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« Où sont les bibliothèques spoliées par les nazis ?

Tentatives d'identification et de restitution, un chantier en cours »

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# From Object of Anti-Semitic “Feindforschung” to Symbol of Living Jewish Culture ? The Development of German Jewish Community Libraries 1938 to Present Times

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## From Object of Anti-Semitic “Feindforschung“ to Symbol of Living Jewish Culture? The Development of German Jewish Community Libraries 1938 to Present Times

Jörn Kreuzer, Hamburg

Ladies and gentlemen,

first of all I'd like to thank Mrs. Poulain for the invitation to participate at this symposium. I'm very excited to be talking about Jewish community libraries today.

I'll start by sketching a picture of the Jewish community libraries' impoundment in 1938. Next we'll take a closer look at what happened with the impounded libraries immediately after WW II. And my presentation will close with a couple of selected examples from my research project “Looted books in the library of the Institute for the History of German Jews”. These examples will show the problems occurring when returning books to Jewish communities and institutions as well as the benefit they might have for a flourishing community life.

The public image of how the national socialists handled books that were not in line with their ideology was for a long time dominated by the public burning of books in the beginning of their regime due to its strong symbolic power. However, the relationship of the national socialists with enemies' books was much more ambivalent than that.

Especially the Jewish community libraries moved into the focus of leading national socialists in the course of 1938's *Novemberpogrome* also known as *Reichspogromnacht*. In his “Blitzbefehl”, issued in the night from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1938, *Sicherheitsdienst* chief Reinhard Heydrich ordered to impound the community archives – of which the libraries were a part – and secured access to the books for his agency.

### (Folie 1: Heydrich Blitzbefehl)

In March 1939 Heinrich Himmler gave orders to execute an inspection of the libraries by the local agencies: “The *Reichsführer SS* wishes for all libraries secured during November's action against the Jews to be closely examined in regard to their contents.”

After the requested listing of all impounded books turned out as infeasible, the *SS-Oberabschnitte* were ordered to at least hand in a rough overview of the impounded libraries and their contents. Based on this overview *SS-Untersturmführer* Günther Stein, librarian at the *Sicherheitsdienst-Hauptamt*, assembled a list containing the 71 Community Libraries impounded and destroyed during the *Novemberpogrome*.

In Berlin a discussion started about how to handle the libraries. Librarian Stein strongly highlighted the subversive nature of the secured literature in a report for Heinrich Himmler:

“It is therefore inappropriate to let the Jewish libraries remain in Jewish hands. As the current situation makes it possible to assemble all Jewish literature in Germany in one spot it is suggested to gather all secured libraries at the *Sicherheitsdienst-Hauptamt* in Berlin and to install a central library for all Jewish literature. Future transfer of duplicates to national libraries and whatnot in exchange.”

He continues: “Regarding the scientific study of Judaism the central availability of the Jewish libraries for the *Sicherheitsdienst* will be of utmost and crucial importance.”

It was agreed on in the *Sicherheitsdienst-Hauptamt* that especially valuable and eminent community libraries should be transferred to Berlin. Librarians regarded the libraries of the Jewish Community of Berlin, the Rabbi-Seminar of Berlin, the Jewish-theological seminar in Breslau, the Synagogue community in Breslau, the libraries of Frankfurt (community, rabbi-school, thora-school), and the Israelites community in Munich and Vienna as such and in addition the community libraries in Hamburg, Dresden and Hannover. In total this were more than 200,000 books. All other impounded libraries were supposed to complement the core inventory as proposed in 1939. To transfer all libraries to Berlin was regarded as way too expensive.

In mid July 1939 *SS-Untersturmführer* and librarian Günther Stein travelled to Breslau and Dresden to supervise the appropriate packaging and transfer of the local libraries to Berlin.

### **(Folie 2: Dresden)**

On 27<sup>th</sup> of July in 1939 he filed the note: “The library was packed by UStuf Stein between 21.07. and 24.07. in Dresden and transferred to Berlin. Box numbers Dresden IRG Nr. 1 to 58, approximately 6,000 books. Signed Stein UStuf”

In the meantime the *Sicherheitsdienst-Hauptamt* got a budget of 100,000 Reichsmark for the setup of the central library. This budget was also used to cover the transportation costs. The money was taken from *Auswandererfonds* in Vienna. That means the victims payed for the transportation! The newly acquired financial means offered the responsible actors entirely new possibilities. In regard to the centralisation of the libraries a more “generous” approach was now possible, a filed note says.

By the end of July 1939 an order to the *SS-Oberabschnitte* was given to make all impounded libraries ready for transfer to Berlin. No sooner said than done. A note dating 7<sup>th</sup> of September 1939 for *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Dr.Knochen read: “Transfer of the significant, bigger Jewish libraries is completed.” The library of the Israelite Community Vienna was especially mentioned since the transport was successful “despite difficulties”.

