

## Thirty Years of The Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit

“A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral.”  
Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *Flight to Arras*

Rebecca Jefferson

The Cairo Genizah has been blessed with the attention of three men of vision and, like their kingly namesake, wisdom. The first, Solomon Schechter, in May 1896, held a scrap of paper in his hand, saw within it a storehouse of treasures, and set about recovering a cultural heritage. The second, Shelomo Dov Goitein, in the summer of 1958, looked into boxes of Genizah fragments, saw among their dusty inmates a vital society, and brought it vividly to life in five books. The third Solomon, Stefan Reif, appointed to care for the Genizah Collection in 1973, looked upon his heavy burden, saw a future of learning, and created a world-class centre of research. These three men with their imagination and verve have, each in their own way, animated a cast of hundreds to see the potential in a pile of old papers known as the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection. Much has been written about the early days of Genizah research, but it is the history of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit that will form the focus of this essay in honour of the man who created it: Professor Stefan Reif.

Since Solomon Schechter’s time, eighty thousand Genizah fragments remained in Cambridge University Library unexamined. In 1927, the Librarian wrote, “there is nothing of interest or value left. The late librarian would not allow anything to be destroyed, which is the only reason why they were not burned years ago.” However, in January 1973, following the resignation of Dr Henry Knopf, the University advertised for an Assistant Under-Librarian “to be responsible for the cataloguing and arrangement of the Taylor-Schechter collection of Hebrew fragments from the Cairo Genizah.” The appointment of Dr Stefan Reif was made in March 1973, but soon after his arrival in September, Reif began to formulate other ideas.

From the outset, Reif recommended “the rejection of past methods which had achieved only piecemeal progress and the adoption of a fully comprehensive programme, planned from scratch in considerable detail.” In his first annual report, he outlined his proposed ten-year project. This project would include conserving the material, improving accessibility, increasing the numbers working on the collection, producing bibliographical aids, implementing a research programme, and producing material for both scholars and laymen.

The Library Syndicate and the Faculty Board of Oriental Studies sponsored the plan and a major fund was received from the Leverhulme Trust for two full-time research assistants and one part-time Visiting Research Associate. Reif found other small funds for conservation and publications. A professor from America was so excited by Reif's ideas that he wrote a warm letter of support, enclosing \$10!

A mere two months into his appointment, Reif arranged an exhibition of forty Genizah fragments that was announced in the *Jewish Chronicle*. Next, he produced *A Guide to the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection* in order to generate wider interest in the collection. The Guide captured the romance of the Genizah discovery: "The interior was dark, parchment crumbled underfoot, and whenever Schechter rummaged among the contents clouds of dust arose and threatened to suffocate him" combined with realism: "the opportunities for research offered by this unique collection are vast, and only the development of a suitable centre for Genizah research could properly ensure the full and satisfactory exploitation of the material." Furthermore, Reif's booklet formed the first proper outline of the contents of the 140,000 Genizah fragments.

Early in 1974, the Library Syndicate agreed to the establishment of a 'Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit' with Reif as its Director. Malcolm C. Davis, a graduate of Oxford, was appointed to catalogue the biblical material; Simon A. Hopkins, from London, was hired to work on the bibliography, and Dr Ernest Wiesenberg, of University College London, set to work on the rabbinic material. By this time, Reif had compiled 5000 entries for his bibliography project and commenced sorting the remaining unclassified material. He approached other institutions with Genizah material to ask them to supply microfilms to aid the Unit's research and ensured that the process of conservation and microfilming gathered pace. Meanwhile, Reif acquainted himself with librarianship, advised other departments, welcomed visitors, carried out his own secretarial work, issuing 500 copies of the Guide; taught, supervised and researched! By the end of that year, the Library Syndicate's Annual Report recorded that, "Dr S. C. Reif, who joined the Library in September ... has achieved a great success in a short time ... in respect of this vitally important collection of Hebrew fragments."

In his second year, Reif organised the transfer of 60,000 fragments into 225 boxes according to subject matter. All the material had now been classified in some way. A weekly staff seminar was held to read texts and discuss the material. Again, the Annual Report for 1974-

1975 abounds with events, so much so that its author reports that, “the time taken to meet all the responsibilities which I have undertaken is greatly in excess of my official hours of work.”

