

Copenhagen Judaica – old collections and new possibilities

The intention of this presentation is to give you some insights into the Judaica and Hebraica collections of [The Royal Library](#) in Copenhagen, their history and their complexity. Furthermore, I intend to give you some insights into how we try to make our collections known and accessible, while at the same time ensuring that they are well preserved for future users.

[The Royal Library](#) of today is both university and national library—a result of a merger between the library of the University of Copenhagen (1479) and The Royal Library that has taken place successively during the last 60 years. The library can therefore be said to have two dates of origin: 1482, when the university library was founded and 1648, or thereabout, when King Frederik III ascended to the throne and made the royal book collection, that had been assembled by his predecessors on the throne, into a royal library. The first Royal Librarian was appointed about a decade later, and for the remainder of the 17th and the 18th centuries, the library's collections grew through purchase, through testamentary dispositions, and—not the least—through wartime confiscations of different book collections abroad. Parallel with this, the legal deposit law of 1697 ensured (more or less) that all books printed in the Danish realm became part of the collection. A century later, in 1793, the library was made accessible to the public.

The Judaica and Hebraica collections grew in the same way as the rest of the library. Medieval Hebrew manuscripts were purchased as objects of art and prestige, but also to enable Christian theological study of the Hebrew Bible. Also Jewish exegesis and philosophy were topics of study, either for their own sake, or to enable clergymen better to refute heretical thoughts and preach the gospel to any Jew that they might encounter—abroad, that is. In this period, some of our most valued and valuable manuscripts were acquired abroad, by scholars and students, and brought back to Denmark, intended as gifts for the King or other benefactors—presumably in the hope of future benefits—or for study purposes. Let me give you two examples.

The first example is the manuscript known as “[The Copenhagen Maimonides](#).” This copy of the *Moreh Nevukhim* was written and illuminated—on almost every page—in Barcelona in 1347/48. It was bought in Amsterdam by a Danish theologian at the end of the 17th century, and eventually acquired by The Royal Library in 1732. It is without any competition the most famous of the Hebrew manuscripts in our collection, and app. 98% of all orders for photographs that reach me, are requests for fol. 114a, which is used to illustrate texts about Maimonides, Aristotle, Jewish philosophy, medieval science, *la convivencia*—you name it. [Another page](#) from the same codex might be recognized by some of you as the logotype for the European Association for Jewish Studies - on this page two recurring themes in the codex is represented, birds and the fabulous beasts. A final example that I cannot refrain from showing you, is a small “beast” appearing in the margin of the manuscript - for some reason, he reminds me of Yoda in the *Star Wars* movies ...

Another codex from the former royal collection is a Pentateuch written in [Ebermannstadt](#) in southern Germany, purportedly in the year 1290 (shelf mark: Cod. Heb. 11). The gothic pattern—made out of micrographic script—clearly shows influences from the surrounding church architecture.

This manuscript must have had a fascinating “life.” It was acquired in Egypt almost five hundred years after its completion by Friedrich Christian von Haven. He was a member of a scholarly expedition sent by the Danish King Frederik V to explore Yemen. This expedition of the early 1760's - out of which only the geographer and cashier Carsten Niebuhr survived to return to Denmark - bought ten Hebrew manuscripts, all biblical texts. Almost immediately when these manuscripts arrived in Denmark, and became known to the scholarly world, a loan request came to the Danish prime minister from Benjamin Kennicott in Oxford, who was working on his collation of all Hebrew Bible manuscripts in Europe. The request was looked upon favourably, and the manuscripts were sent to England. Thankfully, they were returned to Denmark safe and sound.

So far, all the manuscripts I have mentioned were brought to Denmark by Christian scholars. The first Jews, who were permitted to settle within the Danish kingdom, arrived in 1622 to Glückstadt, a by then newly founded Danish town situated northwest of Hamburg. Settlements existed also in other towns, governed by Denmark but situated in present-day Germany, namely Altona and Wandsbeck, now part of Greater Hamburg. From these towns, from Hamburg itself and from other parts of Germany and eventually Europe, Jewish merchants and manufacturers began trickling into Denmark proper. They eventually reached Copenhagen, and in 1684, permission to hold services in the capital was granted.

