


Searching for Nazi-Looted Books at the National Library of Israel

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Abstract: From 1949 and into the 1970s hundreds of thousands of books, looted by the Nazis during the Second World War, arrived in Israel. The National Library of Israel, which led most of this operation, kept tens of thousands of them for its own collection. The remaining books were distributed across the country and used in other libraries, in schools, synagogues, and yeshivot. The books received by the National Library were designated a shelf number, cataloged, indexed and found their places among the shelves with the rest of the collection. In the coming years, identifying them as looted items was usually a matter of luck since their provenance was never mentioned in the bibliographic record. The origins of most of the library's collections are listed in old accession books. By leafing through the pages of these accession books we were able to identify nearly 8.500 of the looted books. The books' bibliographic data were pulled from the library management system which enabled bibliometric analysis and a better understanding of the National Library's collection building policies during the years after the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel.

Keywords: National Library of Israel; Nazi loot; book provenance; bibliographic data; Otzrot HaGolah

Looting of Jewish Libraries

As the European Jewry was being destroyed by the Nazis, many books of Jewish provenance were being preserved for research by various organizations in Germany. Even before World War II broke out, Nazi looting of Jewish private and public libraries in Germany and Austria was common knowledge abroad.

The 'Reichssicherheitshauptamt' (RSHA) – Reich Security Main Office – had plundered the collections of all so-called enemies of the Reich across the country during the 1930s. These included Communists, Freemasons, the Catholic Church, Jews and others. The RSHA established a huge library in what previously had been the Freemason's lodge in Berlin.¹ Jewish libraries from Germany, Austria, and later also from Eastern Europe were crated and sent there, joining the Freemason's books already confiscated. The philologist Ernst Grumach

(1902-1967) who headed the Jewish forced laborers working at the library estimated that two to three million books were housed in the RSHA library.² In the looting of Jewish libraries, the RSHA's main competitor was Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi party's chief ideologist. Rosenberg and his 'Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg' (ERR) began book confiscations in 1941 in compliance with Hitler's request and in anticipation for Rosenberg's suggested 'Hohe Schule'. The Hohe Schule, the planned academic institution for the Nazi elite, was to include a number of research and educational facilities across Germany. These included institutes for the study of German Folklore, Biology and Race Studies, Religion, History and more. Because of the war only one institute was established, The Institute for Research on the Jewish Question. Most of the confiscated books were sent to Rosenberg's 'Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage' (IEJ) in Frankfurt or to the central library and book sorting depot

1 Dov Schidorsky: The Library of the Reich Security Main Office and Its Looted Jewish Book Collections, in: Libraries & the Cultural Record 42 (2007), No. 1, 21-41.

2 Schidorsky 2007 (see FN 1).

in Berlin.³ In 1943, the British Jewish historian Cecil Roth (1899-1970) acknowledged this large-scale theft and suggested that after the cease of hostilities and the return of the stolen libraries, the books belonging to unidentifiable victims should be presented to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.⁴

National and University Library

When The Hebrew University was established in 1925, it incorporated the large Midrash Abarbanel and Ginzei Yoseph library that had existed in Jerusalem since 1892.⁵ The new university library became The Jewish National and University library, four years after joining the university it included some 225.000 books. Under its first manager Dr. Hugo Bergman, previously servicing Prague University library, the library grew and became a professional academic library as well as a home for the national collection. Most of the books were acquired by the university's 'friend associations' in Europe, mainly in Germany and in Poland. These organizations collected tens of thousands of books printed in their countries, and shipped them to Jerusalem during the 1920s and 1930s. This steady flow of quality publications ended with the Holocaust and the outbreak of the Second World War.

