The End of a Library: The Wartime Fate of the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums Library Collections

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Introduction

On a gloomy day in October 1957, Jenny Dorfler found herself standing in a basement storage room in London. As one of the last librarians of the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (Higher Institute for Jewish Studies) in Berlin who had managed to flee Nazi persecution in Germany, she had recently been entrusted with a new task. She was to create a library to serve a newly established rabbinical seminary. Her building blocks lay in the boxes that surrounded her, filled with a rather random collection of books.

As Dorfler delved into the boxes, she was suddenly taken aback. The collection not only featured important works and beautifully bound volumes but also books bearing a familiar mark: accession numbers she had herself written onto their title pages back in her days at the Hochschule library before the war. She was struck by that realization: these books, against all odds, had survived the Nazi plunder and somehow found their way into her hands in London. Dorfler found herself confronted not merely with a stack of old books but with tangible fragments of the past (Dorfler 1966).

The fate of the Hochschule library's books was not an isolated case. Jewish books and libraries suffered unparalleled destruction during the Nazi era, a systematic campaign to not only physically annihilate the Jews but also obliterate their culture (Shavit 1997, 48). The rationale behind that campaign was to silence dissenting voices and erase the memory that they represented by destroying texts that were too closely associated with ideologies opposed to the Nazis (Knuth 2003, 71).

Despite the widespread devastation, not all Jewish books and libraries met with destruction. Some were confiscated by the Nazis and included in newly-founded research libraries set up to support antisemitic studies on the so-called "Jewish Question." As a result, some books were spared precisely because they had been appropriated by the Nazis. Knuth highlights this paradox, noting that, "Ironically, the decision to preserve books for the use of German scholars actually saved many books that otherwise might have been destroyed" (86). That act of preservation was a prerequisite for the postwar salvaging efforts and the rediscovery of such books as the

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ones found stacked in boxes in that London basement. However, rediscovery was the exception. Despite extensive efforts to locate looted collections after the war, success was rare. The extent of destruction and the degree of dispersion of the remaining books were overwhelming, leading many to believe that most collections were lost forever.

The aim of this article is to shed light on one of these cases by taking a closer look at the wartime fate of the library of the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. It traces the journey of these books from their invaluable role at the Hochschule, through their theft and exploitation for Nazi research, to their rediscovery in London fifteen years later, revealing previously unknown aspects of the library's history.

In recent decades, academic interest in the fate of Jewish cultural assets during and after World War II has grown considerably. The looting of Jewish libraries and archives by the Nazis has been the subject of several studies documenting the unprecedented scale of theft carried out by various Nazi institutions (Shavit 1997; Knuth 2003; Schroeder 2004; Schidorsky 2007; Rosen 2008; Grimsted 2008; Rydell 2017). Research has also focused on the immense postwar efforts made by individuals and restitution organizations to rescue Jewish cultural property and transfer it to new centers of Jewish life (Pomrenze 2002; Herman 2008; Gallas 2013, 2019; Weiss 2015; Lustig 2017; Gallas et al. 2019). However, a notable gap concerning the fate of specific collections remains. Case studies like this one can help uncover the overarching patterns of National Socialist plundering of libraries and the subsequent dispersal of surviving books. By tracing the journey of the Hochschule's library collections, this article uncovers some of these patterns of dispersion.

The Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums and Its Library (1872–1933)

The Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, founded in Berlin in response to the exclusion of Jewish studies and rabbinical training from German universities, had a significant role in the modernization of Jewish thought and education. Over its seven-decade existence (founded 1872), the Hochschule developed its own learning tradition that promoted a comprehensive and liberal understanding of Jewish culture and thought (Kaufmann 2006).

The institution served as an academic home for many prominent Jewish scholars who significantly contributed to the scholarly exploration of Judaism and the training of influential rabbis such as Hermann Cohen and Abraham Joshua Heschel (Kaplan and Dresner 1998; Beiser 2018). Abraham Geiger, one of the Hochschule founders, was a key figure in the development of Reform Judaism. His progressive approach to Jewish studies greatly influenced the institution's

curriculum and philosophy (Wiese and Homolka 2013). Leo Baeck, an alumnus and a German Jewry community leader, later became the head of the Hochschule, guiding it until the Nazis' closure of the school (Meyer 2021). In honor of Baeck's legacy, several postwar institutions were named after him. Although they shared his name, they were not directly related. The Leo Baeck Institute was established in 1955 with research centers in Jerusalem, London, and New York. Another academic institution in London, named the Leo Baeck College (founded 1956), served as a liberal rabbinical seminary. It was in this center of learning that Jenny Dorfler was tasked with creating a library.

