

## The Old Jewish Library in Mainz

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**Description:** The Old Jewish Library of Mainz was saved during World War II. The books were hidden in a coal cellar and survived in rather good condition. The collection of almost 5,500 volumes, among them rare Hebraica and manuscripts, is one of the very few libraries saved from the persecutions in Germany. In 1946, the books were brought to the newly founded university of Mainz. Most interesting is the reconstruction of the ownership of some of the books. Some of the books came from the private libraries of Rabbis and preachers of the Mainz community; most famous are Marcus Lehmann (1831-1890) and Siegmund Salfeld (1843-1926). The presentation will give an overview of the most precious volumes and the libraries history.

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Whoever today wants to know more about the great and long history of the Jewish community of Mainz (Magenza) will first visit the cemeteries – the medieval part dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century and then the modern divisions with tombstones from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. While the synagogues of Mainz have been completely destroyed during the Shoah and World War II. nothing more has left with the exception of a few ceremonial objects (Kle Qodesh)

on disposal in the towns Museum of fine arts and in the 2010 opened new synagogue of Mainz.<sup>1</sup>

Another spot of Jewish remnants of the great and long standing Jewish past – actually Mainz houses one of the oldest Jewish communities in Germany<sup>2</sup> – has long been forgotten and neglected: The Old Jewish Library of Mainz that was saved during World War II.<sup>3</sup> During the Nazi persecution the books were hidden in a coal cellar in the old town of Mainz. As far as it is known, the 5500 volumes – printed in Hebrew, Yiddish and German – were put aside by courageous librarians who did not want to deliver the books to the Nazi officials. The collection is one of the very few libraries saved from the persecutions in Germany. The library actually consists of two collections which have been united before November 1938. During the so called “Reichskristallnacht”, the pogrom night of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1938, the library was looted together with the community buildings, private households and synagogues. After the war, when almost 80% of the town were destroyed, the books were brought to the newly founded University of Mainz. Since then they are in the faculty of protestant theology, in a barrack of former German military camp, without being noticed nor by scholars nor by Jewish librarians.

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<sup>1</sup> On the former synagogues of Mainz see Hedwig Brüchert (ed.), Ein Überblick über die Mainzer Synagogenbauwerke mit ergänzenden Beiträgen über bedeutende Mainzer Rabbiner, das alte Judenviertel und die Bibliotheken der jüdischen Gemeinden, Mainz: Verein für Sozialgeschichte 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Die Schum-Gemeinden Speyer – Worms – Mainz, ed. Generaldirektion Kulturelles Erbe Rheinland-Pfalz. Regensburg 2013.

<sup>3</sup> See Andreas Lehnardt: Die jüdische Bibliothek an der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz 1938-2008. Eine Dokumentation, Stuttgart: Steiner 2009.



In 2004, when I was appointed Professor for Jewish Studies in Mainz, I was immediately interested in the fate and history of the books. At the beginning of my research I started to sort the books, refurbish the most damaged exemplars and I started to look for old catalogues or lists of these books. However, it soon became clear that no complete list of catalogue of the books exists. After a thorough examination of the oldest books and journals it turned out that most of the books stem from the two major former communities of Mainz, the orthodox “Israelische Religionsgesellschaft” and the more liberal “Israelitische Religionsgemeinde”.

The Jewish community of Mainz has – as in many other European cities – split into parts in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Isaak Jakob Bernays from Mainz, a rabbi in Hamburg from 1821, is well known for his endeavors for religious reform. However, some of the innovations he strove for were too far-reaching for a part of the Jewish community in Mainz that continued to be deeply rooted in traditional Judaism, so that in 1849 it came to a split. The liberal “Israelite Religion Community” consecrated its synagogue in Synagogenstrasse in 1853 that was later to be followed by the splendid new main synagogue in Hindenburgstreet in 1912.

