

# Not the Work of a Day

by Robert Singerman

Arriving here from the Klau Library at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, in May, 1979, with a solid background of polyglot cataloging experience with a variety of sacred and profane languages and a rather well-honed grasp of book selection techniques gained from my nine years of service beginning in 1970 at one of the world's greatest Jewish libraries, I was handed the key to Room 18 of Library East (now the Systems Office) and given my terse job assignment by my hiring supervisor, Max Willocks, "It is a rough stone-polish it!"

So began my 27-year career building the Price Library of Judaica from a starting line of roughly 24,000 unprocessed volumes drawn from the Leonard C. Mishkin and Shlomo Marenof personal libraries (both had been acquired, unpacked, and sorted prior to my arrival), to over 85,000 fully cataloged volumes today. In the summer of 1979, the opportunity to purchase the entire inventory of Bernard Morgenstern's used Lower East Side Jewish bookstore in New York City presented itself, I responded unhesitatingly in a flash, and this dusty accumulation came to Gainesville to yield the third of our core collections, still recalled with fondness as the 3-M collections. Thus, in the summer of 1979, a veritable mountain of around 30,000, plus or minus, uncataloged books, pamphlets, and periodicals, many of them exceedingly fragile and scarce, beckoned my ascent. Likewise, very fundamental decisions and work plan strategies for organizing, cataloging, collection development, preservation, and binding had to be launched and this effort would be successful, I decided very early on, only through coalition building with Acquisitions, Cataloging, and Binding, each of these technical service units being very cooperative partners to this day. There was also the perplexing challenge of how to maintain the service hours of a separately-housed circulating library singlehandedly with no budgeted support staff at this early time.

I somehow survived, even thrived, some might say, with assistance coming from Yael Herbsman, a faculty spouse and a trained Israeli librarian, pitching in, initially, as a temporary hire, then students and elderly volunteer ladies recruited from the Gainesville Jewish community. There were also budgets to be spent--and spend I did--it was difficult in the extreme to know with any certainty what we really owned though initially, a semblance of bibliographical control was imposed through the typing of temporary slips while the Hebrew and Yiddish materials lent themselves to sorting and alphabetizing by title. My initial goal was to have the collection fully cataloged in ten years but this projection, foolhardy as it was, did not take into consideration the rather high percentage of our materials requiring original, in-house cataloging and/or the editing, with upgrading, of shared, sometimes mediocre, cataloging records input by other libraries.

Moving beyond the crawling stage and infancy, the unorganized collection that greeted me in 1979 passed thru the troubled teenage years with two moves of the entire Price Library of Judaica collection. The polished stone is now the well-stocked functioning library it is today, nurtured and enriched by state funds (ah yes, the budgetary cycles of the fat and lean years!) and the endowment providently created by Jack and Sam Price in honor of their parents, Isser and Rae Price. A public dedication of the Price Library of Judaica followed in 1981, and to maintain

that momentum, I struggled to create and fill a library newsletter mailed out on a list of over 5,000 names, also of my creation (this newsletter, of which eight numbers were issued, would be absorbed by Amudim, published by UF's Center for Jewish Studies since 1986). The faculty encouraged the students, the students told their friends, visitors told other friends, and over time, the library and its circulating collection came to be known as an exceedingly valuable resource serving not only Gainesville but also readers nationally and internationally through interlibrary loan. The contributions of my four successive Library Technical Assistants should be properly acknowledged in this space: Yael Herbsman, Joy Funk, Carole Bird, and Emily Madden. Gazing now over a somewhat mature library of considerable scope and research-quality depth--I would consider it a legacy collection--this writer is prompted to reflect, much in the style of a wilted Biblical chronicle, "It flourished, and it was good."