Certified information on the full extent of the ongoing tragedy in Europe arrived in Israel near the end of 1942. The 'Jewish Agency' formed a rescue committee, hoping to assist survivors and refugees. The Jewish National and University Library, anticipating the end of the war, contemplated similar plans regarding surviving book collections. The 'Committee for Saving the Diaspora Treasures', or in Hebrew 'Hava'adah L'hatzalat Oetzrot HaGoloh' (OG), began its work in 1944.⁶ This committee, whose members came from the Hebrew University and the library, included the university's rector

Leo Aryeh Mayer (1895-1959), professors Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), Martin Buber (1878-1965), and others. Their first mission was to compile lists of known Jewish library collections throughout Europe or collections of Jewish books in national or academic institutions. These lists would help tracing the remnants of those libraries after the war. The committee tried to convince world leaders, the 'Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force' (SHEAF), and later the 'Office of Military Government, United States' (OMGUS) that the orphaned books should be sent to the Hebrew University and that: "the whole scholarly world would recognize the fitness of depositing in the Holy City the libraries, documents, and collections now rescued from the enemy's hand."⁷

Restitution

Millions of looted books were discovered by the Allies after the war. Caches discovered by the Red Army in Poland and Germany were sent by train to the Soviet Union.⁸ The IEJ books had been evacuated to Hungen, north of Frankfurt. They were discovered by the US army and sent to a large warehouse in Offenbach which became known as the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD). Here, members of the allied Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives program (MFA&A) attempted to collect, organize and retribute books to their countries of origin in accordance with Military Government Law 59. Close to two million items left Offenbach by the end of 1946, but the OAD was left with about half a million unidentifiable Jewish books.⁹

In 1949 the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR), a cooperation of Jewish aid administration and academic organizations, took over from the US army in Offenbach and other collecting points. One of the JCR's leading members was the Hebrew University and its OG committee. Gershom Scholem represented the university and much doc-

3 Joshua Starr: Jewish Cultural Property under Nazi Control, in: Jewish Social Studies 12 (1950), No. 1, 27-48. Also see Dirk Rupnow: Judenforschung im Dritten Reich. Wissenschaft zwischen Politik, Propaganda und Ideologie, Baden-Baden 2011.

4 Cecil Roth: Opening Address. Conference on Restoration of Continental Jewish Museums, Libraries and Archives, April 11th 1943, London 1943.

5 On the history of the library see Dov Schidorsky: Libraries and Books in Late Ottoman Palestine (Hebrew), Jerusalem 1990.

6 Dov Schidorsky: Burning Scrolls and Flying Letters. A History of Book Collections and Libraries in Mandatory Palestine and of Book Salvaging Efforts in Europe after the Holocaust (Hebrew), Jerusalem 2008.

7 Judah Magnes: Telegram to American Section of SHAEF sent through General Giles, Cairo, 6.7.45, Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People, Judah Magnes files, P3/2056.

8 Patricia Kennedy Grimsted: The Road to Minsk for Western "Trophy" Books: Twice Plundered but Not Yet Home from the War, in: Libraries & Culture 39 (2004), No. 4, 351-404.

9 Robert G. Waite: Returning Jewish Cultural Property. The Handling of Books Looted by the Nazis in the American Zone of Occupation, 1945 to 1952, in: Libraries & Culture 37 (2002), No. 3, 213-228.

umentation from his private archive and that of the library and Hebrew University tell of the work done by the JCR. According to agreed-upon guidelines, the JCR eventually distributed the remaining books among Jewish libraries and institutions around the world. 40% were sent to Israel, 40% to the US and the rest to other countries.¹⁰ The Offenbach books were not the only resource of salvaged Jewish collections. With much effort and difficulty, about 85.000 books, collected after the war by the Polish Jewish committee, were sent to the library from Poland. A particularly long ordeal in Vienna ended with about 80.000 Nazi looted books arriving from Austria. Similar numbers were collected in Czechoslovakia as well.¹¹

The OG committee became a library department at the Hebrew University. For over 20 years, the department's particularly active manager, the librarian Shlomo Shunami (1897-1984), sometimes with the assistance of government representatives, retrieved hundreds of thousands of books and shipped them to Israel. The National and University Library kept those items missing from its collections and the rest of the books were distributed to libraries, yeshivot, synagogues, and schools around Israel. Unfortunately, no detailed records were kept regarding the final destination of these books. Requests for specific titles were sent to the library and to the Ministry of Religion. Some of these documents still exist in the National Library and the State Archives, but finding the actual books today is a matter of luck and wanting further research.