Year three brought more staff. A number of Visiting Research Associates joined part-time: Professor Shirley Lund, of Boston University, came on a joint project to catalogue targumic fragments; Professor Shelomo Morag, of the Hebrew University, used his sabbatical year to prepare a catalogue of vocalised talmudic fragments, and Amitai Spitzer, from Jerusalem, was hired part-time to help Hopkins with the bibliography.

The year 1976 saw another significant addition. With their two children, Tanya and Aryeh, now at school, the Director’s wife, Shulie Reif, joined the Unit as a researcher. From that year on, Shulie Reif was to become as closely identified with the Genizah story as her husband. Forming a rare husband-wife team, they served to encourage each other. In an interview for CAM, Reif wrote, “As you might imagine, I’m not tolerant of people who don’t work hard; neither is Shulie. We both like to get on with things.”

This year also witnessed the establishment of the ‘Cambridge University Library Genizah Series’ with plans by Reif to produce an initial seven volumes. Reif also reported that conservation had come on so fast, the microfilming department could not keep up. But not everything was a success story: funding the Unit remained an uphill struggle. Major institutions like the British Academy were still unresponsive to Reif’s applications.

Yet his efforts did not go unnoticed. The Library Syndicate’s Annual Report again had a special entry for the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection: “All aspects of this work, ranging from the conservation of fragments ... to the production of catalogues and bibliographical aids, have notably progressed under the energetic efforts of Dr Reif.”

A year later, in 1977, Dr Avihai Shvitzel, already a lecturer in the Oriental Faculty, joined the Unit full-time to help with the bibliography. By now the Unit had eleven members of staff. Meir Persoff in a report for the Jewish Chronicle observed, “the atmosphere still exudes vibrancy and verve. No one knows for sure just when the next great literary find might be made ... Rabbi Wiesenberg meticulously checks and re-checks fragment after fragment in the hope of marrying one just found with another ... Dr Reif’s own researches are interrupted as one of his assistants rushes in, seeking clarification ... Eyebrows are raised, tension mounts ... will cherished theories be thrown to the wind as a centuries-old fragment appears to contradict a modern text?”

In March, Hopkins completed the first catalogue entitled *A Miscellany of Literary Pieces from the Cambridge Genizah Collections*. The Unit was becoming known and visits to see the collection were arranged. The Guide was reprinted in 500 copies and issued to potential donors. Yet Reif's vision was not limited to present-day concerns. At the end of his 1976-77 report, he writes, "If, as far as the Taylor-Schechter Collection is concerned, a return to the neglect of the past is to be avoided, some thought should certainly soon be given to the structure envisaged for this department five years hence."

Hopkins left the Unit in May 1978 having gained a post at Cape Town University, and in his place came Dr Paul B. Fenton from the Sorbonne. Davis was making "rapid" progress with the catalogue of Bible fragments. To raise more funds, Reif and Raphael Levy, a grand-nephew of Solomon Schechter, wrote *A Priceless Collection. The Taylor-Schechter Genizah Fragments at the University of Cambridge. The Facts ...* This pamphlet, described by Goitein as "a masterpiece of conciseness" informed the potential donor that, "an exciting educational potential ... remains unrealised." It concluded with a summary of maintenance costs and what certain amounts could achieve. Three thousand copies were printed and issued.

Word about the Unit was getting out: a radio producer from the Israeli Broadcasting Company came to record a programme about the collection and a fund-raising dinner was held at the Chief Rabbi's home. At last the Unit attracted grants from the British Academy and St John's College. In that year too, Prince Phillip visited the Library and was shown some Genizah fragments. It was a publicity boon and Reif shrewdly included a photo in the new pamphlet.

