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*Kanon im Exil* is an interdisciplinary biographical study of the reading canon and writings of five German-Jewish authors who emigrated to Palestine in the 1930s. Caroline Jessen’s eloquent and creative work, an abridged version of her dissertation, brings together literary and exile studies, social and cultural history, history of the book, and the history of ideas. It is embedded in the specific political context of a newly formed society in Palestine/Israel, which chose Hebrew as its unifying language and embarked on new national literary expressions and cultural narratives. Immigrants to Palestine found themselves in a very different situation in comparison to those in other prominent places of German-Jewish emigration in the 1930s—mainly in the United States and the United Kingdom—where the newcomers entered established societies and negotiated their space there. The lives of the five people profiled in this book offer an impression of the tensions and conflict areas they encountered. Jessen argues that the conscious and unconscious discourse with the German literary canon that each of these writers grappled with is an invaluable tool for the study of contemporary discourses as an expression of cultural memory.¹

Before embarking on a theoretical framework for canon research, Jessen introduces the topic with an observation regarding German book collections taken to Palestine/Israel by emigrants from Germany as material manifestations of their literary culture: These once ubiquitous collections are now vanishing from everyday Israeli life together with the last generation of their owners.

Old German books cause distress to antiquarian bookshops, public libraries, and cultural institutes in Israel. Most of these books can hardly fulfill their original purpose: Every use damages them but it is difficult to dispose of them. Book titles, publication dates, ownership marks, dedications, inserted newspaper clippings, and annotations all clearly tell a story, drawing attention to the provenance and history of the objects and their former owners. Many books were fixtures in the homes of readers who thus preserved in their daily lives a narrow bridge to another place and time. (9)

The author delves deeper into this historical framework by examining the infrastructure of German literature, reading, and publishing in Palestine, as documented in autobiographies, diaries,

literary essays, correspondence, export papers, inventories of lending libraries and bookstores, book reviews and advertisements, as well as literary events. Immigrants took their private book collections from Germany to Palestine primarily between the years 1932 and 1939, when refugees were still able to declare books as “private household goods” (58). Among the books that refugees chose to take with them were often titles that promised practical guidance for a new beginning in Palestine, literary texts, and leisure reading. Many of these books later had to be sold due to financial hardship; they then circulated among the German-speaking refugee community through private or public lending libraries and through the antiquarian book trade in Palestine. In the 1930s, German books could still be exported by publishers to Palestine because the Jewish Agency did not participate in a boycott on German wares. After 1939, most German books were imported from Switzerland, and from exile publishing houses in the Netherlands, Sweden, and Mexico. These German books found themselves alongside widely-circulating English titles and a growing body of Hebrew literature. They were soon supplemented by local German-language works, often self-published, although the small and competitive book market suffered from a war-related paper shortage. Public criticism of the continued production and reception of German-language books intensified in Jewish Palestine with the beginning of World War II. Jessen writes that “German-language reading cannot simply be seen as the persistence of old habits but can only be understood as the negotiation of free spaces and compromises in an environment that called for the construction of a new society in which there was little space for Goethe or Heine” (57).

The central chapter of Jessen’s work is dedicated to these “free spaces and compromises” in five case studies of the reading canon, literary role models, and works of authors of the German-Jewish immigrant generation: Paul Mühsam (1876–1960), Josef Kastein (1890–1946), Schalom Ben-Chorin (1913–1999), Werner Kraft (1896–1991), and Ernst Loewy (1920–2002). The first three were well-known German authors in the 1930s and 1940s before they emigrated to Palestine. All five authors continued reading and writing primarily in German following their emigration and achieved only minor literary significance in their new country and in postwar Germany.