The Jerusalem Post in 1959 reported that 400.000 books had been brought to Israel, a quarter of them remained at the National Library.¹² In 1966, there were 200.000 OG books at the library.¹³ With the development of the new university campus in Givat Ram (Jerusalem) during the 1960s and the reopening of the original campus on Mount Scopus in 1967, many of these books were dispersed among the various faculty and department

libraries of the university. The OG books were regarded as regular books and treated likewise. They were cataloged, indexed (rebound if necessary) and placed on their designated shelf together with the rest of the library's collections. Information about these books' history was never mentioned in the card catalog. This remained the case when the card catalog was converted to the Aleph library management system in 1985. The only tell-tale clue to these books' obscure past were the labels, often, but not always, stuck on the inside binding. The JCR prepared a special label with the corporation's blue Star of David logo and required each recipient library to stick it in the books they had received. The National Library treated books found in Poland, Austria and other places in a similar way by preparing a special black and white book label with the relevant information.



Figure 1: Jewish Cultural Reconstruction label pasted into salvaged 1914 Prayer book for Jewish soldiers (note the ERR stamp, Belgrade office). © National Library of Israel, photograph by Daniel Lipson.

The previous owners of most of the OG books are unidentifiable. Either there are no markings at all or not enough clear information. Some books have stamps of European Jewish libraries closed by the Nazis before or during the war. Over the years, the National Library has received a number of enquiries by researchers or decedents of Holocaust victims and survivors looking for books that may have been stolen during the Holocaust. Without exact bibliographic information about the book in question, there is not even a starting point for a search. Unlike artwork where every single creation is unique, books are printed by the thousands, each copy identical to the one

10 Jewish Cultural Reconstruction: Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors October 17th 1949, The Gershom Scholem Archive, The National Library of Israel, Arc. 4* 1599 02 23.1.

11 Schidorsky 2008 (see FN 6).

12 Special Correspondent: Looted Jewish Books Returned, in: The Jerusalem Post, April 22nd 1959, 4.

13 Yehudah Ha'ezrahi: The National and University Library (Hebrew), Jerusalem 1966.

that preceded it of the printing press. Signatures, dedications, ex-libris and stamps are the only way to try to identify a book's previous owner. If these are available, they normally will not help in giving the time frame of that specific ownership, even if there is a name. 19th-century books looted in 1939 that include an owner's name may have belonged to that individual already way before. A book with the stamp of a Jewish library may have been taken away from a private owner who purchased it from the institution's surplus books. Rarely do we find a book with the owner's details and a date of ownership close enough to World War II to point to the origins of its deprivation.

Over the years, the only real provenance information added to the National Library's catalog was for the manuscript collection. Unlike books, each manuscript is unique. At times, the scribe includes a few words about himself, and the following owners may add their own names to the first page. These details are added to the library catalog. Information about the origins of most of the library's archival collection is also known and appears in the catalog. In most cases, these are private archives that were donated by their creators or families. The only way to try and learn how a particular book arrived at the National Library is with the help of the library's old accession books. These large ledgers were compiled from 1936 until 1990. The library was receiving books at too fast a rate for the few catalogers to deal with. It was decided that before the full professional cataloging was done, a quick register of them would be made in order to be able to check whether a book existed in the library, even if it did not yet appear in the catalog because of the backlog.

Using the Accession Books

The information added for each item in the accession book included only the main details such as title, date of publication, acquisition information such as donation or purchase, and name of donor or supplier. Each book received a shelf number which identified the book. Different accession books were used for Hebrew and foreign language books.

