

QUELLE

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A Story of Survival: Hebrew Manuscripts and Incunabula from the Saraval Collection in the Manuscriptorium - Digital Library of the Memoriae Mundi Series Bohemica Project

'Like the Dead Sea scrolls, like every book that has come down to us from the hands of distant readers, each of my books holds the history of its survival.'

Alberto Manguel, The Library at Night

One of the most important centers of the movement *Wissenschaft des Judentums* - the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau - opened its gates to its first students in 1854. At that point, the Seminary's library had already stored one of the most valuable collections of Judaica and Orientalia in Germany, i.e. the entire library of the famous bibliophile Leon Vita Saraval from Trieste, which had been obtained by the representatives of the Seminary several months before the inauguration. Due to a generous donation, that was bequeathed to the Seminary by its founder Jonas Fränckel¹, it became possible to purchase the unique collection, which consisted of 405 books, including 69 manuscripts and 6 incunabula². For eighty-four years of the Seminary's existence³, the Saraval collection was the centerpiece of the library, which grew significantly due to many private contributions, donations, and further purchases. The library shelves opened to the Seminary students the prosperous cultural world of German Jewry as well as the diverse Jewish European heritage that transcended particular national borders.

The library of the Breslau Seminary ceased to exist in 1938. During the Kristallnacht pogrom, in the wake of the cultural war waged on Jewish heritage by the Nazis, most of its collections were thrown onto the streets and destroyed. Those that survived were then transferred to Berlin and eventually seized by the Reich Main Security Office's (RSHA) library, where hundreds of plundered Jewish libraries and collections had been assembled. Presumably, parts of the Breslau collections were also moved to the Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question in Frankfurt am Main. The books stayed in Berlin and Frankfurt until 1943, when the Nazis evacuated looted collections to various places in Lower Silesia, Bohemia and the so-called Sudetenland. As a result of rather haphazard restitution efforts

¹ I am very grateful to Agnieszka Kagankiewicz and Aleksander Gleichgewicht from the Jewish Community of Wrocław for providing me with the copy of Fränckel's last Will and the Seminary's statute.

² The term 'Incunabulum' refers to a book printed before 1501.

³ For a comprehensive history of the Seminary see Seidel, Esther: The Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau (1854-1938), in: *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 38 (2005), I, pp. 133-144.

taken by several organizations in the immediate postwar period, and the territorial changes endorsed at the Yalta Conference, the dispersion of the Breslau library further proceeded. Nowadays, parts of the library can be found in Israel, USA, Switzerland, Mexico, Poland, and the Czech Republic.

Among the confiscated and dispersed books was also a part of the *Saraval Collection*. After evacuation from Berlin, it was probably housed in the castle of Niemes (now Czech Mimoň), which served as the RSHA's evacuation headquarter.⁴ In 1947-1948 this collection was transferred to the National Library of the Czech Republic in Prague, where it remained unidentified for many years. The first scholar who managed to ascertain the provenance of these documents was Benjamin Richler, the head of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in Jerusalem.⁵ Following the intuition of the French researcher Gérard Weil, who published his assumption in 1980⁶, and informed Richler about new Hebrew archival materials he had found in Prague, Richler identified several dozens of manuscripts and incunabula which had been originally bought by the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau from the family of Leon Vita Saraval.

The rediscovered collection consists of 40 rare pieces (including 34 manuscripts and 6 incunabula), which represent Jewish communities from Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. The oldest manuscript in the collection (a *Torah* with Aramaic translation, handwritten by scribe Israel ben David) was completed in 1284-85, and the most recent (*Ezer ha-Emunah* by Moses ha-Kohen of Tordesillas) - in 1833. The manuscripts cover a wide range of subjects from the Bible, Talmudic treatises and Rabbinic literature to Kabbalah sources, grammar, astronomy and poetry. They represent the main Jewish scribal traditions (the Sephardic, the Italian and the Ashkenazi) as well as the main types of Hebrew scripture (square, semi-cursive, and cursive). Many documents are decorated with painted illuminations and micrography.

The incunabula from the *Saraval Collection* belong to the finest examples of early printed books. All of them were printed in Italy, in the printing houses of Rome and Soncino. Three of the six incunabula in the collection are commentaries on the Hebrew Bible (among them *Perush ha-Torah* by Rashi, printed by the first Hebrew printers Obadiah, Manasseh and Benjamin of Rome, around 1470). The other three are first and second editions of two codes of Jewish law - *Arba'ah Turim* by Ya'akov ben Asher, and *Mishneh Torah* by Rambam.⁷

⁴ See Kennedy Grimsted, Patricia: A Silesian Crossroads for Europe's Displaced Books: Compensation or Prisoners of War?, pp.148-150, available at <http://socialhistory.org/sites/default/files/docs/silesian.pdf> [18.04.2015].

⁵ See Richler, Benjamin: Guide to Hebrew Manuscript Collections, Jerusalem 1994, pp. 24-26 and 213-217.

