

The History and Contents of the Alexander Kohut Collection of Judaica at Yale University **Nanette Stahl**

Description: This paper will discuss the history of how the collection came to Yale and some of the rare and important books it contains.

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In the fall of 1915 Yale received as a gift one of the greatest collections of books, pamphlets and journals on Jewish studies built by a single individual. The collector was Alexander Kohut (1842-1894) who was a distinguished European and American congregational rabbi, an accomplished scholar of traditional Jewish texts and ancient “oriental” languages and literatures. In addition, he was a passionate bibliophile and collector of Jewish books. However, the gift also involves one of his sons, George Alexander Kohut and his second wife Rebecca Bettelheim Kohut. And I would like to say something about all three and then talk about some of the books that came to Yale as a result of the generosity of George.

Alexander Kohut (1842-1894) was from a small town in Hungary. His father was also a rabbi and he came from a long line of rabbis. In addition to his Ph.D which he received from the University of Leipzig, he was ordained as a rabbi at the Breslau Rabbinical Seminary. In 1885 he received an invitation from Congregation Ahavat Hesed in NY to become its rabbi and he and his first wife Julia and their eight children moved to the United States. Ahavat Hesed is today Central Synagogue on Lexington Avenue. It is one of NY’s most influential synagogues. A year later, he helped found the Jewish Theological Seminary of America with Rabbis Sabato Morais and H. Pereira Mendes. He also served as a professor of Talmud there. Kohut published books and articles on Judaic studies but his magnum opus was the *Arukh ha-Shalem* a revision of the medieval Italian Hebrew lexicographer, Natan ben Yehiel’s Hebrew and Aramaic dictionary *He-Arukh*. Kohut worked on it for 25 years. The first volume came out in 1878 and the last in 1892, two years before his death of cancer at the age of 52. His first wife, Julia, had died even earlier and Kohut with eight children to raise married Rebecca Bettelheim soon after. She was 20 years his junior and a relative. Sadly Alexander died 7 years after their marriage and Rebecca was left with 8 children to raise. This she did with love and devotion. Among the children, she had an especially close relationship with her step-son George Alexander. Rebekah’s life is quite sad. Though she was 10 years his senior he died in 1933 long before her. She thus sustained the loss of the two men in her life she loved most. Rebekah, however, went on to live an active life involved in Jewish education, The National Council for Jewish Women, and Zionist groups. She died in 1951 at the age of 87.

However, let's get back to the senior Kohut, Alexander. In addition to all his pursuits, he was an avid collector of books. They were his pride and joy. I suspect that he assembled most of his collection before he arrived in the United States but I don't know for sure. I would love to find out how he went about it and how he found the important and rare books that he did. Not only are they a source of Jewish knowledge but also a record of early Jewish publishing, particularly of Italy, at one time the most important source for Jewish book making in the world. The books are a treasure for those interested in the history of the Jewish book and book makers. I would also like to know how he funded his acquisitions. He came from a very poor family and the professions he chose of rabbi and scholar are not known for making anyone rich.

Of Alexander's many children, George seems to have been the one who had the most interest in his father's library and tried to emulate him in his choice of studies and profession. It was George who inherited his father's magnificent library. George was never in good health but nevertheless, he studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary and at Columbia University and also for 2 years in Berlin. He served as rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in Dallas from 1897 to 1899 but could not continue because of his precarious health. When he returned to NY he continued his work in Jewish education as assistant librarian at the JTS and as the principal at Temple Emanu-El in NY. In all this time, it was his step-mother, Rebecca, who looked after him when he was not well and supported him in his various endeavors. As I mentioned before, they were extremely close and shared a home until he died at the age of 59, six weeks short of his 60th birthday.