Only a couple of days before that the Second World War had started. *Sicherheitspolizei* and *Sicherheitsdienst* were merged on 27<sup>th</sup> of September 1939 as the new *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* that from now on administered and organised the repressive

machinery of the national socialists. Responsibly for the so called *Feindforschung* (ideological study of the enemy) was Amt II, later on called Amt VII. Franz Alfred Six (1909 – 1975) became it's head.

### **(Folie 3: Six und RSHA)**

Part of Six's field of responsibility was the installation of a central library for the study of the enemies. As base for the section on Judaism were the impounded libraries of the Jewish communities and institutions. Waldemar Beyer (1909 – 1952), a trained librarian and *SS-Hauptsturmführer*, became the head of this library. His successors were Günther Stein, whom we've already heard about before, and Karl Burmester. An important role played also Paul Dittel.

Due to the active involvement of many librarians in the war the library was under-staffed most of the time. Therefore the librarians were mainly concerned with gathering more and more books and not so much with the installation of a file-system within the library to establish a catalogue. Proof of this is the fact that the Polish libraries were transferred to Berlin and the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* only months after Germany's attack on Poland.

During World Ward II no functioning central library for the study of the enemies was successfully installed. Up to this day it's difficult to track the paths of the many books – and we're talking about up to one million of them – gathered in Berlin by the national socialists' librarians:

The books were made available for other NS-organisations. Duplicates were sold for money or destroyed. Hebraica for example were sent to the concentration camp Theresienstadt to have them filed there.

In addition many books went up in flames in the storage spaces in Emscher Straße and Eisenacher Straße during air raids. Other stock was relocated into bomb-proof storage spaces like mine galleries.

From 1943 onwards Jewish forced labourers had to register books and do hard physical labour at the RSHA library. Professor of literary studies Ernst Grumach gave the Allies immediately after the end of the Second World War an impressive account of the forced labour at the RSHA:

The library of the RSHA contained further (that means despite the Jewish Community Libraries) "a series of libraries of important Jewish personalities that went far beyond regular private libraries, e.g. the library of the well-known Jewish collector Sigmund Seeligmann from Amsterdam, the French novelist Andre Maurois, the pianist Rubinstein, the Prussian registrar Posner, the historian Arnold Berney and many others, resulting in a Jewish library of an extent and a totality unparalleled anywhere else in the world", as Grumach cynically evaluated.

It can be concluded that the libraries of Jewish communities and institutions within the

RSHA were torn apart and largely destroyed during WW II with the extraordinary exceptions of the libraries of the Jewish community in Hamburg and the Jewish community in Mainz. While the library from Hamburg survived the war stored in a tunnel and returned from the German Democratic Republic in 1955, the library from Mainz remained in the local municipal library. For unknown reasons the officials in Berlin had no interest in it.

### **Archival Depot Offenbach and Jewish Cultural Reconstruction**

However, this did not mark the end of the history of Jewish community libraries in Germany since remains lasted within the former RSHA building, in external storages or in libraries of other Nazi organisations.

#### **(Folie 4: Archival Depot, Bücherkisten)**

Immediately after the war different parties showed interest in the books and the struggle for a solution how to deal with them began. This process was so complicated due to the diversity of interests that I can only give a quick insight into this today. The parties consisted of the allied forces, Jewish trust organisations, newly founded Jewish communities and last but not least German municipalities and cities that were home to the Jewish communities before their destruction.

The US, for example, assembled all looted goods by the Nazis after the war at a collecting point called "Offenbach Archival Depot". Up to one million books were stored there which made contemporary witnesses name the place "The mortuary of books". All cultural goods that could be retraced to its original owners were restituted.

Books from Jewish communities and other organisations that had been dissolved by the Nazis were declared "heirless goods". How to handle these "heirless goods" had to be discussed among the parties mentioned earlier. According to the law all books that had been situated on German grounds before the war would have been owned by the German state. However, that the nation of offenders should have been named legal owner of their victims' goods was unimaginable and unacceptable for the allied forces and the Jewish agents. Therefore a different solution had to be found.

In 1947 the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR) was founded as trust organisation. Its purpose was to manage and distribute the "heirless goods" together with the US authorities.

#### **(Folie 5: Arendt und Scholem)**

The Jewish cultural goods were supposed to be where Jews actually lived. And definitely not in the country of the aggressor – that was the JCR's claim not just for the American occupation zone. For those responsible at the JCR, among them Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem, this was the only possible way since to them future Jewish life in Germany was beyond imagination.

The future of the newly founded Jewish communities was dark due to the small number and high age of their members. In the eyes of the most contemporaries they were only “Ghost communities”. Furthermore it was unclear whether the new communities were legal successors of the old communities before the war. Of course the communities did see themselves as legal successors but to make it even more complicated there was no binding and consistent law regarding the restitution of goods among the allied forces – especially with the Cold War emerging in the background. Despite the unclear situation the JCR allocated until its dissolution in 1952 the remainders of the Jewish community libraries on behalf of the reconstruction and future conservation of Jewish cultural heritage to Jewish organisations and institutions worldwide, especially to the USA and Israel.

