

# EPISTLE FROM EUROPE

***Hebrew Studies: Papers Presented at a Colloquium on Resources For Hebraica in Europe Held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 11-13 September 1989/11-13 Elul 5749.*** Edited by Diana Rowland Smith and Peter Shmuel Salinger. [London]: The British Library, 1991. 252 p. (British Library occasional papers, v. 13).

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## **Some Personal Reflections**

I was one of the few Americans who attended the Colloquium on Resources for Hebraica in Europe, of which the volume under review is the printed record. I felt privileged to be there. Knowing something about Judaica libraries in North America and less about facilities in Israel, I realized that Europe, the Old Country, was for me and, I suspect, for many American colleagues in the field, terra incognita. My visits to a number of European repositories of Hebrew manuscripts in 1987 had opened my eyes to some of the riches they contained and left me with the impression that our colleagues there are interested in regular exchange of information with Judaica librarians in the U.S.

When contemplating European research libraries in general, I am always reminded of the bad joke about the Boston matron who, when asked where she bought her hats, replied, "We *have* ours." So it may seem to American librarians that, while we buy our books, the Europeans simply *have* theirs. And yet, this impression is not entirely accurate. The grain of truth it contains is its reflection of the antiquity of some European collections. The inaccuracy lies in the seeming denial that the great European collections were also assembled. They did not spring into being whole, but are often the result of books changing hands through wars, confiscations, bequeathals, and commercial transactions. One of the ways in which the development of European libraries has differed from the growth of their American counterparts has been in the great time span over which the building of the European collections has taken place.

Bearing all of this in mind, I was eager to attend the Colloquium and was not disappointed. It was different in emphasis,

if not in kind, from a convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL). Before I elaborate, however, it is important to remember that such an event as the Colloquium takes place infrequently, while AJL conventions are annual affairs. Also, participants in the Colloquium came from many countries, in which different languages are spoken. The equivalent of AJL's Synagogue, School and Center (SSC) libraries were not represented.

The Colloquium was rich in descriptions of collections, about some of which I had known nothing, and in reports of original research into the history and lore of Hebrew books. Such a concentration of scholarship has, to my knowledge, only been approached once at an AJL convention, in Jerusalem in 1990. But as an American, I was struck by the fact that beyond describing library collections and work in automation - and I do not wish to make light of these - there was little emphasis on what we would call the delivery of library services.

In the section devoted to automation and cooperation, while it was interesting to learn of the various endeavors under way, I could not help but think that the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) and its Hebrew enhancement - a facility provided by a national consortium, but in the development of which many American Judaica librarians participated - represented a leap beyond any of the activities in automation and cooperation described at the London conference.

## **Proceedings of the Colloquium**

The volume in hand is a well-presented record of what took place at the Colloquium. The two editors, Dr. Diana Rowland Smith and Peter Shmuel

Salinger, have done as fine a job in making the accounts available to the interested public as they did in organizing the event itself. Some of the essays deal with topics of lasting importance and will, I believe, need to be consulted again and again. The book, therefore, deserves a place in every Judaica research library.

The papers in the first category describe resources for Hebrew studies. These are divided into a section on the British Isles and one called "Collections in Europe." In view of the great number of continental participants, the title of the Colloquium itself, and the awareness of shared interests which seemed to prevail, this choice of words seems not quite of our time. Perhaps "British Isles" and "Other Collections in Europe" would have been less jarring to the ear.

Some of the collections are relatively well known. But the Judaica and Hebraica at such repositories as Leeds University Library, which holds, among others, the collections of R. Travers Herford and Cecil Roth; the libraries of Ireland; and the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine are not generally known by American librarians.

Among essays on continental libraries, Giulio Tamani's survey of Hebrew manuscript collections in Italian libraries will be especially useful for its list of libraries and the number of manuscripts in each. Tapani Harviainen's description of Hebraica in the Helsinki University Library comes as something of an eye-opener, but the existence of this amazing collection seems logical enough when one considers that in 1828 the Library became a copyright library within the Russian Empire. The conclusion of the article points to the dilemma of availability versus conservation that all

research collections face, but here it is presented from the odd perspective of a European library whose Hebrew and Yiddish books have virtually never been used:

What is the most difficult problem of Hebraica in Helsinki? It is the users. An increase in their numbers would expose the collection to an unavoidable danger. The majority of books have never been used and the leaves in them have not been cut apart ... While any funds to microfilm our Hebraica collections are welcome, a boom in the number of visitors of Hebraica is less welcome. We try to help scholars as much as possible. However, a disappointed visitor is a more temporary tragedy than the irreversible loss of an irretrievable book. (p. 61)

The next group of papers deals with Hebrew and Yiddish bibliography. Among these, it is especially worth mentioning A.K. Offenbergs account of his work on "A First International Census of Hebrew Incunabula in Public Collections," which at the time he delivered the paper had not yet appeared (Offenberg, 1990).

A bibliographic detective story can be inferred from the rather succinct account of tracking down Hebrew books in "Hebrew Books of the Sixteenth Century in Italian Libraries," by Giulio Busi, and the same can be said of "Yiddish Works Rediscovered," by Moshe N. Rosenfeld. The related essays, "Early Habad Publications in Their Setting," by Naftali Loewenthal, and "Publishing Developments of Habad Teachings, 1794-1989," by Peter Shmuel Salinger, provide much useful information that is not, to my knowledge, readily available elsewhere.

The remaining sections embrace Hebrew manuscript collections; art and illumination in Hebrew manuscripts; a special lecture by Malachi Beit-Arié (in 1989 still Director of The Jewish National and University Library) on the codicological database of the Hebrew palaeography project; automation and cooperation; and background notes for demonstrations at The British Library, including one of RLIN by John Eilts.

In the Hebrew Manuscript category, Italy again stands out. I found fascinating the

account of the way Hebrew manuscript fragments were discovered in state archives, where they served as covers for files of documents stored by notaries, particularly during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (p. 127). This is found in Pier Francesco Fumagalli's paper, "Hebrew Manuscripts and Fragments Recently Discovered in Italy."

#### Evaluation

As I have already stated, attendance at the Colloquium was eminently worthwhile. By publishing the proceedings in an attractive format, the editors and The British Library have rendered a great service to the field. Every Judaica reference library should have a copy of the volume, if for no other reason than its use as a resource in guiding scholars to the collections they need. But the book's value goes far beyond that.

In concluding, this thought leaps to mind: if the existence of such great and sometimes unsuspected wealth has been revealed in institutions in the West (the only country from the former Eastern Bloc represented at the Colloquium was Hungary), how much more remains to be discovered about collections in eastern Europe. Let us hope for a future colloquium in which the latter resources will be discussed.

#### Reference

*Hebrew Incunabula In Public Collections: A First International Census*, compiled by A.K. Offenbergs in collaboration with C. Moed-van Walraven. Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1990.

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