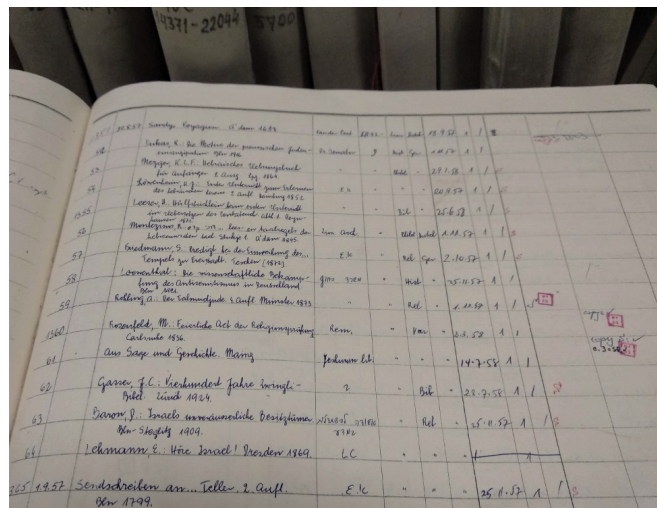


Figure 2: Page from 1957 foreign language accession book. © National Library of Israel, photograph by Daniel Lipson.

When a book arrived in the library, it was first searched for in the catalog. If the library already had a copy, and wanted to keep a second one, a note would be made both in the card catalog and in the accession book under the first copy's shelf number. A book that was new to the collection would first be registered in the accession book, receive its own shelf number, and, a few months later, a catalog card. This means that browsing through the years in the accession books will only show titles of books (or editions) that had not existed in the library before the year it was registered. There is no way to search for second copies. There are of course mistakes, some of which have been discovered, crossed through or edited.

From 1950 until the early 1970s, some of the donated books, scattered throughout the accession books, are marked with the letters OG (for Otzrot HaGolah) or the equivalent Hebrew letters. These markings were forgotten over time and even the few librarians who understood their meaning had very little need for them. In a rare case, if a question arose whether a certain book had been looted during the Holocaust, the letters OG in the accession books would hint to the answer. Quite often, books registered in the accession books were discovered months later to have already existed in the library's collection. In these cases, a note was added that the book was either sorted out of the library or added as a second copy to a previous accession book (and catalog) entry. This meant the shelf number given to the supposedly new book became obsolete. Other items had faded notes about being removed from the collection or being exchanged for copies in a better condition a few years later.

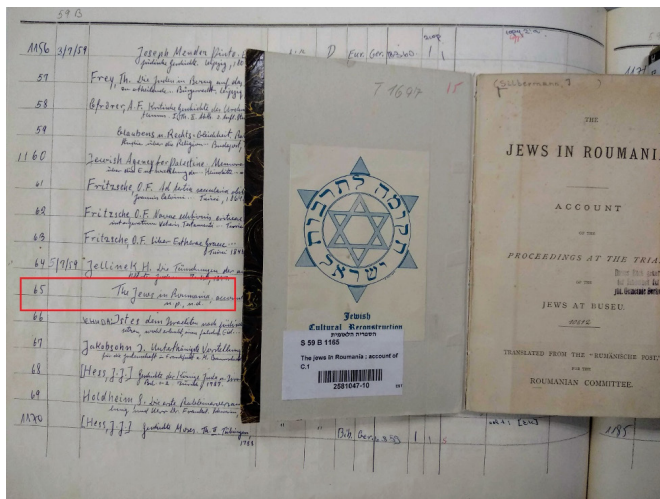


Figure 3: Accession book marking and corresponding item. © National Library of Israel, photograph by Daniel Lipson.

Provenance Research

In 2019, as part of a university thesis,¹⁴ and a first attempt to acknowledge the Washington Principles, I began collecting the books marked with OG in the accession books.¹⁵ At first, the aim was to find all these books, but when we realized that this would take much longer than the two years dedicated to the research project, it was decided to deal with the Jewish language books only. These include mainly Hebrew and Yiddish but also Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and books in Hebrew and other languages. The accession books register the books by year and after a while, in order to reduce the amount of work, I settled on the books that were registered during the first decade of the arrival of the OG books in Israel, namely 1950-1959.