Despite its significance, research literature about the Hochschule is scarce due to the limited number of surviving primary sources (Strauss 1992, 56). However, contemporary events at the Hochschule have been recorded in official reports published on the occasion of founding anniversaries and other festive events (Elbogen 1907; Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums 1922), and the board of trustees shared information in its annual reports ("Bericht des Kuratoriums" 1872–1938). Despite their subjective nature, memoirs and personal accounts from students, supporters, and faculty also provide invaluable information in the absence of other source material (Fabian 1961; Fuchs 1967; Strauss 1999). A few studies published in recent years summarize the key milestones in the institution's development and the history of individuals involved, providing a cursory introduction to the Hochschule history (Awerbach 1992; Kaufmann 2006; Wiese 2012; Steilen 2024). Despite the significant role that the library played for both the institution itself and the history of Jewish studies in general, it has not been a focus of any studies until recently.[1]

From a historical perspective, the library was the cornerstone of the institution from its inception, housing a vast collection of rare and valuable books, manuscripts, and other materials (Elbogen 1907, 55–58). These resources were vital for research in Jewish history, culture, and religion. In 1922, on the institute's 50th anniversary, its board of trustees proudly announced that the library had become one of the largest and most significant Jewish libraries in the world. ("Bibliothek" 1922), encompassing a collection of materials covering Jewish history, literature, philosophy, Bible studies, Talmudic studies, Hebrew grammar, and more.

In 1907, the Hochschule finally found a suitable home. Until then, for 35 years after its founding, it had operated in cramped, temporary spaces (Kaufmann 2006, 28–29). The new building had four floors. The first floor included an administrative office, a staff room, and a lecture room. The second floor held two additional lecture rooms, while the library occupied the third and fourth floors (Fabian 1961, 20). Architect Johann Höniger paid special attention to designing the library, dedicating the entire upper floor, including the attic, to a storage area of 100 square

1. My 2023 publication primarily examined how the library staff and students were exploited in the Nazi system of intellectual forced labor (Farack 2023).

meter—double the previous space. This area housed the collection and was not accessible to patrons. He also added an administration and lending room, along with a reading room (Höniger 1907, 102–104).

Over the course of seven decades, the library amassed an impressive collection of 60,000 volumes ("Bericht des Kuratoriums für 1936/1937" 1938). Although the library catalog is presumed to be lost, its history may be reconstructed from institutional annual reports. Initially, the catalog was created by students and lecturers, but by the early twentieth century, it had become outdated and was physically worn out ("Bibliothek" 1910). Consequently, after the Hochschule relocated to the new dedicated building in 1907, the board decided to develop a new, state-of-the-art catalog following the Preußische Instruktionen (Prussian Instructions; "Bibliothek" 1922). The Prussian Instructions were the first widely applied, cross-institutional set of guidelines in Central Europe that established the method for recording and organizing author names, titles, and other bibliographic data points (Jochum 2007, 119). That modern card catalog offered not only ease of use for librarians and patrons alike in the closed-shelves environment of the new building but, through standardization, also facilitated its integration into an interlibrary loan network—both nationally with other German libraries and internationally, including the Hebrew Union College Library in Cincinnati and the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem ("Bibliothek" 1910). However, developing the new catalog necessitated the re-cataloging of the entire collection. Originally started in 1910 with a projected timeline of three years, the unexpectedly tedious process needed for this project ultimately took 15 years to complete ("Bibliothek" 1926).[2]

FIGURE 1. Readers in the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums library, circa 1935. Jewish Museum Berlin, Inv.-Nr. FOT 88/500/160/020

However, a library is not only the sum of its books, but also its space, and especially its reading room (Rosenzweig 1984, 512). That is true for the Hochschule as well. In addition to serving scholars and researchers (see Fig. 1), the library's reading

2. The 1926 annual report does not explicitly state that the catalog was completed, but it is the first time since the project began in 1910 that there is no mention of the catalog being close to completion. It is also the first report to give an exact number of volumes in the library, rather than an estimate. These points strongly suggest that the re-cataloging project was concluded by that time.

room also served cultural and social functions. The reading room could fit up to 50 people, providing patrons with study desks and access to newspapers, reference works, and the catalog (Höniger 1907, 102).

