

## **The Mosseri Collection: the challenges associated with acquiring a large manuscript archive.**

This paper will focus on the challenges associated with acquiring the Jacques Mosseri Collection of Genizah manuscripts on long-term loan at Cambridge University Library. I will begin by describing the discovery of the Mosseri Collection, its later disappearance, and the background to its arrival at Cambridge. I will then report on the present state of the Collection and some of the challenges involved in conserving, digitizing, describing, and providing access to a poorly preserved set of manuscripts within the time constraints of the current project. Finally, I have managed to track down some of the manuscripts that Jacques Mosseri himself described as the treasures of the Collection. I hope you will see that, in spite of the difficulties, there is much to be excited about.

Jewish custom dictates that worn-out or defunct copies of the Bible must not be destroyed but, rather, should be stored in a Genizah and later buried. For reasons unknown, the Jewish communities of Old Cairo not only placed all manner of written material in the Genizah of the Ben Ezra Synagogue, they also left it to accumulate there over a millennium. This manuscript storehouse whose entrance you can see here [**slide 2**], was emptied piecemeal by scholars and collectors in the late nineteenth century until 1896, when the discovery of a Hebrew version of Ben Sira led the Cambridge scholar, Solomon Schechter, to Cairo in search of similar treasures.

During his stay in Cairo, Schechter befriended the Chief Rabbi, Raphael Ben Shim'on (seen here on the right, [**slide 3**]) and members of the leading Cairo Jewish families, including the Cattauis and Mosseris who were instrumental in helping Schechter gain permission to remove most of the material from the Genizah. The picture on the left is Yacoub Cattau Bey, the founder of a dynasty based on banking and real estate. The Cattauis played a prominent role in Egyptian politics and commerce, and members of the family were accorded the honorary title of 'Pasha'. Here is a picture of the grand Cattau Villa in Cairo [**slide 4**].

The Cattauis and Mosseris were the leading members of the Jewish community in Cairo up until the first quarter of the twentieth century [**slide 5**]. They sent their children to be educated in European Universities and thus it can only be supposed that the Cattauis and Mosseri's supported Schechter in the hope of forging stronger connections to prestigious institutions like Cambridge.

The Mosseris and the Cattauis were also related by marriage. Elana Cattauis, daughter of Yacoub, married Nessim Bey Mosseri, the founder of the J. N. Mosseri bank [**slide 6**]. Elena and Nessim had 12 children, including Jacques who was born in 1884. The Mosseri brothers founded a second bank [**slide 7**]. But Jacques, having grown up in the atmosphere of the Genizah discovery and the exploits of Solomon Schechter, was equally fascinated by Jewish history.

In 1909 Jacques Mosseri together with Raymond Weill visited the Genizah and Bassatine cemetery at the request of Israel Lévi [**slide 8**]. In an article in JQR,

Mosseri wrote, “we found out that there still existed a few documents in the Ghenizah at Old Cairo, which was thought to have been utterly ransacked.” Mosseri continued to search for manuscripts between the years 1910 and 1912 together with Prof. Gottheil, Raymond Weill, and Bernard Chapira, which he reported “led to the complete emptying of the Ghenizot, and to further discoveries both at Bassatine and at Old Cairo.” After receiving help from a government minister and the local *Chammas* they located and unearthed fragments which had been thrown out and buried in the ground when the roof of the synagogue was pulled down in the early nineteenth century.

The resulting manuscript Collection is probably in excess of 6000 manuscripts [slide 9]. These include about 1000 biblical fragments, and 2000 documentary items from both the classical Genizah period and the modern period of Egyptian Jewry. Most of the genres typical of the T-S Collection, like letters, medicine, and poetry are found here too.

During the twelve months after they collected the material, Bernard Chapira (a French librarian, scholar and art collector) set to work compiling a catalogue. Unfortunately, the Chapira catalogue was never published and it remains missing to this day. Jacques Mosseri died in 1934 and his collection of manuscripts remained in the possession of his widow, Rachel née Brill in her home in Paris. For reasons unknown, she did not dispose of the Collection nor did she grant anyone access to it.

In 1970 she met with Israel Adler, the former director of the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem, while on a visit to Israel. He managed to persuade her (a friend of Adler’s tells me that she was won over by bouquet of violets) to allow him to microfilm the collection. She granted him access to the manuscripts for ten days.