By January 1979, another two researchers, Dr Eleazar Gutwirth and Deborah Patterson, had joined the team. Avihai Shvitiel left to take up a post in the Ben Gurion University of the Negev and Professor David Tene came on sabbatical in his place. A second volume in Reif's 'Genizah Series', Davis' *Cambridge Genizah Hebrew Bible Manuscripts*, was published and acclaimed. More publicity material was generated, including postcards and correspondence cards with photographs of the fragments. Reif's annual report records that 245 visitors saw the Genizah collection. More attention was received from the media: The Times newspaper published an article, a local television network made a short film, and Reif was interviewed on BBC Radio 2 and BBC World Service.

Acquiring funds for the Unit still remained the most difficult task. Major bodies like the Leverhulme Trust had funding policies to limit the life of any one project. Thus, by end of the

1970's, the Unit was forced to lose Davis and Spitzer and the pressure remained on Reif to secure funds for the others.

Nevertheless, throughout 1979-1980, the Unit had between 13-14 members of staff, including Davis part-time before his move to the University of Leeds, conservation staff, and visiting scholars, Professor Joseph Yahalom and Professor Jacob Sussman, from the Hebrew University. Microfilming was completed and Yahalom prepared a catalogue of vocalised Palestinian liturgical poetry. Cambridge University Press took over printing the 'Genizah Series', an event that left Reif to wonder "whether this will yield anything other than the absurd increases just made in the prices of the volumes." Outside attention continued to increase: visits were received from the Chief Rabbi, the Ambassador of Israel, and a Government minister nearly came but, according to Reif, "was prevented from doing so at the last minute by a three-line whip"!

In April 1981, the Unit's newsletter, *Genizah Fragments*, made its debut. Over a thousand copies were issued to scholars and general readers alike and a mailing list was instituted that would eventually bear several thousand names. The new Librarian, Fred Ratcliffe, wrote in the newsletter, "What was always suspected to be potentially of great value to scholarship is now emerging as one of the most significant collections of research materials in Cambridge University." On the 14th December, 1981, the last fragment to be conserved was placed in its 'Melinex' pocket, representing a massive achievement. In eight years, 100,000 fragments had been conserved. But by the end of the year, the St John's College grant was exhausted and with that came the departure of Eleazar Gutwirth and Deborah Patterson.

The following year, Dr Penelope Johnstone was sponsored by the Wellcome Foundation to research the medical fragments, and joint research projects were conducted with Professors Fleischer, Sussman, Tene, Yahalom, Groner, Lund and Hopkins. All the data for the bibliography had been gathered. That year, records Reif, was a difficult one for funds. Perversely, the success of the conservation project meant a drop in the interest level of the donors. Nevertheless, the Library Syndicate found reason to offer praise: "The Taylor-Schechter Genizah Unit continues to present an outstanding 'success story' and it is difficult to do justice to it in the narrow confines of this report ... The importance of the considerable personal contribution of the Director cannot be overstated. His fund-raising ability complements in an

unusual way the scholarship which he has brought to bear on this exceptionally important and for long neglected collection.”

Later that year, Paul Fenton gained a post at Lyon University, and Penelope Johnstone left for Oxford. A young doctoral student in semitic languages, Geoffrey Khan, was put to work on the bibliography and a retired medical practitioner, Dr Haskell Isaacs brought specialised knowledge to bear on the medical project. The Unit’s work continued to attract important visitors, including the US Ambassador, Mr J. J. Louis, and the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Coggan, to name just two of the 351 visitors recorded that year. A film about the collection was made for America’s NBC to be televised in the major American cities for one hour on the 27th March, 1983. The programme eventually won an ‘Angel Award’ in Los Angeles for the best production in the ‘Religion in Media’ category.

The year 1982-1983 brought voluntary assistance in the shape of Dr Menahem Ben-Sasson and Mr Oded Irsay. Geoffrey Khan began identifying manuscripts in Arabic script and further funds were received from the Wellcome Trust. In its annual report of 1983, the Library Syndicate observed that, “The driving force behind all this [success] was the Director, Dr Reif.”

In the following year, 1983-1984, the Unit was merged with the Near and Far Eastern sections into a newly created Library division, the Department of Oriental and Other Languages, with Reif at its head. That same year, Reif reported an event hard to imagine in our technological age: “A computer terminal was installed in the Unit”, and in the newsletter he recorded, “I was recently able to take advantage of this new element of mechanization.”

