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Jewish collections and previous Jewish ownership in German libraries: Bremen and Munich university libraries in comparison

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Abstract:

Since 1991 the State and University Library of Bremen has been dealing with purchases made by its predecessor, the former State Library of Bremen, during the time of the Nazi regime. Originated with an initiative from outside, the library started to identify and list the origin of all books coming to the library in 1942 as a result of confiscation by German authorities. Clues revealing the regional origin of the books' former owners were found in files of reparation preserved in the Bremen State Archives. So addresses could be identified with the help of the mass media and contacts to Jewish institutions, however, most of them were found by chance. The first substantial return occurred in 1993; so far, a total of 140 volumes have been returned to former owners.

A departmental library of the University Library of Munich for the departments of history and archaeology ("Bibliothek des Historiums") houses a very small rest of an anti-Semitic library existing in Munich from 1936 to 1943: The library of the so-called "Forschungsabteilung Judenfrage" (Research Department for the Jewish question). After World War II most parts of the library were probably brought to US-university and college libraries. A rest of about 1.000 books remained in Munich, however, and became part of the departmental library established in 1999. Since 2002 the identification of pieces possibly confiscated as a result of Nazi persecution and the search for previous Jewish owners have been started.

Therefore, the lecture will discuss the historical background of previous Jewish ownership in both libraries, will present the efforts, difficulties and problems of identification and reparation, and will inform the audience about the present state of affairs in Bremen and Munich.

Jürgen Babendreier

Jewish collections and previous Jewish ownership in the State and University Library of Bremen

The Institution

During the Third Reich, as well as for decades before and after, the Bremen State and University Library we know today was just a small city library. It was not until 1927 that the name was changed from *Stadtbibliothek* to *Staatsbibliothek*. Its task was to keep the region supplied with a stock of academic literature. In addition there was the public library, responsible for supplying the general public. Throughout the thirties, the two institutions were housed in the same building, with a joint organisation and sharing of staff. Only the circulation department and the book stacks were organised separately. The Director of the State Library was simultaneously Director of the Public Library in one and the same person. This was a somewhat unusual situation. The two functions posed an inherent conflict with the Director's ethics of librarianship – insofar as he may have had any in the first place. Banned books which had to be removed from the public library section with the right hand, were with the left hand to be kept on hand in the state library section. The gateway to literature, on the one hand closed to normal members of the public, was to be kept open for others wishing access for research purposes. This was the dictate of politics, the ethics of National Socialism.

What were the chances in that era for a librarian to actively oppose the ruling ideas?

One book as an example

A large part of the stock of books acquired by the State Library during the Nazi period is still intact. It is set up on the *numerous current* principles. I once used to walk between the shelves with eyes and ears closed. Today I walk between the shelves and the spines of the books stare at me, the titles talk to me and the names of the authors recount their tales. Here is an example I have selected at random:

Valeriu Marcu: Männer und Mächte der Gegenwart. Berlin: Gustav Kiepenheuer 1930. Classification mark: 42.c.632. Dem Andenken meines Freundes Paul Levi gewidmet (Dedicated to the memory of my friend, Paul Levi).

The library registered the book in 1942, although it had been published much earlier in 1930, some time before the start of the Third Reich. In 1942 it was the six-hundred-and-thirty-second book registered in format c for octavo. In those days the publisher, Kiepenheuer, was together with the Rowohlt publishing house the leading representative of avant-garde literature, almost totally forbidden in Germany after 1933. The author of this book, Valeriu Marcu, was an historian and writer born in Romania. He had written books on Lenin and Liebknecht, both communists. And he was a Jew. Such a book, written by such an author and coming from such a publishing house had been unobtainable in bookshops for more than ten years and could not possibly have been acquired by the library via normal channels. It was on the index of banned books. The author, the publisher, the year of publication, the subject matter, everything about this book's existence makes it "suspicious". How could it possibly still have found its way onto the shelves of the State Library in wartime 1942? I open it and ask the book itself. It reveals clues and tells its tale:

It bears the name of a previous owner: *Benno Katz*. The entry in red '*Giftz[immer]*' signifies that the book is to be kept separate, in 'quarantine' as it were, and is prohibited from general access: And it also bears something resembling a filing reference:

JA VI XIII, 1.

The same reference comprising *JA* and the first number (*VI*) is also to be found in the library's accession files. Here, too, in the column "source" we read the reference *JA* as supplier of the book.