The manuscripts were kept in bundles according to Chapira’s classifications and stored in a crate. In just ten days Adler managed to assign 5000 call numbers to the manuscripts based on Chapira’s system, he sorted them into acid free folders and boxes and microfilmed them.

Here is an example of one of the microfilms [slide 10]. I’ve chosen one of the worst ones for you to keep in mind when I discuss the difficulties involved in caring for the Collection but, on the whole, given the difficult circumstances under which it was produced, the microfilm was well executed and provided scholars with their first proper access to the material. A catalogue in Hebrew edited by the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts with the collaboration of numerous specialists, was compiled on the basis of the microfilm. This, too, was an impressive achievement given the limitations of the microfilm.

Recently, the Mosseri family, wanting to honour their father’s treasure, had to reach a decision regarding its future. They realised that without proper conservation and storage facilities, the material was further deteriorating. Jacques Mosseri’s own wish was for his collection to be housed in Jerusalem. But his children, based on the bitter experiences of their family at the hands of the Egyptian Government, were worried

about letting the material go to an area they feel is fraught with uncertainty. Thus, in consultation with Professor Stefan Reif, the founding director of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, they forged a plan to bring the collection to Cambridge on loan for 20 years. During this time, the material will be conserved, digitized and described by experts already well acquainted with Genizah material until a pre-selected panel of curators will meet to review the situation and discuss its future home.

The T-S Genizah Unit has received some funds from the Mosseri family to conserve the collection as well as an award from the British Library's Endangered Archives fund to digitize and describe the Collection and to make it available to scholars. The Unit is required to provide a thousand images and descriptions within 18 months.

At first glance, this process seems straightforward. The Mosseri manuscripts are housed in boxes according to their primary classmark (Mosseri I-Xa). Each box contains paper files in which the manuscripts are stored according to a secondary, individual classmark (e.g., Mosseri I, 20). Each paper file may contain more than one manuscript (Mosseri I, 21, 1–3, for example). Thus far, the Collection is fairly organized.

But a certain amount of preliminary conservation work on each piece is necessary before the fragment can be digitized. Once a digital image has been produced, the fragment can be returned for final conservation. However, before the first stage has been reached, the conservation team have encountered a few problems. Firstly, in order to rehouse the fragments correctly, the proper orientation of the Hebrew manuscript will have to be determined by specialists in conservation who are unfamiliar with Hebrew script. Secondly, individual classmarks are not indicated. Thus, where a paper file is labeled Mosseri I, 21, 1–3, there is no way of knowing which of the three manuscripts is which without recourse to the Hebrew catalogue and microfilm. A number of boxes, particularly those labeled IXa and Xa, contain an assortment of fragments under one classmark. Here you can see the before picture and here you can see where I managed to sort them by physically comparing them to the microfilm [**slides 11–12**].

The next great challenge is the state of the material itself. A thousand years of gathering dust followed by nearly a century in uncontrolled environments has taken its toll. Here are some of the worst cases prepared for exhibition by the conservator assigned to preserve the Collection, Ngaio Vince-Dewerse. The first are examples of distorted, degraded and brittle parchment manuscripts [**slide 13**], the second includes manuscripts that are fragile and broken [**slide 14**] and the third example is of texts that have stuck together [**slide 15**].

In the next few slides you can see some of the time consuming labour involved and its results: [**slide 16**] a badly cockled parchment manuscript being humidified; [**slide 17**] after humidification a piece of writing by Halfon b. Menashe reveals itself; [**slide 18**] a dirty manuscript before conservation, and [**slide 19**] the manuscript is clean.

Once cleaned and flattened, the manuscripts will be placed in a melinex pocket and bound in a book in accordance with techniques pioneered on the T-S Collection. Melinex offers an excellent storage solution given its inert properties and the fact that it keeps the manuscript in place while allowing flexibility for the reader.

However, one unexpected challenge that has presented itself is the issue of the sewn structures. In dealing with the mass of material in the T-S Collection, structures such as the one you see on the screen were often dismantled and their bifolia bound separately in melinex **[slide 20]**. This was done to protect fragile objects from readers' hands and to allow better access to the manuscripts contents. Yet, good conservation practice now dictates that repairs to manuscripts should be reversible. Alongside this idea, is a growing scholarly interest in the object itself. The Genizah preserves rare examples of sewn structures which provide invaluable evidence for the history of book production **[slides 21–22]**

This example of a structure was brought to my attention by Ngaio **[slide 23]**. It is an unusual binding in a late codex (possibly 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century) that contains prayers, piyyutim and rituals for burying the dead.