The shelf numbers of OG books found were added to an ever-growing Excel sheet. It was hoped that the full catalog record of all the books could be extracted from the library's Alma system by using the shelf number list, but unfortunately this was not possible. The shelf number is not considered a unique identity and can only be searched for one at a time. I realized that we would need to collect each book's system number and began adding them to

the Excel sheet. During this process, it was surprising to discover that there were shelf numbers from the accession books that did not have corresponding system numbers in the online catalog. Further examination revealed that these books had been registered twice by mistake. When these and other mistakes were understood, the obsolete catalog records were deleted leaving the shelf number without a usable system number.

In some cases, the OG copy of a book was exchanged over time for a newer copy in better condition. The older book would be disposed of or donated to another library. For many years, the library saw these books like any other book in the collection regardless of their past. The special OG labels sometimes fell off or were lost when the books were rebound leaving no way to differentiate between them and other identical copies. Not all the library's staff were familiar with the labels and the books' history. Some books were eventually donated or sold as surplus copies. Needless to say, today there is far more awareness of the subject. Barcode stickers or old card envelopes partially obstructing the JCR labels stuck there by mistake are carefully being removed at the library's restoration lab and staff members are updating me about OG books being found around the library.

All in all, we collected 10.281 items discovered in the accession books. Because of the various mistakes and double registering done over the years, only 8.368 system numbers existed and were functional. The full catalog record of these system numbers was retrieved by the use of Oracle Analytics which is part of the Alma library management system. Certain library MARC fields that Oracle could not supply were added by the help of the MARC Edit library metadata tool. A new Excel sheet was created with all the record information gathered. This enabled me to perform some bibliometric analysis. Applying bibliographic data science on national library catalogs has been used before to discover historical trends in book printing sizes and languages.¹⁶ It is important to stress the fact though, that the data collected for our research project does not reflect the situation of the pre-war Jewish book industry as a whole and cannot be

14 Daniel Lipson: Abstract Of: From Nazi Germany to the Hebrew University: Reception of the "Diaspora Treasures" books at The National Library of Israel (Hebrew), 2021, https://www.academia.edu/68591767/Abstract_Of_From_Nazi_Germany_to_the_Hebrew_University_Reception_of_the_Diaspora_Treasures_books_at_The_National_Library_of_Israel, <09.08.2022>.

15 There is a similar provenance research project on Nazi-looted books in the Albert Einstein Library of the Heidelberg Centre for Jewish Studies, see: https://www.hfjs.eu/provenanceresearch/start_en.html, <09.08.2022>.

16 Leo Lahti et al.: Bibliographic Data Science and the History of the Book (c. 1500-1800), in: *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 57 (2019), No. 1, 5-23.

compared to other libraries. The data we collected only states the needs of the National Library of Israel during the years it dealt with the many looted books arriving from Europe. The library did not need all the books and only chose the ones missing from its collection or those being important for academic research or national culture and history.

Limitations of Using the Accession Books

By using both the Hebrew and foreign language accession books it is possible to compile lists of OG books. As we have seen not all the markings are correct and some of the books were removed from the collection over the years. Only the books that arrived as new titles or first copies (editions that had not yet existed in the library collections) were added as new records. Second copies are almost impossible to find and list. Obviously due to human error, mistakes were made, and not all of the data is complete and correct. Registering the books in the ledgers was considered a simple task and sometimes given to university students. Some mistakes were made due to misunderstanding the concept of the OG Diaspora Treasures. Several books marked with an OG were not looted in Europe at all but found and collected by an Israeli Rabbi who traveled to Morocco in the 1950s to help with the emigration process of Moroccan Jews. He brought back with him a number of books and sent them to the National Library only to be marked as OG by students who thought that any book from the Diaspora was to be considered a treasure.