Jessen’s first case study is of the lawyer and writer Paul Mühsam, who fled from Görlitz to Haifa in September 1933, after he was forbidden from practicing law and his books were publicly burned by the Nazis. He was a cousin of the better-known anarchist and playwright Erich Mühsam, who was murdered by the Nazis in 1934. In his early literary work in Germany, Paul Mühsam had sought to align himself with the German classical literary tradition, not least as a means of compensating for a perceived otherness due to his Jewish upbringing. In Palestine, Mühsam continued writing in German and never learned Hebrew. Although he had access to imported books, he found himself uprooted and deprived of literary circles and intellectual exchange. Jessen observes that in keeping with his “conservative value system” (109), Mühsam withdrew into his library. Escaping into the literary works of his youth, especially works by Goethe, was his way of coping with his new reality.
With his nostalgic anthology of German poems, which he titled *Perlen deutscher Dichtung* (Pearls of German Poetry; unpublished), Mühsam sought to restore the “integrity of literature in response to the attempt to monopolize it for the ideology of National Socialism” (110). To be faithful to Goethe’s humanistic ideal of “das Wahre, Schöne, und Gute” (the true, the beautiful, and the good), he did not include modern prewar expressionist or socialist/communist poems in the anthology. He also favored romantic poems with motifs such as travel, loneliness, and farewell, which seem to echo his situation. Jessen describes the anthology as an “[…] ark of the bourgeois, humanistic literary tradition of the 19th century, which, in its non-recognition of the dividing line drawn by both the National Socialists and Jews between […] ‘German’ and ‘Jewish’ in the literary tradition […]” (110).

Attorney and writer Josef Kastein (pseudonym of Julius Katzenstein), an ardent and early Zionist, was a well-known author in Weimar Germany. He wrote in a popular and passionate style on a range of Jewish topics and historical figures, including Sabbatai Zevi and Uriel da Costa. Kastein’s biographies are reminiscent of the German-Jewish historical novels of the nineteenth century, which served to interpret Jewish history and disseminate new ideas about Jews and Judaism.št Kastein also regularly contributed articles to Martin Buber’s journal *Der Jude.* He attended the tenth Zionist Congress in Basel (1911) and traveled to Palestine in 1913. In 1927, Kastein moved from Germany to Switzerland, abandoned his legal career, and focused on writing. His popular book *Eine Geschichte der Juden* was published in 1931 and translated into several languages.št It showed a clear commitment to Zionism even before he emigrated to Palestine in 1935, where he lived for the rest of his life. Jessen sees in the tension between Kastein’s bourgeois, humanistic upbringing and Jewish religious education, on the one hand, and his Zionist literary and political ideals on the other, a rebellion against the world of his parents and their friends who “lived a double life” of publicly assimilating and privately maintaining Jewish traditions (127). This tension continued after Kastein’s emigration for example, in his idea to (re)write Jewish history in Palestine. Reading and writing in German was Kastein’s attempt to overcome the perceived eternal duality, or “two-ness” (Martin Buber) of his Jewish identity and existence. Kastein described his Zionist homecoming narratives as “self-therapy” (144). According to Jessen, Kastein undeniably failed in his quest to “encode a new culture (re)created from Jewish history in Palestine”: his literary works, considered marginal at best, “remained, against his will, part of discourses that were not only in retrospect perceived as ‘German’” (169). At heart and in his works, Kastein continued to be a cultural Zionist, as constructed in the Germany of his youth and shaped by the prewar Zionist writings of Buber and the popular historical-biographical works of Emil Ludwig. His disillusionment with life in British Palestine was apparent in his 1942 work *Eine palästinensische Novelle,* which describes the daily life of emigrants in Palestine. The center of his work is the “double tragedy” of his generation, whose idealism could not be fulfilled (146). Around the time his Palestine novel was published, Kastein

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decided to join his wife in the United States but he passed away in 1946. Three of his essays on cultural identity were published posthumously in a bilingual, Hebrew-German edition (which he had prepared himself, ultimately advocating “the reconciliation of nationalist and universalist thinking” (164).4