Throughout the 18th century, the Jewish population of Copenhagen and other Danish towns grew slowly but steadily, but as in all the Scandinavian countries, it has never reached far beyond 0.1 per cent of the population in general.

Few Hebrew books were ever printed in Copenhagen. Most needs were catered for by the print shops in Altona and Wandsbeck. By the mid 19th century, when Denmark had lost its last German possessions, the degree of assimilation in the Danish Jewry made the needs even less. It was only through the influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe by the end of the nineteenth century, that there came a need for prints with Hebrew letters—only now the language was Yiddish. Some of the manuscripts and printed works belonging to the Jewish Congregation in Copenhagen are deposited in The Royal Library, and another part, sorted out by the Congregation in the 1980's, have recently partly been sold through private hands to Stanford University Library, where it forms [The Samson/Copenhagen Judaica Collection](#) (for further information, see the paper by Beth Ryan). A minor part is also deposited in the [Danish State Archives](#), and finally, the Jewish Community has kept part of their collections.

Returning to The Royal Library, we have by now entered the era of the single most influential person when talking about Jewish booklore in Copenhagen and Denmark: [Rabbi David Simonsen](#).

David Simonsen was born in Copenhagen in 1853. Having finished his education at the University of Copenhagen, he received his training as a Rabbi at the *Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar* in Breslau. After graduating, he returned to Copenhagen, where he first upheld the position of assistant Rabbi. For ten years, 1892-1902, he served as chief rabbi. Stepping down – for reasons only known to him – enabled him to pursue his research interests and, above all, his book collecting.

Depending on whether one counts titles or volumes—the figures varies a lot—it is estimated that his private library held approximately 40.000 volumes. Of these, app. 20.000 volumes were Judaica and Hebraica titles. They ranged from medieval manuscripts to the latest scholarly publications, including a responsa collection numbering some 750 titles. Both first editions of Rabbinica within every conceivable field, as well as the scholarly editions of classical texts are included. Throughout his life, he was in contact with a great number of the leading scholars in Europe, and was well known to many others. One example may illustrate both his fame and the postal communications of the time: we have in our collection some of the first issues of a periodical called *Ohel Yitschaq*, published in Satmar, Hungary, from 1902 and on. These were sent to David Simonsen in the following way: you take a bound issue of the periodical, put a string around it to hold it together, put a stamp in the upper right corner, and attach a label on the cover where you write "Professor Simonsen, Kopenhagen, Denemark." Since we have it in the library, the method must have worked just fine.

The book collection was sold to the Royal Library one week before David Simonsen passed away, and became the core of the Judaica Collection at The Royal Library (regarding the catalogue, see below). But together with the book collection, The Royal Library also obtained a maybe even greater treasure: his personal archives, containing some 60.000(?) documents, most of them letters. Several attempts were made over the years to organize the contents of the archives, but for different

reasons, none of them was completed. However, three years ago, the decision was made to allot the necessary resources, and in cooperation with our Manuscript Department, the first version of a register of the senders and addressees was made public in June 2004. This first version of the list includes some 4.600 names, and is available on-line on the [archives' website](#), where also a short biographical sketch over David Simonsen can be found.

David Simonsen was engaged in various and numerous Jewish organisations, dedicated to every possible need and interest, most of them philanthropic in nature. During World War One, he seems to have handled an immense number of connections and correspondence between organisations and families in the war-faring countries on different sides of the front. He also corresponded with "everybody" who was engaged in anything remotely Jewish in Europe, the United States and the then Palestine, as well as a number of Danish scholars and cultural personalities. The names range from a Danish Miss Abraham, over Albert Einstein, to the Zion War Orphanage in Jerusalem - and even further, taking into account the three additional letters of the Scandinavian alphabets... For anyone interested in Jewish Studies, genealogical studies, relief work and relief organisations, or, to put it bluntly, anything going on between 1880 and 1930, I strongly recommend a visit. There are also a couple of thousand documents in Hebrew, Yiddish and Slavic languages; the next phase is to add any names on these documents to the list.