Some books published immediately after the war also have been marked with an OG. The registrars should have noticed the date of publication but since some of these books had JCR labels in them, the mistake is understandable. Books like these were sent from Israel or the US to the displaced persons camps in Germany where they were used by Holocaust survivors. Some were later packed up and sent back to Israel together with looted books. All of them received the JCR label. Some books were marked with 'Poland' or 'Czechia', referring to the country they were sent from. Others were marked with 'Offenbach'. These books should be considered as OG books as well.

In the 1945 and 1946 accession books, among the books that do appear, there are 159 entries

with the marking 'Rhodes'. These books belonged to the Jewish Rabbinical College on the island of Rhodes and were discovered by Jewish soldiers serving in the British Army. Technically, they were not actually looted but they remained abandoned by their owners who had been deported to Auschwitz in 1944. The soldiers packed the books in old Luftwaffe ammunition crates and sent them to Jerusalem.¹⁷ These books are also Diaspora Treasures even though they are not marked OG. Some of them were probably already among the library's collection and as second copies would not receive their own entry in the accession books.

Several of the entries in the accession books have shorthand notes regarding the different copies of each book. These notes that quite often stretch far over their allowed space on the line deal with changes in the numbering of different copies. Today, many decades after they were written, some are no longer accurate, others difficult to understand or even illegible. This means that if a certain OG title has a few copies in the library, the only way to know which copy was salvaged after the war would be to go to the library stacks and search for all the copies hoping that the real OG copy will have a label. Not all copies are in the same place. Identifying the exact copy has yet been beyond the scope of our research.

Results

In correspondence with the Washington Principles and the Terezin Declaration, after compiling the list of OG books, we added a note to the books' records in the online catalog. The note reads:

"Some of the copies of this book were looted by the Nazis during the Holocaust and reached the National Library as part of the 'Diaspora Treasures' project."

If the exact copy is known or if there is only one copy (the OG copy) in the library, the note can be edited.

¹⁷ 'Anonymus': Rhodes Library for Mount Scopus, in: The Palestine Post, September 23rd 1945, 2.

| Details | |
|---------------|--|
| Title | Pirke aboth sprachlich und sachlich erläutert : nebst Angabe der variae lectiones nach gedruckten und ungedruckten Quellen / vorgelegt von Michael Cahn aus Rudesheim. |
| Publisher | Berlin : Benzian |
| Creation Date | 1875 |
| Notes | <p>This book was looted by the Nazis during the Holocaust and reached the National Library as part of the "Diaspora Treasures" project.</p> <p>ספר זה נבזז על ידי הנאצים בשואה והגיע לספרייה הלאומית בעזרת מפעל "אוצרות הגולה".</p> <p>With stamp of the Bibliothek der Jüdischen Gemeinde, Berlin Inaugural-Dissertation, Universität Strassburg.</p> |
| Extent | 65 pages 23 cm. |
| Language | German |
| System Number | 990019410260205171 |

Figure 3: Example of catalog record for OG book including provenance notes. © National Library of Israel, photograph by Daniel Lipson.

Words from this note are searchable, meaning that if one searches the catalog for the term “Diaspora Treasures”, among the results will be thousands of books looted by the Nazis now forming part of the National Library’s collection.

It is impossible to know how many OG books the National Library has. The accession books can help to identify most of them, but many will remain unaccounted for. We can roughly estimate that there are probably between 40.000 to 70.000 items in the library collections. These include not only books but also newspapers, manuscripts and even a few maps. We hope that we will be able to continue the research and add further identifying notes to our library catalog. This project has been the first large-scale attempt at provenance research at the National Library of Israel forming a possible basis for future research.

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Figure 4: © National Library of Israel, photograph by Daniel Lipson.

Reference

Daniel Lipson: Searching for Nazi-Looted Books at the National Library of Israel, in: *transfer – Zeitschrift für Provenienzforschung und Sammlungsgeschichte / Journal for Provenance Research and the History of Collection 1* (2022), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48640/tf.2022.1.91524>, 168-174.