⁶ Weil, Gérard: Sur une bibliothèque systématiquement pillée par les Nazis: le catalogue des manuscrits et incunables retrouvés de la Bibliothek des Jüdisch-Theologischen Seminars in Breslau, in: Gérard/Nahon, Charles/Touati: Hommage à Georges Vajda; études d'histoire et de pensée juives, Louvain 1980, pp. 579-604.

⁷ For more detailed description of the Saraval Collection see Olga/Sixtová, Jerzy/Stankiewicz: Saraval Legacy. Catalogue of the exhibition, Prague 2004. Also see: David/ Loewinger, Bernard/Weinryb: Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Library of the Juedisch-Theologisches Seminar in Breslau, Wiesbaden 1965.

Richler's discovery, followed by several international conferences on which the issue of Jewish looted art had been discussed, aroused the interest of the Commission for Art Recovery, established in 1997 by American businessman and philanthropist Ronald Lauder, who in 2001 informed the Wrocław Jewish community about Breslau books stored in Prague.⁸ Despite several legal and historical objections with regard to the question whether the Jewish community of Wrocław should be regarded as a legal heir of the Breslau library, the three year long diplomatic negotiations with the government of the Czech Republic culminated in favour of Polish claimants. Finally, in December 2004, on the 150th anniversary of the inauguration of the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau, the *Saraval Collection* was transferred to Wrocław, where it resides in the University of Wrocław Library. From a geographical point of view the collection has come full circle, but on the symbolic level a completely new entity has been created. The *Saraval Collection* transformed from the cultural property of the concrete pre-war German community of Jewish inhabitants of Breslau into possession of the postwar Polish community of Wrocław Jews, who built their religious life in the same point on the map, yet not in the same city.

Before the items were delivered to Poland, the entire collection had been digitized within the framework of the *Memoriae Mundi Series Bohemica* (MMSB) project, which was launched in 1992 by the Czech National Library. The MMSB project is one of the initiatives developed as a part of *the Memory of the World* programme, directed by UNESCO. As described by Adolf Knott, the Director for Science, Research and International Cooperation at the National Library in Prague, who is in charge of the whole project, the MMSB focuses on "digital access to endangered documents as a method enabling to avoid their frequent direct use and accelerated deterioration".⁹

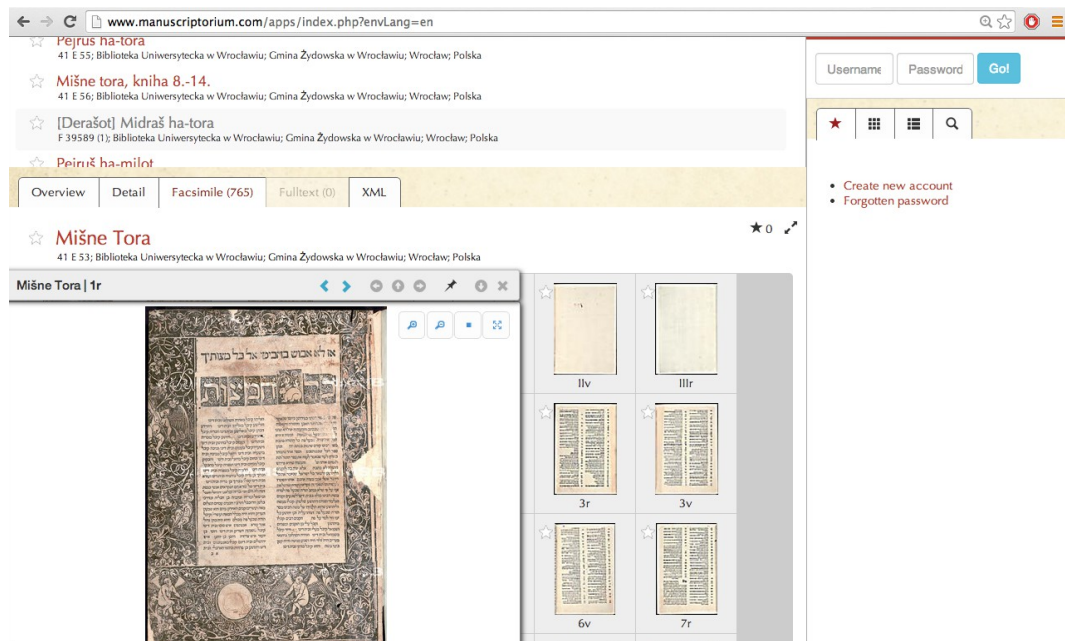
The Saraval collection can be accessed on the platform *Manuscriptorium* (www.manuscriptorium.com), which is the largest European digital library of written cultural heritage. By providing access to a great variety of manuscripts and rare old printed books from digital libraries all over the world, *Manuscriptorium* creates a virtual research environment which "enables ready access to concentrated information on historical resources via sophisticated search tools".¹⁰ Moreover, it seeks to connect digital libraries both within and outside of Europe as well as to gather all existing digital copies of relevant historical documents under the roof of one virtual library (nowadays, the platform stores about 85% of digitized materials from the national libraries in the old continent). This idea attracted numerous supporters. Currently, the platform is

⁸ Moreover, Lauder tracked another part of the Breslau library in the Russian archives in Moscow.

