

Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana: Training the Next Generation

Practical Case Studies Panel: *Rachel Boertjens and Rachel Cilia Werdmölder*

Description: The last two decades have seen a great change in the way libraries function and are used. New technologies, fast-developing digital possibilities, increased national and international inter-library cooperation, and the new demands placed on libraries by users have influenced the way they have developed. The modern library extends far beyond its own four walls. Furthermore, each generation has its own interests and needs, as well as different strengths and weaknesses that need to be catered to and addressed. Common to all generations is that in the digital age requests are often more specific and answers are expected quickly and internationally. The Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana is working hard to keep up with and ahead of the change. The curator and the junior curator will discuss the need for the training of young professionals as a way to accomplish this, and to be prepared for the generations to come. They will also share their experiences and the contents of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana junior curator training programme, begun in August 2016.

Rachel Boertjens is the curator of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, part of the University of Amsterdam's Special Collections. While studying Hebrew at the University in 2003, she began working at the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, beginning as a cataloguer of printed books, and moving on to become junior curator. She shared curatorship of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana from 2013 to 2015, thereafter assuming sole responsibility. Rachel has managed several national and international digitization projects on printed books, manuscripts and archives. She has also worked on several exhibitions, among them, the exhibitions on Jewish book culture in the Landesmuseum in Zurich and the Jewish Museum in Berlin.

Rachel Cilia Werdmölder is the junior curator of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana. She pursued an undergraduate degree in classical Hebrew at the University of Malta before starting an internship at the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana. Rachel then undertook a master's degree in Jewish studies from the University of Oxford, where for her dissertation, she studied some of the ephemeral material within the library's Dutch-Jewish archive.

Rachel B: Good morning, I am Rachel Boertjens, curator of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana in Amsterdam. Together with the junior curator, Rachel Cilia Werdmölder, we will be discussing the modernisation of libraries, and the training of the next generation of Judaica librarians.

Rachel CW: Hello, I am Rachel Cilia Werdmölder, junior curator of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, the Jewish collection of the University of Amsterdam Special Collections. The Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana was founded upon the personal library of Leeser Rosenthal, who left a collection of some 6,000 volumes, including books, manuscripts, incunabula and periodicals, when he died.

Rosenthal's heirs donated his library as a gift to the city of Amsterdam in 1880. The Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana has since developed from a German library of enlightenment to a general library on Jewish history and culture, with works in all the languages that Jews have used over the centuries.

Today the library contains approximately 120,000 works including manuscripts, early printed books, ephemera, broadsides, archives, prints, drawings, newspapers, journals, and reference books.

Rachel B: In 2011 I presented a paper at the Montreal AJL conference entitled 'Digitisation in Progress'. I spoke about the various projects underway at the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana to make our material available digitally, and visible online. Even though that was only six years ago, the swift advancement of technology and the increasingly digital focus of the academic world turned digitisation from a side-project to a central element of modern librarianship. The new demands placed on libraries by users have influenced the way they have developed, reoriented workflows and reordered priorities. For example, requests for material are often followed by requests for a digital copy.

This is the case especially for people who only need the text, and also for international patrons. Researchers from abroad find digital copies useful in the initial stages of their research, and depending on how their research develops, will either not need to see the original, or will come to the library knowing exactly what they would like to see. I have noticed that this has affected how long foreign researchers visit for. A two week research trip is now more common than a summer of on-site research. Furthermore, as a consequence of having material available online, both the material and the institution are easier to find, which leads to an increase in loan requests.

For the library to have an effective digital platform, appropriate workflows and trained library staff are necessary to accommodate patrons' requests for digital material and to maintain the library's online environment. Since not every item is currently available digitally, the Special Collections developed an on-demand service. This allows patrons to request digital reproductions of entire books. The in-house photographer, who originally worked on exhibitions and exhibition catalogues, could not handle the large volume of requests. In order to alleviate the load and ensure requests could be fulfilled in a reasonable length of time, the library made an arrangement with an external digitisation company to handle requests of over 40 pages. The Special Collections follows the 'middle track' model of digitisation, so every book that is digitised through this process gets added to the online collection, joining items digitised through large projects such as Google Books, Metamorfoze, and Wikimedia Commons.

Rachel CW: Since 1997 the Dutch government has sponsored the Metamorfoze project, which is the Netherlands' national programme for the preservation of paper heritage. All printed material digitised through this project is uploaded to Delpher.

This database is hosted by the National Library of the Netherlands and contains 60 million pages worth of Dutch books, newspapers, and journals. Each page has been run through OCR software to make the database searchable through both content and title. Delpher has, perhaps obviously, become one of our most important and frequently used resources.