Unexpectedly, the publicity provided by the NBC film was bringing a stream of casual visitors that could not be catered for. Funding was reduced that year but, undaunted, Reif envisaged a new initiative “to be conducted on an international scale” encouraging other institutions to become involved in joint projects. By April 1985, the Chairman of the Library Syndicate, Derek Brewer, observed that, “The whole enterprise is a model of what can be done by energetic direction.”

In the year 1985-1986, the world of Genizah research lost a major scholar, Shelomo Dov Goitein. At the same time, more people saw the collection than ever before, including visitors as diverse as the Dean of the Syrian Ba’athist Party’s Higher Institute for Political Science, the Mayor of Ashkelon, and a TV producer. These were busy times. Dr Maaravi Perez of Bar-Ilan University came for a year to compile a hand-list of Judaeo-Arabic material; Khan prepared

descriptions for a catalogue of Arabic legal documents; Isaacs identified yet more *material medica*; Mrs Reif prepared the Bibliography for publication; Wiesenberg compiled more descriptions of rabbinic material, Groner finished his hand-list of liturgical and geonic material and Reif continued to be involved in all of the Unit's activities at once. Three posters were designed to mark the forthcoming ninetieth anniversary of the Genizah and the Unit's first New Year card was produced.

Between 1986 and 1987, Professor Michael Klein joined part-time to prepare a catalogue of the targumic material; Dr Robert Brody came to complete a hand-list of the rabbinic fragments, and a new secretary, Mrs Sandra McGivern, was appointed. That same year, the Unit hosted an international conference on 'Ninety Years of Genizah Research at Cambridge'; the King and Queen of Spain came to visit, and funding improved with Reif making successful applications to the British Academy, the Wolfson Foundation, and the Rothschild Foundation. During this period, Reif reported "noteworthy achievements in the fields of catalogue preparation, computerisation and fund-raising."

In 1988, the Morag volume *Vocalised Talmudic Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* was published. The volume sold out within a few weeks and 250 more copies were produced. The eighties had proved to be such good years of academic endeavour and cooperation that Reif recounted, "It has been a pleasure to work with such a dedicated and enthusiastic team."

Towards the end of that decade, the Unit consisted of ten people. Professor Haggai Ben-Shammai visited for five months to catalogue Judaeo-Arabic material; Khan produced a camera-ready copy of his *Karaite Bible Manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah*, and the Unit was judged one of the top entries in a national competition, the 'Dawson Award for Innovation in Academic Librarianship'. The Department of Oriental and Other Languages was awarded a new, independent status with Reif as Senior-Under Librarian at its head. The Library Syndicate quickly realised that this division was "making its mark not only in the Library and the University, but also in the world outside."

In October 1989, a Cambridge PhD student in Arabic, Colin Baker, was appointed as a part-time research assistant to work with both Khan and Isaacs. The Unit's massive Bibliography, incorporating Reif's early work and the work of twenty scholars, was finally published and six more titles for the 'Series' were suggested. But, in spite of its international

renown, Reif recorded “a growing feeling among members of the Unit that senior academics in this University ... have insufficient appreciation of the scholarly importance of the work being done here and tend to confuse it with routine cataloguing ... Possibly as a consequence, there is no academic recognition for scholars in the Unit.” He soberly concluded that without such acknowledgement the Unit’s future would be in doubt.

The following year, Geoffrey Khan took a sabbatical; Baker became a full-time researcher; Brody returned to revise his catalogue for publication, and Dr Michael Lerner came on a temporary basis. A volume based on the conference ‘Genizah Research After Ninety Years’ was published and good reviews for the Unit’s Bibliography were received. But, again, a note of despondency resurfaced as Reif realised that scholars in the Unit could only gain academic recognition by seeking teaching posts elsewhere. In this connection he wrote to *The Times*: “As long as scholars draw artificial distinctions between their own research and the systematic analysis of such collections, the suitably talented specialist is unlikely to be attracted to a post in a museum or academic library.”