More than just a quiet study space, the reading room hosted community members for engaging, lively discussions and casual conversations (Farack et al. 2023). A central figure in these social interactions was Jenny Wilde, the library's last director, known for her advisory and supportive role to students and lecturers alike (Loewe c1949, 1; Fabian 1949, 16). Many library users consulted her for either personal or bibliographic matters, drawing into the library almost daily visits from book enthusiast Leo Baeck, for example (Strauss 1999, 171). The constant chatter turned the reading room into a bustling area, moving away from the traditional quiet room model. Another source of noise was the security system, which required patrons to be buzzed in and shut the door loudly behind them. The level of noise resulted in complaints, as evidenced by at least one recorded note (Grumach 1940, 160–61). Finally, the social function of the reading room is highlighted most explicitly through the events held there, including the annual Purim and Hanukkah balls. For these celebrations, the reading room was decorated and, by removing the desks, turned into a dance floor (Seidel 2002, 111).

Navigating through Crisis (1933–1942)

Despite the challenges posed by World War I and the 1923 hyperinflation in Germany, the 26 years that passed since the Hochschule relocated to its dedicated building in 1907 and until the rise of National Socialism in 1933 marked a significant phase of expansion and professionalization for both the institution and its library (Strauss 1992, 43). The growing reputation of the institution attracted students from across Europe, leading to a proportional increase in demand for library resources. Trained librarians were employed to manage the collection, and the opening hours were extended to accommodate the expanding readership (Verein Deutscher Bibliothekare 1927, 16). This period sharply contrasted with the years under Nazi persecution, characterized by financial constraints but also by an extraordinary growth of the collection and a continuously expanding readership, ultimately culminating in the confiscation of the library holdings in the fall of 1942.

The Hochschule and its library encountered a series of escalating challenges under the Nazi regime starting in 1933. Initially, the institution experienced a significant boom, as students and lecturers who were no longer allowed to study or teach elsewhere joined its ranks. Consequently, the diversity of subjects taught expanded as lecturers from various disciplines joined. However, the Nazi pressure to push German Jews to emigrate resulted in a steady decrease in the student and faculty body, until the institution was forcibly closed, with only a handful of students, lecturers and employees left in the summer of 1942 (Strauss 1992, 40).

Until at least 1941, the library space could still be utilized, although maintaining operations required immense improvisation. With no means to buy new books, library staff relied heavily on exchange ("Bericht des Kuratoriums für 1932–1935" 1936). In addition, the acquisition of new books became increasingly difficult due to the Nazi-imposed ban on Jewish book production after 1938 (Hambrock 2016, 551). Book acquisition was further complicated by Germany being at war, resulting in the breakdown of trade relations with enemy nations—a reality that affected other German libraries as well, Jewish and non-Jewish alike.

Furthermore, the library faced a space problem since many Jews fleeing Germany were forced to leave their personal libraries behind, either donated or left on consignment for the Hochschule. According to a witness, the multitudinous books accumulated in the library caused "a Babylonian confusion" (Grumach 1940, 154). Due to the dearth of space, these books were not only stored in the reading room and storage but also in the attic, basement, and faculty room. Many of the donated books were hardly relevant to the library collection scope. The skilled staff improvised a new section for so-called "useless" books, serving as a reservoir for exchange in the interest of accepting other, more suitable books for the collection (Grumach 1940, 155).

Under Nazi persecution, books held profound significance for Jewish readers. As David Shavit concluded after examining numerous personal narratives, books provided comfort and intellectual engagement and served as "a weapon against despair" (Shavit 1997, 66). Although library work was crucial under these conditions, the personnel responsible for keeping the library operational has only been partially identified, due to the scarcity of primary sources. One of them was Jenny Wilde, the head librarian from 1910 to 1942. In 1943, she was deported to the Theresienstadt Ghetto but survived. After the liberation, she returned to Berlin, where she passed away in 1949. Adele Sperling, a young woman deported to Auschwitz in 1943 and murdered there, served as the last library assistant at the Hochschule. The other librarians identified, Jenny Dorfler and Suse Hallenstein, managed to flee Germany shortly before 1938 (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. Jenny Wilde, Adele Sperling, and unidentified men. The Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums Library reference desk, circa 1938 (Leo Baeck Institute New York, F 19592)