Successful business relationships would be formed over the years with booksellers, both domestic and foreign, since these colleagues are logically the librarian's ideal partner in stocking the library shelves, certainly in the filling of gaps by servicing desiderata lists, and by their personal involvement such as developing special offers and raising the bibliographer's awareness with collecting insights about the marketplace. Much of this activity has since migrated to the online bookseller search engines like abebooks.com or, increasingly, e-mailed lists have supplanted dealer catalogs ranging from downright pathetic stenciled sheets on cheap paper to the nicely printed glossy ones with illustrations dispatched in the mail. When the mail brought in the daily harvest of catalogs, the competitive race with other libraries and collectors was on to place my order first! A working partnership might also be developed from time to time with a favored antiquarian book dealer who was invited to search our online catalog before developing a custom-made offer of titles not already owned. Although there was typically more work devolving on the bibliographer, I always resisted establishing an Israeli approval plan, relying instead on my own book selections, with invited help from our faculty in the area of Hebrew belles-lettres.

Starting out with our splendid 3-M core collections, no additional major collections were sought after 1979, though portions of scholarly libraries might come our way as gifts (the Theodor Gaster library) or as selected purchases from retiring professors at institutions out-of-state (Menahem Mansoor, Zvulun Ravid) or yet another walk-in bookstore closing in New York (Feldheim's, down the street from Bernard Morgenstern's former store on East Broadway). From the outset, I solicited free periodical and newsletter subscriptions whenever I could, also published lecture series, working papers, and anniversary books from a wide variety of academic centers, Jewish institutions and communal agencies, federations, synagogues, or directly from authors of memoirs and books of local Jewish history interest. An enormous amount of "here today, gone tomorrow" ephemeral pamphlets were gathered in all of these years. Rising book prices coupled with my perceived explosion in Jewish publishing at home and abroad, on the other hand, now demands an even greater selectivity with respect to purchases of new (and old) books. It has become a severe challenge for us to remain current with our acquisitions and to nurture our paid periodical subscriptions in the midst of repeated library-wide serial cancellation projects.

Knowing that academic programs are not static and that new faculty will generally have unanticipated demands and needs, this bibliographer was continually challenged by nagging

questions with long-term implications--Am I buying too much in Hebrew from Israel? Should I buy less or more Yiddish? What about primary sources for the graduate program? If there is no sustained program in Jewish music here, to what extent should Jewish music be purchased, either by me or the Music Library? Dare I ignore emerging electronic resources and audio-visual formats to complement the print collection? With a \$1000 to spend, should it be deployed for out-of-print books that aren't likely to be available (or affordable!) years from now, or do I buy an equal amount of new releases, these the books touted and reviewed in the Jewish press today and likely to be requested? For the same \$1000, should I buy a single rarity for the treasure room, or twenty books or videos at \$50 each for the circulating collections? The analogy of adjusting the hot and cold water faucet seems quite appropriate in this context. With my retirement looming on the horizon in June, 2006, a new bibliographer coming on board armed with his or her fresh set of operating assumptions, biases, values, intuitions, and knowledge of Jewish Studies research trends and publishing patterns, as well as the local needs on campus, will revisit all of these challenging questions, hopefully with better budgets in place.

In any event, the foundation for sustained growth is remarkably on very solid ground. Collection highlights range from Jewish history in all countries on all continents, with German-Jewish intellectual and community history and the Latin American Jewish communities a focused strength. Additional areas nurtured over the years include demographic reports of Jewish communities, memorial books, Polish Jewry, Sephardic Jewry and Jews in Muslim lands, Jewish-Arab relations, Zionism and histories of Jewish movements and organizations, rabbinical biography, the pre-1948 yishuv in Palestine, Hebrew literary criticism, Festschriften, bibliography and, of course, the ubiquitous pamphlets, sometimes referred to as "gray literature," transecting all aspects of the Jewish experience. As for our sets and files of periodicals (slightly over 500 titles are received on a current basis today), a great many of these are not owned anywhere else in Florida or, for that matter, in the entire southeastern United States.

In closing, I endured and grew stronger, I managed in my characteristically undistracted, systematic way to remain active as a widely-published Judaica bibliographer, and the library legacy I leave behind for future generations of faculty and students remains intact and not dispersed. My motto--a deceptively simple one--is this: "All work done today is cumulative."