When building its new temple, the congregation for the introduction of an organ. Those of the members who were opposed to this innovation organized a Religionsgesellschaft. This orthodox oriented “Israelite Religion Society” opened its own synagogue in 1856 which was replaced by a larger building in Moorish style to the plans of the City Architect Eduard Kreyssig in 1879. Nominally there continued to be one Jewish community in Mainz. However, the two groups each led their own community life with their own institutions and libraries. These libraries were united by order of the Nazi bureaucracy before November 1938.

Half of the books of the library are rare *Hebraica*, almost 2800 volumes. Some books were printed as early as in the 16th century, in places in Germany or in other European countries. Older copies come from the printing houses of Homburg vor der Höhe, Karlsruhe, Fürth, Sulzbach, Hanau, Wilhermsdorf, Mainz, Venice, and Berlin. Among the books are also many Hebrew printings from Mainz itself, some of them not listed in any catalogue, like the comprehensive Thesaurus of Y. Vinograd<sup>4</sup> or in Sare ha-Elef.<sup>5</sup> Most of these printings come from the printing house of Yehiel Brill (1836–1886), the famous founder of the first Hebrew newspaper in Israel, ha-Levanon. He had to leave Turkish Palestine and immigrated via Paris to Mayence, then under French rule. With the support of Marcus Lehmann he founded a small printing house in which he produces an unknown number of well edited and important Hebrew books. Some of them, like *Yesud ma'ala*, a history of the early settlement of Eretz Yisrael, have been reprinted only recently.<sup>6</sup>

Most interesting is the study of the history of ownership of some of the books. A great number of the Hebrew books have been gifts and donations from the private libraries of Rabbis and preachers of the community. Most prominent are the books donated by Marcus Lehmann (1831-1890) and Siegmund Salfeld (1843–1926). Several titles are also coming from the heirs of Rabbi Joseph Aub (1805–1880), Moses Loeb Bamberger (1902–1960) and Sali Levi (1883–1941), all former Rabbis in Mainz.

Marcus Lehman was one of the most notable figures and is one founders of the Orthodox community. He edited the German orthodox newspaper “Der Israelit” and published a first critical edition of the Talmud Yerushalmi, *Massekhet Berakhot*. He also authored children books and novels. Many of these books have been translated into Hebrew and into many other European languages. Some of them are in print today. Most noteworthy is his commentary and translation of *Pirke Avot*. Oscar (Asher) Lehmann, his son, was very essential in furthering their publishing in America in the 1900s. Oscar has dedicated his precious book and manuscript collection after his death to the Orthodox Jewish community of Mainz. Most of these books from his father’s collection are identifiable by a stamp when the libraries were united before 1938.

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<sup>4</sup> Yeshayahu Vinograd, *Thesaurus of the Hebrew Book, Listing of Books Printed in Hebrew Letters since the Beginning of Hebrew Printing circa 1469 through 1863*, Vol. 1-2, Jerusalem 1993 (Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> Menahem M. Kasher / Jacob B. Mandelbaum, *Sare ha-Elef (New Edition). A Millenium of Hebrew Authors (4260-5269: 500-1500 CE.). A Complete Biographical Compendium of Hebraica Written During the Thousand-Year Period between the Close of the Talmud and the Beginning of the Shulhan Aruch. All Books Extant are Described and their Authors Listed. Appended hereto also is a Complete Listing of all Hebrew Books extant Created from the Post-Biblical Times Through the Talmudic-Midrashic Period*, Vol. 1-2, Jerusalem 1978 (Hebrew).

<sup>6</sup> See Yehiel Brill, *Yesud Hama'ala. The immigration of Eleven Farmers from Russia in 1883*, Jerusalem 1976 (reprint of the edition Mainz 1883). See the introduction by G. Kressel on Brill’s biography.

Siegmund Salfeld (1843–1926) was a Reform rabbi in Mainz, and an important historian. He has edited the famous Nuremberg Memorbuch<sup>7</sup> and he has published numerous articles on Jewish history in Germany. He also collaborated for the Jewish Encyclopedia. Due to his achievements as a historian he was the first Jew who received the honorary title “professor” in the state of Hesse – long times before a university was opened in Mainz.