Jessen’s third case study focuses on the poet, religious writer, and philosopher Schalom Ben-Chorin, a name choice that translates to “peace, son of freedom.” Ben-Chorin was born as Fritz Rosenthal in Munich in 1913. He left for Palestine in 1935, where he engaged in the discourse of exile literature and became one of the figures of the German literary scene in Jerusalem as an author, publisher, book dealer, literary critic, and host of literary evenings. Like Kastein, Ben-Chorin’s beginnings as a writer were marked by a search for a Jewish tradition and identity lost in the acculturation and assimilation of German Jews. He refuted, however, any functional understanding of literature, maintaining that, “content and form determine the value of a literary work, not ethical, religious, moral, or nationalistic considerations” (170). Ben-Chorin struggled throughout his life with the relationship between Jewish identity and the German language. Although he believed that literature should be independent, he leaned towards the idea of Jewish culture “as a variation of the traditional Bildung ideal of German literature,” as did Max Brod, Martin Buber, and Karl Wolfskehl (174). In his own lyrical work, he tried to synthesize the language of Jewish biblical and liturgical traditions, especially of the psalms, with the language of modern German poets such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Stefan George, in whose works he found similarities in form, symbolic language, esthetics, and mystical experience.

In his article “Sprache als Heimat” (Language as Homeland),5 Ben-Chorin looked back at Palestine of the 1930s and wrote that for some emigrants, “German classical literature became their transportable fatherland,” a reference to Heine, who had called the Bible a “transportable fatherland” (179). He thus connected the “people of the book” to “the people of books” (179), who perceived language and literary canon as belonging and home. Ben-Chorin tried to overcome this narrow definition by engaging with and supporting new literary trends, first among emigrant authors and later in the postwar literary scene. Some of his own publications from the late 1930s and early 1940s were criticized as being “symptoms of the Jewish diaspora mentality” (185). In the end, Ben-Chorin’s literary activities became more and more directed toward the “religious in its intellectual and ethical-social dimension,” (195) to which he attributed more permanence. He consciously parted with his own literary career and became committed to Reform Judaism, as is evident in a 1939 publication.6 He laid the foundation for the Reform community in Jerusalem in 1958 and participated in the postwar Jewish–Christian dialogue between Israelis and Germans. Based on Ben-Chorin’s unbroken fascination with the work of the symbolist poet Stefan George, Jessen concludes that his engagement with German-language literature had an enduring impact,

“not only as a Jewish–Christian dialog, but as a discourse about the destruction of Jewish history in Germany and its precarious continuation beyond German borders” (214).

Lyricist and essayist Werner Kraft, who emigrated to Palestine in 1934, tried to present himself as a German author rather than as a Jewish one. In Jerusalem, he became part of the literary circle of Else Lasker-Schüler and Ernst Simon but his publishing and marketing options were limited. Jessen describes Kraft’s tireless and ultimately desperate efforts to become part of the postwar German literary scene and to be acknowledged as a German poet, despite the geographical distance, cultural differences, and logistical constraints of the day, including restrictions on the import and export of books and unstable postal delivery. Neither his own poems in German-Jewish periodicals and a small volume of reprinted Heine poems in the 1930s, nor three German publications in Jerusalem in the 1930s and 1940s made an impression in postwar Germany. Kraft published a number of critical literary essays and poems in the renowned West German literary magazine Merkur, yet he remained a marginal literary figure. Unlike Martin Buber and Schalom Ben-Chorin, who were regarded in postwar Germany as Jewish intellectuals, Kraft failed to reach a significant German audience. Kraft avoided being labeled as a Jewish author and threatened to quit writing for the Merkur in 1952, when one of his poems (Auf dem Sinai) was published as an example of an exotic German culture in Israel and not as the work of a German poet. The discrepancy between his own identity and the perception of him by German readers continued throughout his life. His canon of rhetoric—a term that Jessen employs throughout her book, with no clear definition—“in its specific reference to tradition and its refusal to politicize or functionalize Jewishness or Israel, stood at odds with the dominant trends in the literary establishment of the late 1950s and 1960s” (249). Kraft saw himself as an autonomous thinker, who found new paths in the literary landscape beyond the literary canon—out of necessity and as a way to position himself in a “political, literary, and critical language triangle” (255). All the leading German journals acknowledged Kraft’s work as a literary critic when he passed away in 1991 but in his literary work Kraft remained an outsider—a relic of the past—who did not “speak the right language” (264), a judgment he perceived as “exclusion.”

