא מבוקשו בנקל כל דין ודין על  
מתכונתו באין אומר ואין דברים והבק  
לכל מטה ושלחן וכסא ומטרה  
אשר לאורו ילכו בטח: כי כן משנת רבי יוסף קבונקי



ותהי ראשית מלאכתו ז"ל ניסן שכה' לפ"ק פה וויניציאה הברה :

**The classic work of Bulgarian Hebrew scholarship, by Joseph Caro of Nikopol, *Shulhan 'arukh . . . Bet Yosef* (Venice, 1565). BL 1959.g.3**

standable that the government should be interested in maintaining this part of the Bulgarian heritage in the General Department on Archives.

Similarly, it would be beneficial if the South Slavic printed Hebraica, in particular, were transferred to the Bulgarian National Library, now one of the most important of the Balkan national libraries,<sup>6</sup> where there is considerable expertise and interest in Bulgarian printing history and ethnic bibliography. Indeed, during a separate visit to the National Library, I was shown a number of locally prepared bibliographic guides to Bulgarian Hebrew and

Jewish printing and journalism,<sup>7</sup> and was able to locate a copy of the very rare serial *Selanik/Solin* (Salonika, 1869-70; said to be printed partly in Bulgarian in Hebrew characters) which is held at the state library in Plovdiv<sup>8</sup>.

**Notes**

1. The early history of the collection is surveyed in Elly H. Eshkenazy and S.D. Ghichev, *Opis na evreiskite staropechatni knigi v Bulgariya = Descriptive catalogue of the old printed Hebrew books in Bulgaria* (Sofia, 1966), where some 26 choice items are described in detail.

(Continued on p. 144, col. 2)

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.

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(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 Sektsiya 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 judaïsme* (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.

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