According to the stamps and the remarks of preposers a number of books in the collection can be identified as coming from the possessions of Rabbi Joseph Aub (1805–1880), the author of an important reform siddur, Rabbi Joseph Lorge (1874–1948), and the last orthodox Rabbi of Mainz before the Shoah, Moses Loeb Bamberger (1902–1960).

Many books are recognizable by a stamp from the Chevra Qinyan Sefarim, the “Society for Buying Books”. This society was founded by Rabbi Salfeld with the interest to collect old and rare books for the preservation of the Jewish heritage. Some of these books are rare printings from Eastern Europe, and they are preserved in Mainz only due to this remarkable historical society.

Other printings are remnants of the schools and education institutions of the communities. Some books are leftovers of the „Unterrichtsanstalt der Israelitischen Religionsgesellschaft“ – the elementary school of the orthodox community, founded by the strict and learned Rabbi Jonah Bondi. Other booklets and printings are witnesses for a united Jewish school founded 1937 according to a decree by the Nazis to unite all Jewish schools in Germany. In this “Jewish district school” (Jüdische Bezirksschule) all Jewish children had to learn elementary knowledge, and they were trained also in agriculture and sports to allow them to immigrate to other countries such as Australia or even Palestine. In 1942, when the school was closed, nearly 600 books for pupils and 50 books from the teacher’s library were joint with the growing stock of the community’s library.

Only one item, a Siddur, can be identified as having been used in the small Polish Chassidic prayer house (Shtible) of Mainz, mainly supported and attended by Jews from Galicia.<sup>8</sup>

Older books – some were printed in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries – are leftovers from the family of Abraham Schloessinger, one of the representatives of the community in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Other books are heir from the family of David Oppenheimer. For example, Moritz (Mendel) Oppenheimer’s books can be identified, a relative of David Oppenheim. One book has also a personal note by David Oppenheimer himself, who was the owner of one of the largest book collections in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe. Most of his books later were sold to the Bodleian library, after a long journey via Vienna, Hannover, and Hamburg.

There are more than 60 manuscripts in the collection, mostly written in 17<sup>th</sup> until 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were first described by Rabbi Ernst Róth from Hungary.<sup>9</sup> Microfilm copies of

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Siegmund Salfeld (ed.), *Das Martyrologium des Nürnberger Memorbuches, Quellen zur Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland* 3, Berlin 1898.

<sup>8</sup> See on this Chassidic community also: Abraham Shlomo Stub, *Erinnerungen. Von Bobov über Magenza nach Jerusalem*. Translated and edited by Andreas Lehnardt, *Sonderheft der Mainzer Geschichtsblätter*, Mainz 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Ernst Róth: *Hebräische Handschriften, Teil 2*, hrsg. von Hans Striedl unter Mitarbeit von Lothar Tetzner, *Verzeichnis orientalischer Handschriften in Deutschland VI, 2*, Wiesbaden: Steiner 1965, pp. 190–212, Nr. 260–290. On the Memorbooks from Mainz cf. Aubrey Pomerance, *Geteiltes Gedenken. Die Mainzer Memorbücher des 19./20. Jahrhunderts*. In:

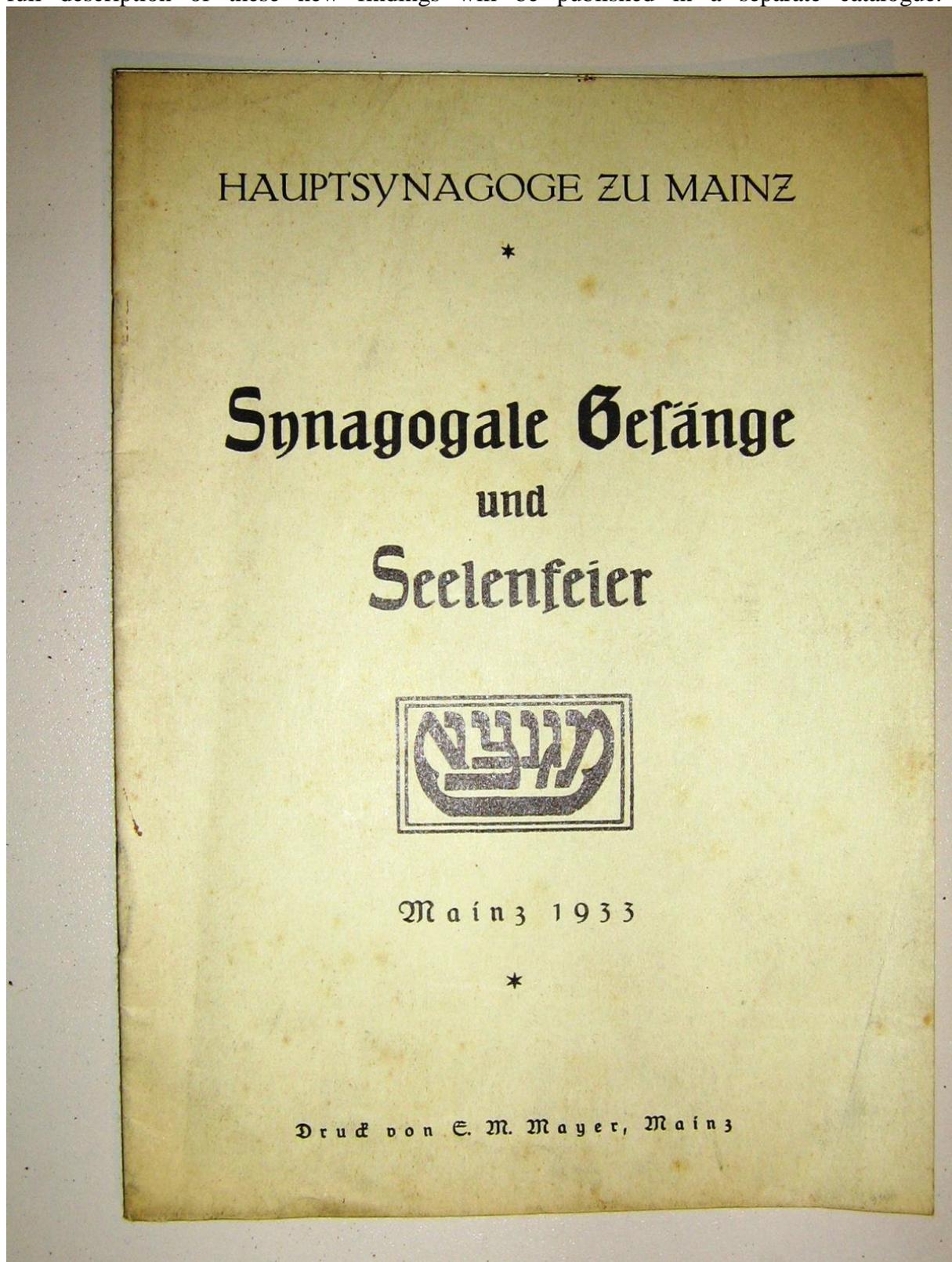
these manuscripts were made in the 70's of the past century, and all the films are available in the *Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts* at the National and University Library in Jerusalem, Givat Ram.

Among the manuscripts are found prayer books from the *Hevra Qaddisha* of Mainz and Worms describing local minhagim and prayers for the dead. Notable is also a German novel book written in German in Hebrew characters by a 19<sup>th</sup> century Shohet of the community. Among the other manuscripts are found Talmudic Novellae, for example Hiddushim written by Rabbi Herz Scheuer (1753–1822), and letters and personal documents written by certain members of the community.

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Brocke, Michael u.a. (eds.): *Neuer Anbruch. Zur deutsch-jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur*, Berlin: Metropol 2001, pp. 205–219.