Through the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana's active and continual participation in the Metamorfoze project, a significant amount of Dutch Jewish printed material is already available online. In autumn 2016 we submitted an application to digitise our entire

collection of Dutch Jewish press from 1840-1960. Much of this collection is unique, and therefore not available anywhere else, which makes digital preservation even more important. Our application was a success, and we are currently preparing the material for digitisation in collaboration with Metamorfoze.

They were a tad overwhelmed though very enthusiastic about our application – it was the largest number of titles that they had ever received in one application, adding up to 155 individual titles and 137,000 pages. I was also a little overwhelmed – it was my first week on the job and the application contained almost 30 very specific questions for each title. Collaborating with Metamorfoze and projects like it has been and will remain a consistent part of my work.

Rachel B: Another very important library that we work with on digitisation is the National Library of Israel. For instance, I informed them about the digitisation of the Dutch Jewish Press to make sure they can link it to their database of historical Jewish press, JPRESS. They even offered to help the library to digitise the titles that fell out of the Metamorfoze date range, that is, published before 1840.

Ktiv, the website for The International Collection of Digitized Hebrew Manuscripts, is also hosted by the NLI. This database reached its current form after many years of development. Starting as the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in 1950, it has since become the most important resource for handwritten documents in Hebrew script. Their aim is to provide open access to all Hebrew manuscripts, and have, I quote, “a quick and efficient search engine, enabling manuscript searches according to their physical attributes, content, historical and artistic context.” End quote. Since Ktiv deals with manuscripts, and OCR technology is not yet advanced enough to be applied to handwritten documents, the website is built and organised differently from Delpher. This is an important distinction that highlights the importance of tailoring digital platforms to the type of material they present. A Delpher-like system for manuscripts would simply not be as effective or even particularly useful. I think Ktiv is a great example for making handwritten material available online in a functional and structured form.

All of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana’s Hebrew and Yiddish manuscripts that were not already microfilmed have been photographed in preparation for being uploaded onto Ktiv. This is an ongoing process and not all the images are available online yet, but all the corresponding metadata is. This makes Ktiv a functional source of information as a world-wide catalogue of Hebrew manuscripts, and it will become even more useful and comprehensive as the years go by.

Rachel CW: The title of this year’s conference is “The Sky’s the Limit: The Next Generation of Judaica Librarianship.” Research using heritage material requires a specific manner of thinking and searching, which Google and other search engines, like a library catalogue, often don’t have the creativity for. Just like people no longer remember phone numbers, choosing to rely instead on the contact list in their phones, bibliographical knowledge isn’t something people are used to having to build anymore. Students have often not had to remember where to find useful bibliographies because they could always rely on a library’s search engines and Google. However once they start more in-depth research, for their

dissertation for example, that's exactly the sort of knowledge they need. As a result, students often go to their supervisors or librarians for the first push in the right direction. At the same time, tailor-made subject indices often disappear from online catalogues, or are not understood. Card catalogues aren't being used anymore in part because people no longer know how. We are currently in a transitional age of librarianship, making it the perfect time to educate a new generation of librarians in the old methods and how to apply them to modern advances in library technology.

As the latest junior curator, I have the privilege of forming part of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana's long tradition of training the next generation of Judaica library curators. Louis Hirschel, curator from 1930 to 1940, Adri Offenbergh, curator from 1973 to 2003, Emile Schrijver, curator from 2003 to 2015, and Rachel Boertjens, curator from 2013 to the present, all received their education hands-on, through working in the library, assisting patrons, and handling the material. The importance of working with the collection cannot be overstated. Doing so whenever possible can teach a young librarian everything from the history of bookmaking, trends and styles over the centuries, what is normal and what is exceptional, and even the history of the collection and the institution where it is kept. Reading academic articles on these subjects is certainly beneficial and indeed necessary, but the combination of knowledge and experience that is admired in great librarians can only be achieved through the active handling of material.

This is especially the case with special collections. Merely from looking at a book, opening it, and looking at its binding you can get a good idea of the book's history, where it could have been produced, who may have owned it, and whether an owner was wealthy. A book's shelf marks, both current and former, give insight into provenance, and even the history of the library collection and the institution, and how they grew. With experience you can begin to identify the place and time of publication from the lettering, the formatting of the text, or the style of the title page, simply from having seen so many like it. Patterns become clearer, and certain concepts from the literature that may previously have remained abstract become increasingly concrete and understandable the more books you see, study, and work with.

Practical work is also important for archivists. Learning the theory behind the way archives are built, curated, stored, and catalogued is crucial, but anyone who has built an archive will know that in practice you are presented with exception after exception to the standard order of archival divisions. Once you have a few archival collections under your belt, it becomes easier to find a practical and appropriate solution to the issues presented by a particular archive. Sometimes this merely requires an adaptation of a previous solution and other times a new one would be more effective.

The well-established history of on-the-job training at the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, and the years of experience that went along with it, formed the basis of the first designated training programme to be instituted at the Special Collections.