While the Hochschule continued its teaching activities and maintained its library operations, 1941 brought about a significant change when the institution was forced to sell the building and the educational activities were separated from the library. Teaching was relocated, first to a nearby building that used to house the orthodox Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin until Kristallnacht in November 1938. Subsequently, teaching activities were further relocated to an entirely different neighborhood in Berlin (Fabian 1961, 24), while the book collection remained in the institution's original location. Surprisingly, even under conditions requiring Gestapo permission to access the building, the library was still operational (Simon 2001, 106). The last official activity of the Hochschule library involved recalling all borrowed books and recording their return (Nathan 1942, 51–54). The last book was returned in October 1942, three months after the Hochschule had already closed. The book return was documented by Johanna Nathan, a secretary rather than a librarian. Six months later, in March 1943, Nathan (born 1891) was deported to Auschwitz and murdered (Hank and Hank 2017, 75).

Due to the scarcity of archival materials, whether originating from the institution staff or from Nazi authorities, it is still unclear why the institute was allowed to remain operational for so long while other rabbinical seminaries were compelled to shut down shortly after the 1938 November pogrom. One theory regarding that question suggests that the Hochschule was not seen primarily as a rabbinical seminary but more as a school (Hamburger 1957, 30), and Jewish schools were permitted to operate longer under Nazi rule. That assumption is supported by the fact that when the Hochschule was eventually forced to close, it was due to a Nazi decree targeting all remaining Jewish schools. Another possibility is that the Hochschule benefited from protection due to its esteemed reputation and Leo Baeck's international standing. Herbert Strauss, a former student, speculated that the Nazis hesitated to shut it down to avoid provoking international protests similar to those following the arrest of Leo Baeck in 1935, resulting in his release shortly after (Strauss 1999, 180). Although the Hochschule was permitted to function longer than other institutions, it was ultimately forced to close in the summer of 1942. Shortly after, in October 1942, the library was confiscated and taken over by the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Security Main Office).

The Hochschule Library in Nazi Hands (1942–1945)

Of the many German institutions that participated in carrying out the Nazi plunder of books, the Reich Security Main Office took the leading role (Schreiber 2006, 352). In order to provide source material for the so-called Judenbibliothek ("Jewish Library") of the Amt für Weltanschauliche Forschung und Auswertung (Office for Ideological Research and Evaluation), the SS intelligence service collaborated with the Gestapo to seize Jewish private and public libraries all over Europe and transfer them to its Berlin headquarters. The result was a library built exclusively of looted Jewish books.

The Nazis stole Jewish books to gain control over crucial sources of knowledge about Jewish history, religion, and culture. That act was a component of a larger scheme to mold European thought to fit the Nazi ideology, as described by Rebecca Knuth: "German institutes and scholars were involved in planning for reshaping the European mentality into a German mode and the combating of forces of tradition and cultural intransigence within each occupied country. The control of books and libraries was seen as a key element" (2003, 90). The Nazis' goal was to exploit these sources for their study of Jewish history from a National Socialist perspective, aimed at legitimizing their ideology (Berg and Rupnow 2006). Such ideological research was conducted in numerous universities and other research institutions established after 1933. Many ambitious young academics were attracted to this field, not only for the prospect of swift career advancement, but also because of the power it gave them over people and resources as part of a new combination of academia and policing. The Nazis aimed to control and interpret Jewish history itself, seizing the authority to define it, particularly as they were working to bring Jewish history in Europe to an end (Schreiber 2006, 327).

Although the confiscations had taken place before, it was the transfer to Berlin and accumulation of German and Austrian Jewish libraries in the summer of 1939 that marked the definite inception of the "Jewish Library" at the Reich Security Main Office (Schidorsky 2007, 23). The establishment of the "Jewish Library" coincided with the founding of the Reich Security Main Office itself, when the Abteilung Gegnerforschung (Enemy Research division) of the Office was at the peak of its influence (Schreiber 2006, 352). The office location, encompassing the library and a research division, was in a central and prestigious Berlin neighborhood. The building used by the "enemy researchers" was constructed in 1900 and had served as the seat of the grand lodge of the Freemasons of Germany until its dissolution in 1935. Following the ban and expropriation of the lodges, it was provided to the Reich Security Main Office as an official site in 1939 (Rudolph 2016, 253).