During the cataloguing of the printed books unknown manuscripts came to light. A full description of these new findings will be published in a separate catalogue.<sup>10</sup>



**How were the books rescued?**

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<sup>10</sup> This cataloguing project has been subsidized by Rothschild foundation (Europe).

According to witnesses I have interviewed shortly after starting to research the history of the library, most of the books were hidden in a cellar in the Old city of Mainz. After a thorough investigation in archives in Israel, Germany, New York and France, it became clear that the German Secret State Police (Gestapo) had confiscated the books during the November persecution. However, even one year after the destruction of the synagogue and the adjacent community facilities like the library books were recovered from the cellars which were still standing.

The Gestapo has brought the books to the municipal library, and here they were first sorted and double printings were thrown away. Other books have been used as binding materials or simply were used as heating fuel during winter.

The Nazi persecutors in Mainz were interested in the books first and foremost because they wanted to use them for their ideology. This interest however faded after the outbreak of World War II. And so the confiscated books were soon forgotten. The help of the librarians of the municipal library – most of them being pious Catholics who were not in favour for Hitler and his anti-catholic politics – has been effective too. They tried to hide the books and made them unavailable. The books therefore have survived in poor condition and many of them still need refurbishment, cleaning and conservation.

After the liberation of Mainz by allied forces (American troops) the books were given back to the few members of the Jewish community who returned from the camps (mainly from the camp of Theresienstadt) or have survived in Mainz itself. Only 80 persons of a former community of 3000 members returned and established a new community as soon as November 9<sup>th</sup> 1945. Understandably, this few people had other problems than the library. Nevertheless, the books were used and a provisional library service was established in the interim community Centre, close to the ruins of the former main synagogue.

Hanna Arendt, the German philosopher, who worked like Gershom Scholem for the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR), noted in a field report from February 10<sup>th</sup> 1950: „The Jewish community in Mainz possesses as you know still its library which one can only see upon written request, several days before. The present librarian moreover thinks of emigration. The whole business is fantastic, but there is little we can do about it”.<sup>11</sup>

The last remark points to the fact that the Jewish community of Mainz refused to overhand the books to the JCR. It is one of the few cases in Germany known to me that a Jewish community did not cooperate with this institution that was installed by the American forces to investigate the fate of Jewish properties and books and pass it to existing Jewish communities in the Americas and Israel.

At the end of the 50's the Jewish community life was declining and so nobody could take care of the books any longer. Most of the returned members now started to leave to Israel or other European countries. And so it was decided to give the books to the newly founded University. According to a report in a letter written by a grandson of Sigmund Salfeld which I found in New York's Leo Baeck institute, “a laboratory of the university assisted with the removal of the worms and the cleaning of the books. Without available funds a Pastor repaired books as well as possible. A daughter of the Pastor started to catalogue the entire library according to language, subjects and authors.”<sup>12</sup> This handwritten catalogue exists, however with many errors and funny misidentifications.

During the 60's the books were more and more forgotten and many German scholars researching the history of Ashkenazi Jewry did not take notice of the library. The Jewish community still in existence had no interest either and so the books were stored in a small and

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<sup>11</sup> Marie Luise Knott (ed.), Hannah Arendt – Gershom Scholem. Der Briefwechsel. Berlin: Suhrkamp 2010, p. 502.

<sup>12</sup> LBI New York, Sigmund Salfeld Collection AR 7017.

dirty room at the university, mostly in bags and carton boxes without any chance to find certain titles and even the manuscripts were not kept properly.

Today, after the new wave of immigration from the former Russian republics thousands of new Jewish citizens have come to Mainz. A new Jewish community centre has been opened in 2010 and a new, but Russian library has been opened. It seems that the original Jewish Library from Mainz is forgotten. And due to new technologies the interest among my colleagues and students is fainting too.