Rachel B: In 2012 when Ets Haim, the library of the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam, became part of the Jewish Cultural Quarter some major changes had to be made. The library website did not have much useful information for potential visitors and researchers, and

also lacked an online catalogue. While there was library staff, there wasn't a structured library service to support them. The boards of the synagogue and the Jewish Cultural Quarter turned to the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, at the time headed by Prof. Emile Schrijver and I, for help and advice. Shortly after the curator of Ets Haim retired, Emile was named interim curator, to prepare for the set up of an online catalogue and to assemble a new small group of staff. Both Emile and I were easily available for training and questions from the new staff, since our two libraries are located less than a mile apart.

At that point we realized the need for training professionals who could work with Jewish Heritage material, and the significant role that the Jewish collections in Amsterdam could play in it. In 2013 when Emile was appointed professor of Jewish Book History at the University of Amsterdam, we decided to try and raise money to facilitate a training programme for curators that could give a young professional the time and the opportunity to fully grow in the role of a trained library and archive curator.

The aim of the programme is that after a few years of training the curator would have a solid base of knowledge on book history, and Jewish book history in particular. They would be able to manage every aspect of a Jewish collection and all activities that may be required, such as acquisition, digitisation, and cataloguing. The training programme is intended to promote a deep understanding of heritage material and will enable the junior curator to advise users such as researchers and students.

In 2015 Emile became the general director of the Jewish Cultural Quarter. Due to cutbacks, the University of Amsterdam decided not to hire another curator, leaving me as the sole curator of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana. The desire for a junior curator suddenly became a necessity. With the help of the Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe, and two Dutch charitable foundations, Stichting Levi Lassen and the Dr. Henriette Boas Stichting, we managed to establish a three year training programme.

The Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe suggested we standardise the programme so it could easily be applied to other Jewish heritage institutions. Together, we are currently looking for other collections that are also suitable locations for training a junior curator. The programme can be tailored to the needs of the participating institutions, while still providing training in the broad variety of Jewish heritage material. One of the benefits of collaborating institutions is the interchange of knowledge, ideas, research, internships and workshops on special material.

Rachel CW: The standardised training programme is based on four elements.

The first being heritage material and the diversity of it, for example printed books, manuscripts, ephemera, broadsides, periodicals, photographs, prints, and archives. Secondly, library users: including the questions users have regarding the library, the collection and its material, understanding the (academic) backgrounds users have and their reasons for using the collection.

The third element is presentation, which covers the library catalogues and digital material, positioning the collection in a broad academic context, participating in exhibitions and giving tours of the collection.

And finally, preservation, which covers not only physical preservation but also making sure future generations will be able to use the material digitally.

The way the programme has been applied at the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana is mentor-based. Every day I work side by side with the curator, answering user questions, helping library patrons, and participating in any projects at the library, such as the previously mentioned Metamorfoze project. Besides that, we focus on specific skills, like making archival descriptions and inventories, acquisitions, and cataloguing. For each skill I receive training from a specialist at the university library. I already have some experience with archives, and this summer I will be receiving in-depth archival training on the basis of a recently acquired archive. Over the first six months of the programme I was taught to catalogue by a colleague in the Acquisitions and Metadata department, first how to make copycat records, then derived records, and eventually new records. Training began with modern books, and progressed to more complex material. I am currently cataloguing Rules and Regulations booklets independently, and hope to start cataloguing rare books and incunabula next year. The progress of each element is monitored and reflected upon every quarter, with adjustments to the schedule being made where necessary. The quarterly review has been an excellent tool for keeping track of what I have been doing and learning, which sections have been receiving the right amount of focus, and which may need a bit more, or less, attention in the next quarter. External deadlines, such as those relating to the Metamorfoze digitisation project, and internal organisational ones may mean some weeks are focused on only one or two of the four elements. This is naturally the case in any work environment. Considering the training programme in three-month blocks allows flexibility without running the risk of neglecting an area of training for too long. Frequent analysis also helps tailor the programme to the person doing it. A natural affinity for, say, cataloguing, may mean that that timeline gets sped up and more can be done sooner, while if certain projects are moving along slower, the timeline can be adjusted before it becomes a problem.

Rachel B: The Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana has close links with the Hebrew department and the Faculty of Humanities. Since the university library has no other staff that can read Hebrew, I also maintain the Hebrew department library. During the preparation of the training programme, I consulted the head of the Hebrew and Jewish studies department, Prof Irene Zwiep. Together we came up with the idea to try to actively include collections in PhD positions. For instance, a former student at the Hebrew department is doing her PhD at the University of Nijmegen on Jewish private libraries, and since our library contains most of her research material, I want to try to involve her in the Footprints project, which I assume you're all aware of.

We believe that creating training programmes and actively encouraging research into collections will help strengthen the position of Jewish libraries, Jewish collections, and Jewish studies all over the world.