The expropriated building comprised a central structure and several wings. Spanning approximately 15,000 square meters, it housed eight temples, two large ballrooms, two assembly halls, three conference rooms, six official residences, an archive, a museum hall, and numerous ancillary rooms for administration, a cash office, a kitchen, and a wine cellar. By 1941, the plundered Jewish libraries occupied three halls and the entire basement of the building (Schidorsky 2007, 44). By 1943, the Reich Security Main Office's "Jewish Library" filled all the former reading and dining halls of the building, yet the existing spaces were still insufficient, leading to the majority of the material being stacked away in piles (Grumach 1945, 3).

The scope of activities for the "enemy researchers" and their librarians continually expanded. After the incorporation of public collections from Germany and Austria was almost complete,

the Nazis began to draw from the private collections of those who had fled or been deported. In the occupied territories, temporary task forces were assembled to conduct plundering missions on behalf of the Enemy Research division, since it did not have its own executive branches (Rudolph 2016, 250). This nearly Europe-wide reach allowed the researchers to amass an extensive collection, with estimates suggesting that the complete collection eventually numbered between two to three million volumes (Schidorsky 2007, 27).

Alongside other German institutions, the Reich Security Main Office began relocating its library holdings to depots in August 1943, to protect them from bomb damage by air raids (Grumach 1945, 4). After a significant effort was made to swiftly accumulate the stolen book collections in Berlin, the books were dispersed across depots in the regions of Silesia and the Sudetenland. Books processed from the "Jewish Library" were primarily transferred to the Niemes and Hauska Castles (Grimsted 2008, 153–56). However, the entire Hebrew and Yiddish book collection was moved for further processing to the Theresienstadt camp, located between Prague and Dresden (Grumach 1945, 4). In Theresienstadt, the books were stored in one of the ravelins, a detached fortification of the fortress walls surrounding the former garrison town. The books were processed in the Altmann House outside the ghetto, named after its owner, consisting of three low-ceilinged rooms (Manes 2005, 381–82).

It was Jewish forced laborers who were compelled to sort, organize, and re-catalog the stolen books. Similar to how the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce) forced the members of the so-called Paper Brigade to sort through looted collections in Vilna (Fishman 2017), the Reich Security Main Office engaged in both the widespread confiscation of Jewish books and the exploitation of forced labor for their reorganization. The Reich Security Main Office utilized two groups of Jewish forced laborers to catalogue the stolen books: the Grumach-Gruppe (Grumach Group) based in Berlin and the Talmudhundertschaft (Talmudkommando) in the Theresienstadt Ghetto (Holzer-Kawałko 2018; Farack 2023). While the work of the Berlin-based Grumach Group had been documented shortly after the end of the war by Ernst Grumach, one of its few survivors and a former lecturer at the Hochschule (Grumach 1945), it took longer for the activities of the Talmudkommando to be systematically investigated (Farack 2023). As a result, it is now known that from 1941 to 1945, at least 101 individuals were forced to work for the "Jewish Library" of the Reich Security Main Office. This workforce consisted of Jewish intellectuals, many of whom were intimately familiar with the books they were now cataloguing for the Nazis. These individuals were scholars who had previously studied the books, readers who had enjoyed them, and librarians who had cared for them

A contemporary witness who had successfully fled from Europe tried to put himself in the shoes of those subjected to forced labor. That contemporary, Herbert Strauss—another alumnus of the

Higher Institute—wrote in 1947 about the experience of these forced laborers: "It must have been among the most paradoxical experiences of their lives to be led by SS guards into a room containing the treasures of Jewish centuries in an accumulation previously unknown, and to sift out from the debris of Yiddish popular fiction the precious incunabula or early prints that would form the treasured core of any library" (Strauss 1947, 716–17; translated from German by the author). Although no direct testimony has been found to corroborate this observer's account, it is established—and perhaps unexpectedly—that the stolen books provided an intellectual sanctuary for the forced laborers and camp inmates. Artist Arno Nadel, businessman Philipp Manes, scholar Ernst Grumach, and notably librarian Jenny Wilde, the only woman among the labor groups, found various forms of emotional comfort and inspiration with the help of these stolen books (Simon and Schütz 2010; Manes 2005; Farack 2023). On a personal level, their use of the books was in stark contrast to the "Jewish Library" at the Reich Security Main Office's official intent, as the workers found encouragement and comfort in the very materials meant to fuel antisemitic policy and propaganda.