1991-1992 saw Khan’s return and Yechiel Kara, from Haifa University, came for two months to prepare a catalogue of talmudic fragments to complement the Morag volume. The Unit’s international spirit was enhanced by the short-term presence of Dr Victor Lebedev from St Petersburg.

In 1992, Michael Klein’s volume *Catalogue of the Targumic Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* was published, and Reif’s own book, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer*, was delivered to the press. After ten years, the character of the Unit would change again with the departure of Geoffrey Khan whose work in the Unit had gained him a lectureship in the Oriental Faculty. But the Unit would continue to attract young post-graduates: Khan’s last year was the first year for former Cambridge student, Dr Meira Polliack.

An exhibition featuring Genizah fragments was mounted in the Library to mark five hundred years since the Jews’ expulsion from Spain. This was also a year of record funding, bringing the amount raised for the Unit since its inception to more than half a million. Yet, in 1993, Reif warned against complacency: “some academics are so absorbed in their research that they cannot conceive of anyone who may be totally unacquainted with its significance ... Having to attract a substantial proportion of its budget from sources outside the University ... the



Genizah Research Unit has to remain consistently aware of the need to interest the wider world in its activities.”

In 1993, Baker and Polliack worked together on further descriptions of the Judaeo-Arabic material and Dr Edna Engel of Jerusalem joined the team to provide palaeographical expertise. Khan’s Arabic Legal and Administrative Documents was published and the BBC programme *Everyman* featured the Damascus documents. That year, the use of automation in libraries came under attack. Reif not only defended its use but drew attention to its future possibilities:

“Currently under consideration is the idea of copying the contents of all the fragments on to a CD-Rom ... Such a project could potentially provide scholars all over the world with the opportunity of accessing any Cambridge Genizah folio.”

A quarter of a century since its foundation, the Unit was thriving and a steady stream of researchers continued to make their mark. In 1995-1996, Baker was appointed Research Associate, Dr Douglas de Lacey assisted with computerisation and the Unit drew visiting scholars, Yahalom and Klein. The Isaacs and Baker catalogue *Medical and Paramedical Manuscripts* was published just before Isaacs died aged 80. Ernest Wiesenberg ceased to work due to ill-health, but new influences would be felt in the shape of Librarian Peter Fox, and enthusiastic Keeper of the Collection, Dr Robert Gordon.

A year on, Dr Erica Hunter was appointed to continue the Unit’s bibliography; Baker attained an important curatorial post at the British Library, and Polliack a post-doctoral fellowship in Jerusalem. The Unit was gaining new attention through the introduction of its web-page and the Genizah On-Line Database (GOLD). A thousand “hits” were recorded each month; one user wrote, “At last, someone’s got it right!”, and the Unit received its first e-mail enquiries. In a boost to funding, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) provided a major grant.

The year 1996-97 saw the return of Avihai Shivtiel as Acting-Director while Reif took his first sabbatical. Ellis Weinberger, a Principal Library Assistant from the University of London, joined to identify liturgical manuscripts and, at the same time, developed a keen interest in the Unit’s computing needs. Matthew Bernstein became the Unit’s World-Wide Web Officer and visiting scholars included Polliack, Engel, and Ben-Shammai. Reif’s comprehensive catalogue *Hebrew Manuscripts at Cambridge University Library* and Yahalom’s catalogue of

*Palestinian Vocalised Piyyut Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collection* were both published.

This was the year of the Genizah centenary celebrations and the Genizah went on tour. A large exhibition of Genizah fragments was staged in the Israel Museum. The Unit generated imaginative publicity material, including a newspaper, *The Genizah News*, reporting events from the Middle Ages. In the first two months of its opening, 400 people visited the exhibition each day.

In 1997, Erica Hunter went on secondment to Manchester University, and I was another student to whom the Unit offered an opportunity. The secretary of ten years, Sandra McGivern, resigned and was replaced by Eileen Bentham. In Cambridge, the centenary was marked by a Library exhibition of Genizah manuscripts and the Israeli President, Mr Weitzman, paid a visit. The sheer popularity of these centenary events stirred ideas of a permanent presence in the Library's proposed exhibition centre, "even", Reif wrote, "if only on one display terminal." An audio-tape, on which members of the Unit spoke about various aspects of the collection, was produced and is still purchased by visitors today. Most importantly, twenty-three dynamic years after its inception, the Unit's creator was finally recognized with a professorship in medieval Hebrew studies.