### **Looted books at IHGJ**

#### **(Folie 6: Blick in die Bibliothek)**

Which role does this history play for the library at the Institute for the History of German Jews? And which role does it play for my research project? I'll be answering these questions in this last part of my talk. But let me tell you that the answers will lead to new questions.

The starting point of the Institute's history was a conflict. Due to the far-sighted decision of the local Jewish community in Hamburg to hand over their archives to the *Staatsarchiv* the files survived the Nazis' lust for destruction.

In the 1950s the state of Israel together with important Jewish organisations such as the Successor Organization claimed the transfer of the original sources of the Jewish Communities to Israel. After several years of lawsuits, in 1959, the parties agreed on dividing the archive between the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (Jerusalem) and the *Staatsarchiv* in Hamburg. The missing part was replaced by copies or microfilm and handed to the other archive respectively.

The idea to save the archive for Hamburg grew in line with the idea to find an institutional frame of historically evaluating the sources. Several ideas and solutions were discussed. The most prominent idea was to found an institution similar to the Leo Baeck Institutes. After years of debates finally our institute was founded, with the German-Jewish historian and religious philosopher Heinz Mosche Graupe as the first director in 1964. Just two years later the official opening of the Institute took place.

To compliment the archival studies at the Institute a specialised library was founded that contained the private collections of the founders of the Institute, gifts from other institutions like the Leo Baeck Institutes or antiquarian purchases, amongst others. In the spring of 1974 Dr. Peter Freimark, director of the institute, wrote down in a report for the curatorship: “The hint of a friendly colleague informed me of the existence of numerous Hebrew books in the back catalogue of the State and University Library Hamburg. During the past weeks and in a lengthy process Mr. (Moshe) Zimmermann and I went through the back catalogue and could track about 1,000 books, some of them very important works of the rabbinic Judaism, history of the German Jews and general

Judaism.”

The focus of the scientists was unquestionably the historic view on the history of the German Jews and in that context the preservation of Jewish cultural goods and science for posterity.

With this context of the founding of the IHGJ it's hardly surprising that, during my research project about looted books, we found quite a number of items in the library with stamps from Jewish libraries and institutions. Between 2013 and 2016 we examined the more than 8,000 older books of the Institute's library – which meant for our purpose: books published before 1945.

### **(Folie 7: Stamps)**

Among the 945 suspicious provenances more than 50 different stamps of Jewish communities were found, containing stamps from the Jewish community Berlin (11 books), the Israelite community Frankfurt Main (six books), or the Israelite community Munich (13 books), but also the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (14 books).

### **(Folie 8: Archival Depot, JCR)**

In 40 books the stamp of the Archival Depot, a sticker by the JCR, a Hebrew stamp (reading “dismissed”), or a stamp of Jewish post-war institutions like the Leo Baeck Institutions were found. These items looted by the national socialists remigrated back to Germany and I dare raise the question how to proceed with these looted items?

However, there have been more sources identified in the Institute's library. Via an antiques dealer the Institute purchased books that had been dismissed from the University Library in Posen. These books bear stamps of Jewish communities.

### **(Folie 9: Universität Posen)**

The only plausible reason for this circumstance is that the books had been hidden and stored by the RSHA in Silesian mines. After WW II ended parts of these books, together with a large amount of books from Masonic libraries, was transferred to the University Library Posen. The University Library then sold duplicates to antiques dealers.

### **(Folie 10: München)**

Those Jewish communities we could identify were contacted by us. The Jewish community Munich and Oberbayern was very happy to hear from us and to get back the books. At the end of May 2016 we were able to hand over 14 books to the community in Munich. Ellen Presser, Head of the Cultural Centre, received the books in person and used the opportunity to emphasize the importance of such books to their library and cultural life of the community: “For us, the Jewish Community of Munich, it is a small sensation to bring back some books of our fourth Rabbi to our Kehilla.”, Mrs Presser said. Other communities, however, passed the opportunity to get back the book

since they do not have libraries.

**(Folie 11: Hochschule für die Wissenschaft)**

It's a different case with the books bearing a stamp by the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* ("University of the Science of Judaism"). This University had been founded by Abraham Geiger, amongst others, and was the centre of the liberal, scientific Rabbi education. In 1942 the *Hochschule*, by then discriminated as "school", was closed by the Nazis like all Jewish schools in Germany. The inventory including the library had been confiscated and brought to the RSHA in Berlin. The problem we faced in the course of our work was that the *Hochschule* still doesn't have any legal successor. However, since 1999 the *Abraham-Geiger-Kolleg* in Potsdam exists and sees itself in the tradition of the *Hochschule*. Would the restitution of the looted books contribute to the flourishing of the Rabbi education in Germany? ~~Recently colleagues answered this question with "yes".~~

This question is also the end of this talk, ladies and gentlemen, and I thank you very much for your attention.

**(Folie 12: Abschlussfolie)**