Due to lack of documentation by Nazi authorities, little is known about the classification system used for the "Jewish Library" of the Reich Security Main Office. What is known was documented by Ernst Grumach and indicates that this system diverged significantly from conventional library practices of the time, in Jewish or non-Jewish libraries alike. According to Ernst Grumach, the library was organized at its core around reassembled collections from the Berlin Jewish Community, the Breslau Jewish-Theological Seminary, and the Central-Verein Deutscher Staatsbürger Jüdischen Glaubens (Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith). These were important collections in their own right and among the first to be systematically seized. They had been stolen along with their catalogs, packed, and reassembled as cohesive units within the new context of the Nazi library. Collections that arrived later were handled differently: they were broken up, with individual books integrated into additional sections of the "Jewish Library." These sections included a general reference area with periodicals, calendars, and commemorative publications, as well as a "Kleine Schriften" (Small Writings) section that contained brochures, off-prints, community statutes, reports, sermons, and pamphlets. A supplementary collection, or Ergänzungsbibliothek, that was created from later plunders and served as a repository for books that the core collection was missing, supplemented the older part of the collection (Grumach 1945, 3). The Nazi classification scheme seems to have diverged significantly from conventional library practices. Instead of organizing books by subject or author, many items were arranged by provenance, based on the former owners from whom they were stolen. Additionally, even books from collections disbanded upon arrival retained visible traces of their origins, such as stamps of their former owners. There were no attempts to hide that these books had been stolen or to obscure their sources. While some biographical information exists about the Nazi librarians who oversaw the forced laborers (Schidorsky 2007, 31–37), no documentation, correspondence, or memoranda have been found to clarify the motives behind these decisions.

The library of the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums was integrated into that "supplementary library." Two reasons might have facilitated this decision: first, the collection was stolen and accessioned relatively late, after the core collection had been created. Second, both the Hochschule library and the Reich Security Main Office library were cataloged according to the Prussian Instructions (Schidorsky 2007, 30). It is worth noting that the Hochschule had initially adopted these cataloging rules to facilitate collaboration with other libraries, especially in Germany. Thirty years later, it turned out that this decision made it easier for the collection to be disbanded and absorbed into the Reich Security Main Office system. Integrating the Hochschule collection into that "supplementary library" meant that the collection was broken up, with duplicates and books deemed irrelevant discarded. After the books had been physically removed from their original location, with the original library community of patrons and staff destroyed, that marked the end of the Hochschule library.

The Postwar Fate of the Hochschule Books

As World War II ended, the vast book collection of the Reich Security Main Office, including that of the Hochschule, was dispersed. Many books were located in depots near Prague and in the Theresienstadt Ghetto, while another portion of them laid in the half-destroyed Reich Security Main Office headquarters in Berlin, exposed to the elements. These scattered books then suffered various fates: some were looted by local civilians, while others were seized by Allied forces—Soviet, Polish, Czech, and American troops, depending on who reached them first. The books left at the Reich Security Main Office's damaged headquarters attracted the attention of several groups: the Soviet Trophy Brigades, Berlin's city administration, and the American Armed Forces (Schroeder 2004, 322). In the end, the Americans managed to recover only part of the books, among them some from the Hochschule. These books were then moved to the Offenbach Archival Depot for safekeeping and further consideration. The Offenbach Archival Depot was established by the American Military Government as the main collection point for looted Jewish cultural items. Over time, this depot housed millions of books, periodicals, and manuscripts (Gallas 2013, 141).

In July 1946, around 300 books from the Hochschule were identified at the Offenbach Archival Depot (Office of Military Government for Germany 1946, 58). Similarly to the collections of other no longer existing institutions, various future plans were proposed for the Hochschule books. Ultimately, it was Leo Baeck who successfully advocated for the reallocation of the books to German Jewish refugees living in England. These books were given to the Society for Jewish Studies, a group established in London by German refugees in 1947 (Meyer 2021, 255–56) aiming to form a new institution, similar to the Berlin Hochschule, to keep its tradition of learning alive. The society organized weekly public lectures, frequently drawing audiences of up to 150 people. Since it did not have any books, some of the Hochschule library's books found in Offenbach were given to that group (Gallas 2013, 180–81).