Ernst Loewy, a librarian, writer, and researcher of exile literature emigrated to Palestine as a teenager in 1936 with the help of the Youth Aliyah; his parents later joined him. He is the only writer discussed in Jessen’s work who returned to Germany after World War II, a decision that seems to have been influenced by his intensive readings of Thomas Mann, Romain Rolland, and Friedrich Nietzsche. He had access to this literature while working in kibbutz Kiryat Anavim and later during an apprenticeship in the Liberty Bookstore in Tel Aviv. The bookstore also functioned as a lending library and was a natural hub for exile literature to and from Palestine/Israel. Loewy studied the literature that he encountered in the bookstore and started writing about authors and literary topics, strengthening his bond with the German literary canon. Jessen states, “the literary canon promised Loewy the support that he needed when the world familiar to him in his parental home in Germany was radically questioned” (273). However, he soon questioned the relationship between literature and reality, based on the hardships of emigration, financial strug-

gles, work in the kibbutz, socialist ideas, and the destruction of his former German world. The anti-fascist literature from the Soviet Union formed his historical framework. He became strongly influenced by the work of the Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács, who interpreted the literary work of Thomas Mann as a bridge between bourgeois and proletarian societies, and who strengthened Loewy’s belief in the political power of literature. After unsuccessful attempts to gain an entry permit to the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Loewy and his family settled in Frankfurt am Main, where he soon headed the Judaica department of the university library, thanks to his knowledge of Hebrew.\(^8\) There he was trained to be a librarian. He attended lectures with Theodore Adorno, studied the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, and revised his understanding of Georg Lukács. In 1984, he became one of the founding members and first chairman of the Gesellschaft für Exilforschung (Society for Exile Research).\(^9\) In his writing and in his personal life, Loewy, like the other four authors, did not succeed in (fully) connecting with the literary and cultural establishment in Germany.

In researching the literary canon of the former German emigrant community in Palestine/Israel, Jessen does not attempt to reconstruct a comprehensive, quantitative catalog of book titles, as her research topic may suggest. She rather asks why and how certain authors and texts from the prewar literary canon played an important role in everyday life and in individual discourses of memory. She notes that inventories of book possessions or private libraries or inventories of bookdealers do not necessarily give a full picture of the literary canon, reading preferences, or the social, cultural, and historical context. She therefore worked with autobiographical and literary texts, diaries, correspondence, as well as literary criticism in leading journals e.g., das Mitteilungsblatt (MB), published between 1933 and the 1950s. She also used the (partial) archival materials of the five authors at the German Literary Archive in Marbach (Paul Mühsm, Schalom Ben-Chorin, Werner Kraft), the German Exile Archive in Frankfurt (Ernst Loewy), and at the Leo Baeck Institutes in New York and Jerusalem (Josef Kastein)—and archives of other German-Jewish emigrants who were part of their social and literary networks.

Jessen notes that a literary canon is never fixed because each generation selects and defines what it deems to be the most important works. She regards a literary canon as a selection that satisfies “the need for order, continuity, boundaries, and identity” (27). The canon has “a social function and is at the same time a place of memory” (46). Among emigrant communities, a literary canon becomes separated from its traditional origin and meaning.