I now would like to discuss how George became interested in Yale as a permanent home for his father's library. He heard of Yale's history in collecting Hebraica and particularly of Ezra Stiles' interest in Hebrew. Stiles was the 7th president of Yale University and a known Hebraist and friend of Rabbi Chaim Isaac Carigal, an itinerant preacher from Hebrew who Stiles heard preach in Newport around 1773. George even published a book in 1902 called *Ezra Stiles and the Jews*. Kohut also became acquainted with Albert T. Clay, the Laffan Professor of Assyriology at Yale from 1910-1925. Clay and George had common interests in Semitic languages and "Oriental" studies. Kohut discussed his desire to make a gift of his father's collection to Yale as a memorial to his father and Clay encouraged him to do so. And thus, George decided to donate Alexander's book collection to the Yale library and to name it *The Alexander Kohut Memorial Collection*. He asked Professor Clay and the Rev. Dr. David Levy, the rabbi of Cong. Mishkan Israel in New Haven, to represent him before the Yale president and Board and to make the proposal on his behalf. Yale enthusiastically accepted Kohut's proposal and in the fall of 1915 the collection came to the Yale Library. However, that is not all that came to Yale as a result of George's extraordinary generosity and his desire to honor his father's memory. He established the Alexander Kohut Memorial Publication Fund, a Kohut book fund, and the Alexander Kohut Fellowship in Semitics. The fellowship was to be awarded annually to a postdoctoral student in the field.

Kohut wrote that he had indexed about a half of the library and that we would give the card index to the Yale along with the books but I have not seen it anywhere. He did, however, also contribute a list of books compiled by Alexander but it is not complete. He also said that he would contribute at a later date the manuscripts in his father's library, but it appears that in the end they

went to the Jewish Theological Seminary. In fact, though Yale received the majority of the books of the Kohut library, JTS and the Jewish Institute of Religion also received parts of the collection.

George requested in return that Yale have a bookplate supplied by him placed in each book that came with his father's library. And indeed a beautiful bookplate was designed that captured the man. It shows the scholar in his library pouring over books with a volume from his own work, *Ha-Arukh*, in one of his hands. Images referring to his name are on the top on either side. On the right side is a lion referring to his middle Hebrew name Judah and on the left side is a rooster referring to his Hungarian surname which means rooster. Kohut's Hebrew name is Hanokh which is Enoch in English and thus the appearance on top of the verse from Genesis refers to the manner of the biblical Enoch's death (Gen 5:24). The Yale library also agreed to George's request that the Kohut library be housed in a separate room but this was not done to the best of my knowledge.

Here is George's description of the Kohut Memorial Collection in his own words: "The collection aggregates from five to seven thousand separate bound volumes and about two thousand pamphlets and miscellaneous periodicals. The greater portion deals with Hebrew and Rabbinic literature and contains several hundred Oriental subjects." "In general let me say that the Kohut Library will form a nucleus for a representative collection of Hebraica and Judaica which is to be augmented by a special fund, so that all the standard works missing, some of which I have retained for my own use, may be replaced, and the books kept in serviceable condition."

George Alexander Kohut's gift of his father's library to Yale formed more than a nucleus for its Judaica collection. It was its crown jewel. He died in 1933 but still lived to see an exhibit that took place in the library in 1932 that celebrated the arrival of the Kohut library to Yale. Leon Nemoj, Yale's first Judaic and Arabic librarian, curated the exhibit and published a check-list of it. Alexander Marx, then head of the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary loaned books to the exhibit and spoke at its opening with George and Rebekah in the audience. Rebekah described his visit to the exhibit as the happiest day of his life. "Before him were the fruits of patient labor and sacrifice made over a period of many years." George Alexander lived in the shadow of his father all his life. Though he was an accomplished scholar and a passionate lover of books himself, he was quite happy to never take the lime light but rather cede it to his beloved father, Alexander. However, at Yale, the spotlight shines on him as well as his father's. His generosity still yields support to the Judaica Collection and there still are funds to subsidize a Kohut Fellow every several years. In addition, Rebekah continued to make contributions to the library after his death. On the books that she donated the bookplate states "In memory of George Alexander Kohut."