What it looks like, when you keep 40.000 books and 60.000 papers in a two room flat, is amply demonstrated by this [photo of him and his wife](#), taken in connection with the sale of the collection. The couple, who had no children, had to buy the neighbouring flat to have a place to live, and local lore has it that the building came to require extra support to prevent it from sinking into the ground.

Having been secured during the Nazi occupation by being "hidden" among the Orientalia Collections of the Library, the Judaica collection—now part of the Department of Oriental and Judaica Collections - has steadily grown through the almost 75 years, that have passed since this photo was taken. Today, it holds close to 40.000 titles, including app. 9.000 titles in Western languages printed before 1950. All more recent works in Western languages, as well as many older Judaica titles, belong to the main collection of the library. The manuscript collection contains more than 400 titles, contained in app. 300 volumes. There are also some 30 incunables (titles) and app. 350 16th century prints (titles). The total budget for 2005 for new monographs etc. (regardless of language) is app. USD 11.000 (DKK 64.500), to this is added the costs for periodicals and some electronic resources. The permanent staff consists of the present speaker, holding a position that includes a research part of 25%. To my help, I have a student assistant, or two, on an "on-and-off"-basis, depending on the financial situation of the moment.

Having outlined the history of the collection, and thereby also its main groups of contents, I will now turn to what I perceive as the central problems and possibilities of the present time, namely preservation and accessibility. Our main preservation project, which will go on for another couple of years, is to give each volume printed before 1950 a custom-made acid free archival container box. This facilitates the handling of the volumes greatly, and will also reduce the variations in temperature and humidity. There has been talk of a "de-acidification" drive, but so far, the cost has been too high.

The same boxing has also been done for our manuscripts, but here we have also begun using the new possibilities that the Internet provides, which brings me to my other keyword: accessibility. So far, only one of our Hebrew manuscripts has been published as a digital facsimile, and that is the *Moreh Nevukhim* I mentioned earlier. Hopefully, this facsimile site will grow with further links, references and analyses, and thus become a centre for resources dealing with this manuscript. We are also planning to make other manuscripts available in the same way.

Accessibility is also a question of the users being able to find the books. In the ordinary on-line catalogues, we have been using Hebrew characters for a couple of years now. All records also

contain a simple transcription of author and title. Almost all the cataloguing of the older Hebraica and Yiddica has been done using Hebrew characters, and the records are available in our OPAC [REX](#). Not all records are of the same quality, but hopefully the data are recognisable.

As I indicated earlier, digitization seems to be the way forward. There are however two aspects that one should consider before walking down this path. Normally, the argument for digitization is that more documents, manuscripts, whatever, become accessible to everyone (provided that they have a computer, of course). Another argument is that the original document is spared from tear and wear. On the other hand, this wider accessibility might also feed a bigger interest in the item, and therefore lead to more scientific studies of the original, more requests for photographs etc. etc. Therefore, best solution is to combine the digitization process with producing photographs and/or high quality master files that can be used for making print quality files and photos. But again, this is a question of resources of different kinds.

The other question involves the demands made on us as librarians. Should there always be a "companion volume", i.e. a scholarly commentary of some length, accompanying a digitized facsimile edition? What if there is an extraordinarily beautiful manuscript of which we know almost nothing, should that refrain us from making it public? Or the opposite: what about highly interesting contents in a boring setting? The ideal is, of course, to digitize everything and to have specialists write extensive commentaries. But most libraries, including my own, have for economical reasons to rely on the existing staff, with its limitations in knowledge and time available.

Nevertheless, I *do* think that digitization is the way to go. To give access to the treasures and the ordinary books of the library—with or without commentaries—must be better than the alternative. Other institutions can help with this; in Copenhagen we are now fortunate to have the [Danish Jewish Museum](#), designed by Daniel Libeskind, as partners in showing objects from our collections, and in enhancing the interest in, and knowledge of, our collections. I can only hope that the future will provide further, exciting possibilities and resources that will enable libraries like my own to make their collections known, and available, for everyone interested in Jewish Studies.

For further information

[The Judaica Collection of The Royal Library](#)

[The history of The Royal Library](#)

Other Danish links of interest

[The Jewish Community in Denmark](#)

[The Jewish Genealogical Society of Denmark](#)

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