Many books kept in the library (some of them still in poor condition) are nowadays available in the World Wide Web. The Jewish Journals and Newspapers, like “Der Israelit”, a very important source for the history of the Jewish community in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is now available on the magnificent web-Site Compact Memory at Frankfurt University Library. Other German titles can also be found on the excellent web-site of the Freimann Library on the websites of the same institution.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.compactmemory.de/>; see also <http://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/freimann/>



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חמדת ימים

לג' רגלים ולבין המצרים ולט"ב

הדור אתם ראו ההר חמד אלהים בקול המוסף  
דברים מאירים והיו לדי ראשי הראשון פי' ההגדה  
להמקובל האלהי קדוש יאמר לו רבינו יוסף  
ג' יקטיליא ז"ל ואשר על ידו השני פרקי  
כונת כל תענית צבור ותענית של  
גשמים הרב הגדול המפורסם המאירי ז"ל ושלישי  
בקרש עניינים נאים השייכים לימות הקיץ  
ורבין המצרים ולתשעה באב ודי' בקדש כוונת  
האר"י ז"ל לבין המצרים

וגם מזה מסובות נחמדות מהרמ"ז ז"ל השייכים לחלק הזה בספר  
עשינו בחלקים האחרים כל אלה הכוונות אל עמק טוב חוד  
ספר הנחמד הזה למען יגיל הקורא וישמח בשמחה האו"י ונחוסף בו מחדש  
מפתחת הספר למען לא יחסר כל בו אשר לא היה נמוהו לעולמים :

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בדפוס המשוכת של הגביר משה עטיאס יצ"ו:

בליוורנו

שנת חמדת ימים אותו קראת לפיק

קון ליסינסקה די סוקריווים מי פרוילחיוו די סו מאחססטר אימפריל



Summary and Outlook

1. The Jewish Library of Mainz is one of the very few examples of a former Community library in Germany that survived the Shoah.<sup>14</sup> Other examples in Germany, that I have seen not investigated fully, like the library of the Jewish community of Hamburg and the remnants of the community library of Leipzig are different in condition and quantity. They are less old and far less intact. The percentage of *rara* and *cimelia* is by far smaller.

The sheer number of Hebrew and also some Yiddish books in Mainz is remarkable. The quantity of books reflects the long standing, but sometimes difficult history of this very community in Germany.

2. It is my sincere hope that further interest in the library will help to improve its condition. Help is still needed for some of the most damaged items. I invested already half of my research budget I have received from my university.

3. What can be done for the future of old Jewish books in Germany today? The situation of many communities in Germany is difficult. Members of the communities are coming mainly from former Soviet Union countries and have no interest in this difficult heritage.

4. The new synagogue in Mainz and the communal centre was planned without taking the Old Library into consideration. Today no appropriate space for the books has been left, and also trained librarians who can keep the books properly are not available. Past instances have proven that it is difficult to maintain books with the help of individuals who cannot read the books that they are keeping.

5. What's left is an important witness for German Jewish history. My interest in this paper was to inform you about this remarkable remnant of German Jewish culture. A famous Latin proverb says, *Libelli sua fata habent* (Books have their fate), and you never know what will be their fate. I hope that the Old Jewish Library will not end up as a graveyard for books, just to remind you what I have said at the beginning on the old Jewish cemeteries in Mainz. I hope the Old Jewish Library will not have only a fate, but will have *masal*, a good fortune!

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Werner Schroeder, *Beschlagnahme und Verbleib jüdischer Bibliotheken in Deutschland vor und nach dem Novemberpogrom 1938*. In: Regine Dehnel (ed.): *Jüdischer Buchbesitz als Raubgut. Zweites Hannoversches Symposium. Im Auftrag der Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek – Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek und der Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2006, pp. 27–36. On the ERR see also Maria Kühn-Ludewig, Johannes Pohl (1904–1960). *Judaist und Bibliothekar im Dienste Rosenbergs. Eine biographische Dokumentation*, Kleine Historische Reihe; 10, Hannover: Laurentius 2000; Alice Jankowski, *Die Hamburger Jüdische Gemeindebibliothek: Ein ereignisreiches Jahrhundert*, in: *Judaica* 701, (2014), pp. 2–14.

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