Stolen property

In 1991 the librarians of the Bremen State and University Library found themselves unexpectedly at the centre of media interest on the part of the regional television channel. A member of the public had brought to light that the library's stack rooms harboured books that had once belonged to Jews and that had been stolen from them. Their possession by the library was therefore illegal. There was a call for immediate restitution.

The government of Bremen lost no time in reacting. The legal aspect was investigated. The verdict was unequivocal: demands for restitution or damages were barred by the statute of limitations. But there were also the moral aspects to be considered – and they carried more weight: the state government waived their property rights and decided in favour of restitution. First of all, though, the historical circumstances had to be clarified: the number of books suspected of constituting stolen property, the circumstances by which they were acquired, the names of their previous owners, their origin and their whereabouts. The government chose to appoint a retired school inspector to audit the stock of books in question, rather than the librarians themselves.

The investigations were started in 1991 and completed one year later. The only entries of books under clear suspicion of being stolen were in the year 1942. The suppliers entered in the accession file were abbreviated with *JA*, *Jud. A*, *Jud.Aukt*, and in some cases *Juden-aukt*. The meaning of these abbreviations is clear: they stand for „Jewish auctions“ and refer to auctions of Jewish property. The auctions were publicly advertised in the local newspapers as *auctions of the personal and household effects of emigrants*. The auctions are recorded: there were altogether twelve such auctions. The book by Valeriu Marcu came from the sixth auction. The auctions were carried out on behalf of the fiscal authorities following legislation ruling that the assets of Jews living abroad now belonged to the Reich. Thus, in Bremen the auctioned goods were the personal effects of Jewish emigrants left in the port warehouses of forwarding agents after the outbreak of war. The Library Director acting as representative of a public agency was permitted to view potentially interesting items prior to the auction taking place and was able to acquire them for cash.

In this way he managed to acquire approx. 1,500 books for the symbolic price of 0.50 or 1.00 Reichsmark each. By the way, the acquisition of private collections belonging to Jews was in those days one of the usual "very contemporary methods of building up stocks". Among the objects acquired in this way were some more valuable early imprints. By far the most items, however, were everyday literary items of low material value. However, many of the books were on the index. They were banned. Like the book by Valeriu Marcu. It was put in 'quarantine' in the *Giftzimmer*.

The confiscation of Jewish property was legal according to the legislation of the period. Nonetheless, it constituted an act of theft and enrichment. To have put the books under “safeguard”, though, and especially those, which were banned, was from the stance of librarianship by the same token an act of preservation from certain destruction. Only those libraries charged with stocking academic works were empowered, even duty-bound, to collect and preserve banned literature. According to the axiom: *“you can only fight the foe you know”*.

Restitutions

Of the 1,500 volumes ‘legally stolen’ at auctions of Jewish goods, about a quarter bear some kind of ownership reference. Altogether there are 90 different names of private persons. None of the objects, unlike in Munich, bear the names of institutions. Some of the names are also to be found in the reparation and restitution files stored in the Bremen state archives. Not one name is that of a Jew from Bremen. As far as can be ascertained, the names point to all directions: to Breslau, Berlin, to Leipzig, Stuttgart, Heidelberg, Freiburg and Hanover. The first restitution was made in 1993 to a member of the family of Henri Hinrichsen, proprietor of the renowned music and music-sheet publishers ‘Edition Peters’ in Leipzig. Other restitutions followed. To date, some 140 books have been returned to their rightful owners.

Among the fundamental principles of the ethics of librarianship is the duty to collect literature, to maintain archives and to enable access to users. All in the absence of censorship, with regard to both the literature and the user. It was previously foreign to the ethics of librarianship to part with collections, break them up or make restitution. Nowadays, though, this must be a requirement of any policy truly committed to democracy, human dignity and freedom. German librarians have shirked their duty for too long, remaining silent and choosing not to remember. It is high time they stirred their historical awareness and woke up to the moral-historical responsibility for the actions of librarians during the Nazi era.

What are the chances nowadays for a librarian to actively oppose the ruling ideas?