In Palestine, books and libraries from Germany came to symbolize the idea of bourgeois German culture and the ideal of Bildung (15). This term, rooted in the emancipation movements of the nineteenth century, refers to holistic educational training and formation of the character and the mind. Jessen argues that for German-Jewish newcomers, who were collectively often dubbed

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8. He had married in 1944, and his two sons had been born in 1946 and 1951. His third son Hanno, born in 1961, became an exhibition curator and author, and eventually the Director of the Jewish Museum Hohenems in Austria.

9. The Gesellschaft für Exilforschung continues to support and promote scientific research on exile, in particular through its yearbook Exilforschung and other book publications, as well as events.
“Yekkes” in Israel, adherence to their accustomed literary canon—in their reading habits, their libraries, their use of literary quotes—served as a “cultural code,” as did their often distinctive dress code or lifestyle. The literary canon thus became a marker of belonging, a vehicle of communication, a metaphor of memory, but also a fetish of a utopian ideal. It ultimately stood and stands for the loss and destruction of Jewish life in Germany. In Palestine, adherence to the German Bildung tradition was often frowned upon as the “dead ballast of European culture” (15) and considered to be a symptom of idealistic pandering to German acculturative which needed to be overcome in favor of the new Jewish society and State. There had always been a critical Bildung discourse, especially from a cultural Zionist perspective, whose authors certainly had an ambivalent relationship with German literature and culture. Yet, this discourse was now in direct tension with a concrete national commitment to building a new society defined by “authentic” Jewish traditions and roots (21). The canon is especially important for discussions about the function of literature. Early Zionists identified a certain literary canon of core Jewish texts “as a common point of reference for a Jewish community scattered in the Diaspora and no longer religiously bound” (21). Many German emigrants, however, found in Goethe’s concept of world literature and universal humanism a synthesis that could bridge the tension between individual and community, between cosmopolitanism and nationalism.

In the concluding chapter, Jessen resumes her discussion of the function and meaning of a literary canon. Its true significance lies in individual interpretations and selections, which are emblematic of general cultural discourses of memory and continuity (53, 317 ff). The five portrayals of German-Jewish emigrant authors reveal different approaches to and strategies for connecting their literary past to the new present in Palestine/Israel. Paul Mühsam’s literary canon reflected the bourgeois, humanistic literary tradition of nineteenth-century Germany, exemplified by his reverence for the work of Goethe. His retreat to this literary canon signifies a nostalgic escape from the reality of his new homeland. Josef Kastein searched for the core of Judaism. He was profoundly influenced by cultural Zionism in prewar-Germany and shaped by the philosophical writings of Martin Buber and by the populist writings of Emil Ludwig. Schalom Ben-Chorin embarked on a universal religious and philosophical discourse, rooted in the German Bildung tradition, which was highly influenced by the work of Stefan George and Martin Buber. Werner Kraft tried to position himself as an autonomous German writer and thinker but did not reach an audience either in Palestine/Israel or in postwar-Germany—he was literally in the wrong place at the wrong time. Ernst Loewy, who was strongly influenced by the Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács and by the work of Thomas Mann, put thought into action and decided to emigrate to the GDR, a country that seemed to have implemented his political beliefs. He did not settle in the GDR, however; he moved to Western Germany and dedicated his scholarship to an examination of exile. All five authors have in common their search for ways to integrate their German literary foundations into a new environment. They all tried to connect to the postwar literary scene in Germany and succeeded only marginally at best. Ultimately, the literary canons they chose were as much a statement about their individual identities as as they were markers for cultural-social discourses at the time. Most of them perceived literature as a third autonomous space, juxtaposed with politics and religion, that had a universal message rooted in the German Bildung tradition. However, literature needs a reading audience for its discourses and interpretations and thus cannot necessarily remain an autonomous space in everyday life. A literary canon
can trigger a return to the well-known, it can be an inspiring path to a new outlook on life, or it can be a bridge between the old and the new.