Much work has been done on the study of Hebrew codicology, but little attention has been paid to sewn structures. One of the foremost scholars of medieval bookbinding, J. A. Szirmai, writes of the Cairo Genizah: "It is highly regrettable that virtually no effort has been made so far to explore this rich source of early binding structures."

Yet how do we preserve the structures so that scholars may study their contents while keeping them intact? Should we record the object digitally before dismantling it and make those images available to scholars of the codex or should we preserve the object in one piece and allow scholars of textual studies to look only at images of the contents? Should we use the Mosseri Collection to forge creative methods of conservation or should we treat it conservatively given that it is only on loan to us?

But allow me to end by giving you a taste of some of the treasures in the Mosseri Collection. These are treasures that were first announced by Jacques Mosseri himself in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* of 1912. They have not been seen since early last century.

A bifolium from Maimonides famous philosophical work, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, *Moreh Nevukim*, in his own hand **[slide 24]**.

An introduction to the Talmud by Samuel ben Hofni HaGaon **[slide 25]**.

Fragments from Saadiah Gaon's *Sefer ha-Galui* **[slides 26-27]**.

And last but definitely not least is a document that was first noticed and brought to my attention by Jan Coleby, the conservator in charge of documenting the Mosseri Collection. I confess that it gave me something of a "Schechter moment" as I told Jan and Ngaio in haste and great excitement not to speak to anyone about the matter until I made the matter known here today! Here it is: a letter from Nehemiah Gaon ben

Gaon Kohen Zedeq with his personal seal still intact [slides 28-30].

First a word about the document: its author had set himself up as Gaon of the Academy of Pumbedita in challenge to the existing Gaon, Aharon ha-Kohen ben Yosef (also known as Kalaf ben Sarjada). The letter is a polemical piece about his rival. This rebellion is also recorded in Sherira Gaon's *Iggeret*. This makes the fact that he has used a seal calling himself Gaon even more remarkable!

You are seeing his seal for the first time in over eighty years. Benjamin Lewin was given access to some Mosseri fragments and published it in 1921. He and Shaul Shaked incorrectly described the manuscript as belonging to the Chapira Collection. The microfilm of Nehemiah Gaon's letter only reveals a blank circle where the seal sits, thus subsequent scholars interested in the contents of the letter have had to trust Lewin's account of it.

This seal is a rare object. Caliph Omar 634–44 prohibited the use of personal seals for Jews and Christians. Only the Exilarchs (the heads of the Jews in exile) and the Gaonim (the heads of the leading Jewish academies) were allowed seals. The Exilarch seal was engraved with a fly and Hai ben Sherira Gaon at Pumbedita 998-1038 is known to have had a seal with a lion. But none of these seals have survived. Most of the surviving Jewish seals come from Europe and date from the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Here you can see how it was made: the matrix was probably composed of wax mixed with hair (this combination is attested in medieval Jewish seals from Europe). The pigment for red seals like this one was vermillion. The matrix is attached with a cord of parchment or leather through a slit in the paper. Daniel Friedenberg in his work on Jewish seals reports two methods for affixing a seal: an early method was to cut a slit in the parchment and allow the hot wax to ooze through. Later seals were attached to a strip of paper which was then attached to the main document. But here we have unique evidence of a seal from the 10<sup>th</sup> century which is attached to a piece of paper which is then attached to the main paper with a slit through the back and threaded through.

Benjamin Lewin transcribed Nehemiah's seal as: Nehemiah Gaon ben Gaon. Yet, looking at it with the aid of digital photography, I can see that there is another word at the end. Unfortunately the letters are both indistinct and badly formed (possibly the result of a non-Jewish engraver). But it seems to me that the letters must read Nehemiah's father's name: Kohen. I tried to see if I could discern the letters of the abbreviations to indicate that the father was dead (he died in 934 and this letter had to be written after Nehemiah's rival's accession in 943, but before Nehemiah's own true leadership in 960), but I could not see the expected letters *nun ayin* or *zayin lamed* or *zayin tsade lamed*.

And this is where we will leave the Mosseri Collection with a vision of future scholars pouring over digital images, perhaps like me looking at them obsessively in the middle of the night!