Dr. Sven Kuttner

Jewish Collections and Previous Jewish Ownership in German Libraries: University Librarian of Munich

The “Bibliothek des Historicum”, a departmental library of the University Library of Munich for the departments of history and archaeology, houses a small Jewish collection. The collection belongs to a remainder of about 1.000 volumes originating from the library of the so-called “Forschungsabteilung Judenfrage”, the “Research Department for the Jewish question”. The institution belonged to the “Reichsinstitut für Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands” (Imperial Institute for the History of the New Germany). The collection in the departmental library is mainly dealing with publications on the Jewish question and the so-called Jewish world conspiracy. Some books are dealing with Jewry in general, Jewish language, literature and

theology. The existence of the collection has been known to the scientific community for more than four decades. [Picture 1 with further information]

The “Imperial Institute for the History of the New Germany” was subordinate to the imperial ministry of education and started, as an addition to two departments existing in Berlin, in April 1936 its Research Department for the Jewish question in Munich. The founder of the Institute, Walter Frank, intended to build up the largest anti-Semitic library in Europe. The library was to help “to investigate the struggle between the Jewish people and its non-Jewish environment from the beginnings to present time” and therefore it was there to authorize the Nazi anti-Semitism in a pseudo-scientific way. Many prominent members of the National Socialist Party supported the Research Department and its library. Among them were Hitler’s deputy, Rudolf Hess, and the editor of the anti-Semitic journal “Der Stürmer”, Julius Streicher. Chairman of the Research Department but in name only became a professor for modern history in Munich, Karl Alexander von Müller. As manager of the Research Department officiated the historian Wilhelm Grau who had written his PhD-thesis about the end of the Jewish community in Regensburg in the 15th century. He died in 2000. As librarian acted Günter Schlichting. He was born in Danzig, studied theology and became a member of the Nazi party in 1930. After World War II he fulfilled the position of a protestant priest in West Germany.

Upon the initiative of Hitler himself, the library obtained 130.000 Reichsmark in January 1938. At the end of World War II the library presumably contained at about 35.000 volumes. It is said that more than 27.000 books came into the library by confiscation or were bought in antiquarian bookstores in Germany and other European countries occupied by German troops. The library also contained a small collection of manuscripts and early modern prints, but almost nothing has remained up to the present day in the departmental library: About a dozen books date back to the time before 1800. Nevertheless, the collection houses some rare books, and their value was sometimes recorded by the librarian of the Research Department. [Picture 2 with further information]

In 1940 no more shelves were available, so that the main part of the books lay on the floor, and volumes were stored for some time even in a toilet. Now the library called itself no more the “largest”, but only “a large European library for the Jewish question”, and made an application for three additional rooms in the house of the Bavarian parliament. When the allied air forces intensified their bomb-attacks on Munich, the collection was brought to Passau near the Austrian border. It is said that in 1943 the manuscripts and rare books were stored in the Bavarian State Library, but there is no evidence for this until now.

Today it is not known why about 1.000 volumes remained in Munich and were presumably not brought to Passau. After 1945 the department for modern history took over these books, drew up a typewritten catalogue in book format, and stored the collection in a room not accessible for common library users in the small library of the department for modern history. The collection of the newspaper clips went to the Institute of Contemporary History founded in Munich after the war. Apart from these 1.000 volumes the rest of the library is considered to be mainly lost, but some books with the seal of the Research Department for the Jewish question were found in American university libraries. In order to ensure the safety of cultural values stolen by Nazi authorities between 1933 and 1945, the American military government

established central collecting points in Munich, Marburg and Offenbach. In 1947 238 large boxes with books once belonging to the library of the Research Department were brought from Passau to the central collecting point in Offenbach. As far as we know, many books were sent from Offenbach to the United States.

Since the establishment of the departmental library of the University Library of Munich in 1999 the collection has been housed in the separated stack room. Since 2002 the identification of volumes possibly confiscated as a result of Nazi persecution and the search for previous Jewish owners have been started. All names of persons and institutions found in the books in forms of handwritten property marks, dedications, seals or bookplates were registered in a database [Picture 3 with further information]. In four cases the Research Department destroyed property marks on purpose, so a previous Jewish ownership is probable, but can't be proved anymore [Picture 4 with further information]. By identifying each previous owner it was verified with the assistance of the Oberfinanzdirektion Berlin, if a compensation for these books had been made by West-German authorities after World War II. The efforts to identify all possible previous owners took a very long time, but now almost 50% of all possible previous owners are cleared, although some cases are still doubtful. In autumn the data recording will be finished. The University Library of Munich will then send all information about the books and their previous owners to the "Koordinierungsstelle für Kulturgutverluste" (Lost Art Internet Database) in Magdeburg and hopes to get in contact with possible claimants in order to give back those books stolen by the Nazi regime.