Jessen touches briefly on current political memory controversies and warns that the vast book collections of the former German emigrant community cannot be easily classified and integrated into an “economy of memory”:

In the reluctance of the books, however, to be integrated into this necessary economy of memory, lies their great significance. To call them a cultural heritage (and perhaps to demand their unconditional preservation) would be to ignore this protest of the books, to immobilize them in the historization and determination of a pedagogical function. (327–8)

The book’s final sentence expresses the challenges of researching the literary canon of a society. It advocates an understanding of literary canons as complex, individual, dynamic discourses in a society and cautions against reducing them to simple, static, stereotypical lists and shrines of memory:

….forms of canon rhetoric explored in this study as dynamic responses, efforts, and contradictory boundary-drawing maneuvers do not fit in with the diverse heritage programs in Israel and Germany, for they stand at odds with the kitschy image of the saved ideal of Bildung as a time capsule and resist efforts to create catchy literary-historical, memory-political, and museum-pedagogical narratives as a re-enactment of earlier exclusion. (329)

Some of the material embodiments of these shrines of memory are the German-Jewish books and libraries that have been left behind, physically and literally. Fittingly, Jessen concludes her work with three photographs: two, of discarded German books in Haifa, and the third, of Werner Kraft’s personal library, which is partially preserved at the German Literary Archive in Marbach, along with many other libraries of literary authors in a vast complex of stacks (330). These images poignantly echo Jessen’s introductory observation that the old German books—overwhelming in their sheer quantity—that meant everything to their former owners, are still so difficult to discard because they symbolize a lost, bygone world. Most books will indeed be discarded; very few will be preserved in libraries and archives, and even fewer in the context of their former collections. These vast book collections of former German-speaking Jewish emigrants will continue to be concrete challenges for a few more years but at some point they will cease to exist in physical form.

Jessen observes that physical book collections, while intricately connected to the personal histories of their owners, reflect the actual literary canon discourse at the time only to a certain
extent. She is uncomfortable with instrumentalizing the remaining collections or book lists as simplified, static, and sentimental memory shrines that might even signify the exclusion of their former owners from society. However, physical book collections do help to visualize historical discourses, and the personal lives and intellectual engagements of their owners. They can be visual bridges to the past, especially for generations that will no longer encounter the former owners and their world. As librarians and archivists, we are responsible for preserving a “representative” part of the tangible heritage. How do we find concrete hands-on solutions, embedded in theoretical approaches, that will stand the test of time? I am convinced that despite the cost, the preservation of exemplary book collections in their entirety is crucial because they are material traces and sources of their time. How are the contexts of these collection and the discourses about them framed and interpreted? Each new generation and its scholars will address this question differently. For this reason some of these collections need to be “frozen in time” and taken out of the inevitable continuing movements of books and libraries, which is so brilliantly illustrated by the Footprints project. The Footprints project “traces the history and movement of Jewish books since the inception of print,” noting that “every literary work represents a moment in time and space where an idea was conceived and documented. But the history of a book continues long after composition as it is bought, sold, shared, read, confiscated, stored, or even discarded.” An entire book collection is yet another layer of book movement history; the whole is often more than the sum of its parts. Special collections have always strived to preserve the libraries of collectors and well-known authors (not least to find influences and traces of the creative writing process). It would be unthinkable to atomize the rare book collection of J. Pierpont Morgan in New York or Goethe’s private library in Weimar. In the same way, how fortunate it is that the private library of David Oppenheim (1664–1736), chief rabbi of Prague, was acquired in 1829 and preserved in its entirety at the Bodleian Library. Shouldn’t libraries of everyday life and “ordinary readers” find a similar place in the collective memory?

It is hoped that Caroline Jessen’s brilliant interdisciplinary analysis will find a publisher in the English-speaking world so that her keen observations can be shared more easily with the wider research community in a variety of disciplines.


12. See also the effort of the Leo Baeck Institute to preserve three private libraries physically in their entirety: https://www.lbi.org/news/preserving-private-libraries-leo-baeck-institute/, in addition to document (or create) inventories of private book collections when possible.