⁹ Knott, Adolf: Digital Access to Old Manuscripts in the Memoriae Mundi Series Bohemica Programme. A Short Overview, available at <http://digit.nkp.cz/knihcin/digit/vav23/TALIN.pdf> [20.07.2015].

¹⁰ See: <http://www.manuscriptorium.com/en/about-manuscriptorium> [20.07.2015].

financed also by the EU ENRICH project¹¹ and coordinated by the National Library of the Czech Republic together with two other Czech partners: AiP Beroun Ltd. and Crossczech Prague Inc. Among its many contributors could be found: Complutense University Library in Madrid (Spain - 2902 items), St. Trinity Sergiev Monastery in Sergiev Posad (Russia - 2668), Wrocław University Library (Poland - 1839), Cologne University Library (Germany - 1634), National Library of Italy in Florence (Italy - 1566), and National Library of Spain in Madrid (Spain - 1444).¹²



Picture 1: Moses ben Maimon (Rambam), *Mishne Torah* [printer Gershon ben Moses Soncino], Soncino, [5]250 (1490) code of Jewish law, second edition.

Source: <http://www.manuscriptorium.com/apps/index.php?envLang=en> [23.06.2015]

Manuscriptorium offers its users a great variety of documents - in terms of their provenance, date of origin, subject, language and type of material. The Saraval collection is only one of many available on the website. On the virtual shelves of the library, one may find for instance the famous Basagic's Collection of Islamic Manuscripts¹³ as well as the collection of manuscripts from the Romanian

¹¹ See: <http://enrich.manuscriptorium.com/> [15.08.2015].

¹² For the full list of *Manuscriptorium* partners see: <http://enrich.manuscriptorium.com/index.php?q=about> [20.07.2015].

¹³ The Basagic's Collection contains 284 manuscripts and 365 printed volumes of medieval Islamic scholarly literature and belles-lettres that portray a development of Islamic civilization from its commencement to the beginning of 20th century.

Batthyaneum Library, which includes medieval parchment manuscripts purchased from the Viennese Archbishop Christoph Migazzi.¹⁴ Judaica and Hebrew writings are also well represented, especially with regard to Central and Eastern Europe. Available documents offer a unique insight into the life of medieval and modern Jewish communities, movements and institutions. Many of them - like the Breslau Seminary itself - are still waiting for a comprehensive study.

Due to its singular structure, the platform provides readers not only with high-quality virtual copies of the archival materials, but also with a detailed and up-to-date bibliographic description of each document, which is delivered from the partner institutions. Usually the description consists of six sections (Identification, Heading, Physical Description, Content, History, and Bibliography) that are particularly helpful for historical-philological inquiry. Furthermore, *Manuscriptorium* enables readers to create their own library of various available documents and bring together manuscripts stored in different collections. This opportunity encourages manifold research perspectives, facilitates deeper understanding of the texts and reveals new possibilities for their interpretation. It is also of great importance for scholars dealing with comparative studies, who do not have to travel to get access to sources they need for their research.

Finally, *Manuscriptorium* is not only about facile access, and merits attention not solely due to its practical advantages, as probably the easiest way to gather archival pieces scattered around the world. As pinpointed by the case of the documents from the Breslau Seminary, *Manuscriptorium* also serves as a space of remembrance and commemoration. Nowadays, when the Saraval collection seems to be the only survivor of the tragic events that led to the destruction of the Jewish world of Breslau, and neither the Seminary nor Breslau itself still exists, this virtual platform seems to be the only place, where at least a part of the Breslau



Picture 2: Ebronot; illuminated Ashkenazic manuscript on paper, Germany (?), 18th century.

Source:

<http://www.manuscriptorium.com/apps/index.php?envLang=en>
[23.06.2015]

See: <http://v2.manuscriptorium.com/index.php?q=content/virtual-collection-arabic-manuscripts> [15.08.2015].

¹⁴For a more detailed description of the collection see: <http://v2.manuscriptorium.com/index.php?q=content/manuscripti-qui-theca-batthyanyana> [15.08.2015].

library¹⁵ could be built and preserved as a heritage of the Breslau Jews. As such, *Manuscriptorium* appears to be a fine ending to the postwar history of this collection; the ending, which indeed turns this history into a story of survival.

Quotation *Anna Kawalko: A Story of Survival: Hebrew Manuscripts and Incunabula from the Saraval Collection in the Manuscriptorium - Digital Library of the Memoriae Mundi Series Bohemica Project*, in: *Medaon – Magazin für jüdisches Leben in Forschung und Bildung*, 9 (2015), 17, S. 1–6, online unter http://www.medaon.de/pdf/medaon_17_Kawalko.pdf [dd.mm.yyyy].

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¹⁵ As far as I know, there are no plans of reassembling all dispersed books from the Breslau library as a whole through Manuscriptorium, since the platform is intended mainly for manuscripts and early prints.