It appears that it was this society that ensured that the books were stored in a London basement, where Jenny Dorfler eventually rediscovered them after the Leo Baeck College was inaugurated in 1956. The society had close ties with Werner van der Zyl, founder of the Leo Baeck College and alumnus of the Hochschule, and supported the training of the college's first students (Magonet 2012, 105). The Leo Baeck College became the first official training facility for rabbis and teachers within the Reform and liberal Jewish movements in the UK (Van der Zyl 1985, 11).

Dorfler's surprise upon finding the books shows how much was unknown about the wartime fate of the books and how easily information was lost in the immediate postwar years. Dorfler assumed the books were lost, and while that was true for most of the 60,000-book Hochschule collection, a few remnants survived after all. What better use could there have been for them than creating a new library, or in Jenny Dorfler's words, using these fragments for the "birth of a library" (Dorfler 1966, 170)?

Dispersion Patterns of Nazi-Looted Jewish Books

The article traced out the ways in which the Hochschule library continued functioning under trying conditions, introduced the staff who strove to keep it open, and detailed the timeline and methods of its seizure, reorganization, and dispersal by the Nazis. Yet, the article's contribution extends beyond this single case study. The case of the Hochschule library also exemplifies broader patterns of Nazi book theft and postwar dispersal, reflecting general trends in the fate of Jewish collections. Examining these patterns sheds light on the mechanisms of Nazi looting, postwar redistribution, and the ongoing journey of these books through current collections. Recognizing these dispersion patterns helps us understand not only the Hochschule library's trajectory but also offers insights into how other looted Jewish collections were affected. The current study identified four distinct patterns:

1. Many books originating in prewar collections, such as those of the Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith, followed a similar trajectory to the Hochschule library books (Holzer-Kawałko and Farack 2023). These books were subjected to the same decisions and processes: they were stolen by the Nazis to support their research, funneled into the vast collection at the Reich Security Main Office, and later salvaged by Allied Forces. After the war, these books deemed "heirless" became part of a broader debate over who should be considered the rightful successor to Jewish institutions in Central Europe that were forced to close under Nazi rule. Ultimately, the books from the Hochschule and from other prewar institutions were redistributed to various libraries, museums, and archives, primarily outside Europe, regardless of whether they had direct ties with the prewar owners or not.

2. The postwar redistribution of the salvaged books further fragmented the original collections, scattering items from the same prewar libraries across numerous contemporary collections worldwide. In the case of the Hochschule, its books are now found in at least 23 different collections across Europe, Israel, and North and South America (Farack et al. 2023).

3. Examining the Hochschule collection at the level of individual objects highlights not only similarities to the fate of other collections, but also two important differences. First, outside of Germany and the annexed territories, the Reich Security Main Office faced competition from other Nazi looting agencies, such as the Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce, leading to different pathways for the stolen books. Second, not all looted collections were retained for Nazi research. Smaller, primarily private collections were often quickly monetized for the benefit of the German Reich. Once their Jewish owners were deported, the contents of their homes, including their books, were appraised and sold, channeling many stolen books into book trade and private non-Jewish collections (Friedenberger 2008).

4. While the stolen books were initially sent on different trajectories, depending on the processes and decisions they were subjected to, their paths later often converged again. For example, even though the collections of the Yiddish Scientific Institute in Vilna (YIVO) were confiscated by the Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce, they nevertheless met with the remnants of the Hochschule collection at the Offenbach Archival Depot before going their separate ways again (Fishman 2017). This pattern of converging paths is not limited to the past. Today, these co-occurrences continue: books from different prewar collections frequently resurface together in the same locations. For instance, when a book from the former Hochschule collection is found, it is often accompanied by volumes from the Breslau Rabbinical Seminary or from Eastern European Jewish communities (Looted Cultural Assets Database 2024).

It becomes clear that these books not only shared similar fates along their winding paths, but that the persons and institutions handling them—the very agents responsible for sending the books on these journeys—are all part of a shared circulation sphere. The movement of books between collections illuminates the connections between these institutions, much like contrast fluid in a medical imaging procedure reveals hidden structures. The patterns revealed are shaped into a network: just as prewar Jewish libraries were linked through book exchange, the current ongoing movement of books connects contemporary collections of Judaica from Central Europe. Moreover, these ties extend even further, as this circulation not only connects present-day collections to one another, but also links them back through time to libraries that have long since disappeared.

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