Between 1998 and 1999, a series of lectures to mark the Genizah centenary were held in the Library and delivered by some of the most outstanding scholars in Genizah research; most of whom had, at some point, passed through the Unit. Robert Brody's *A Hand-list of Rabbinic Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* was published, and the cataloguing of the Arabic material was given a boost by the appointment of full-time researcher, Dr Friedrich Niessen and, for one year, Cambridge graduate, Nicola Heys. A student researcher from Jerusalem, Joshua Granat, joined Ellis Weinberger on the liturgy project and a joint project to describe the liturgical material was initiated with Dr Uri Ehrlich of the Ben-Gurion University. A second joint initiative with Princeton University to share data and images on the Web was formally agreed between the two institutions. Moreover, the Unit continued to attract significant funds, bringing the total raised since 1973 to over one million pounds.

In 1999, Ben Outhwaite, was hired towards the end of his doctoral studies at Cambridge to prepare the third and fourth volumes of Davis' catalogue for publication. But, again, funding proved a thorn in the side of Genizah Research. The end of the HEFCE grant was on the horizon

and Reif battled hard to attract major funding elsewhere. This finally came in the form of the Friedberg Genizah Project in New York whose generous funds would, over the coming years, provide for a variety of research projects.

At the turn of the millennium, Reif produced a book about the Genizah story that would appeal to layman and scholar alike. Curzon press had the foresight to publish it and *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo* proved a great success, to the extent that it recently required a reprint. A BBC2 TV production ‘Wealth of Man’ included footage of Reif talking about Genizah manuscripts in the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo.

Over the next three years, things remained virtually unchanged, apart from the appointment of a new secretary, Sarah Sykes, and the reappointment of Ellis Weinberger as the Unit’s specialist in information technology. The Genizah Unit moved to a single suite of offices creating an increased sense of cohesion. Erica Hunter left to teach in Manchester and the team numbered eight. The Unit continued to attract publicity: Reif spoke about the Genizah manuscripts for a BBC Radio 4 programme ‘In the footsteps of Moses’, and some manuscripts were filmed by TV crews from Japan. A further three volumes in Reif’s ambitious ‘Genizah Series’ were published, including Baker and Polliack’s *Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collections (Ar. Series)*; the third and fourth volumes of *Hebrew Bible Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collections* by Davis and Outhwaite; and a collection of essays edited by Reif that arose from the centenary lectures, *The Cambridge Genizah Collections: Their Contents and Significance*. In 2002, a joint project to digitise and describe Genizah manuscripts, making them available to all was launched with the University of Pennsylvania.

By 2003, Reif could justly boast that, “If Genizah study was once an exclusive domain ... that situation has undoubtedly been altered beyond recognition by the developments of recent years.” Towards the end of that year, the second instalment of the Bibliography was sent to the press and the catalogue *Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic Manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah Collections (New Series)* by Shvitiel and Niessen was nearing completion.

Now in its thirtieth year, the Unit continues to attract funding, and particularly benefits from major awards such as the Friedberg Genizah Project. But maintaining those funds, defending the work of his researchers, and ensuring the future of the Taylor-Schechter Collection remains an unremitting task for Reif. In spite of this continual worry, the Unit flourishes.

Visiting Scholar, Dr Efraim Lev, from Haifa University, is using the medical catalogue as a catalyst for in-depth research; the digitisation project continues apace with material rapidly mounting on the internet; the Unit's website is now receiving over 11,000 "hits" a month, and more important research projects are afoot.

In thirty years, the energies and enthusiasm of one man for a unique Jewish archive has galvanized over forty researchers, produced a series of fourteen books, raised a million and a half pounds, generated enormous publicity and attracted a world-wide audience. Originally part of a ten-year plan, the story of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit continues.