

THE EPHEMERA COLLECTION AT THE JEWISH NATIONAL AND UNIVERSITY LIBRARY IN JERUSALEM

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Description: This presentation will offer a definition of ephemeral material in general and will then focus on the collection of the Jewish National and University Library (JNUL) in Jerusalem. After giving an overview and history, the speaker will discuss the problems encountered in cataloging this type of special collection.

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The ephemera collection contains a collection of leaflets.

What exactly is a leaflet (or a Broadside, or Flugschrift in German, or Feuille volante in French)?

Leaflets are printed material consisting of only a few leaves or, more frequently, one leaf only. They are written in a popular, simple language and deal with topics, which concern everyday life, with issues that are the focus of a current public argument or which attract significant attention and demand public expression. They are ephemeral because their content was meant for current issues and most of them, being transient, were thrown away after being read.

Leaflets penetrate every corner of Jewish life: History, religion, culture, folklore, economy. But let us start with the use of leaflets in general. According to the *Reallexikon der deutschen Literatur Geschichte*, leaflets are an important source for historians, especially for those who research the 16th and the 17th centuries. During that time they fulfilled the role of journals and newspapers and were a crucial tool in the religious wars, for instance.

Leaflets continued to play a role even during the 18th and 19th centuries in public disputes, for they could be printed quickly and distributed within a short time.

They were often written in a satirical or even ironic style by authors who concealed their true identity behind a pseudonym or initials. Because of the polemic character of the issues their authors preferred to remain unknown. Frequently the leaflets were written as a literary piece with a veiled political content.

The Jews adopted this means of communication with enthusiasm. Being a widely dispersed minority the leaflets were a very important tool for the Jews and they used it even more than the general world in which they lived.

By means of spreading leaflets they gave a voice to struggles and conflicts in various topics and it was also a convenient way of communication among communities.

Only a small part of the ephemeral material was devoted to literary pieces. Hayim Schirmann mentions only short poems for weddings, other family celebrations and memorial tributes. Steinschneider, in his list of Rangstreit Literatur mentions the “pictures of the moment” poems, poems which capture the little minutes and events of life.

The leaflets were often written in haste in order to spread an edict of the government or of the Jewish leadership as rapidly as possible, and therefore even spelling mistakes can be traced in some of them.

The main problem with this kind of material is that it was not preserved. Only in the 19th century did a few catalogues mention such pamphlets, which were collected by a few people who lived in Italy. It was meant for its time, the publishers were not concerned with its historical significance, and many of the leaflets, after being read and discussed, were thrown away. Only quite recently did librarians begin to give them the attention they deserve, to acquire what remained of the ephemera and to develop their leaflets collection. Among those, the leader in the field, is the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, which owns thousands of leaves.

The exact number is unknown. Most of the leaflets are collected and kept by the department of manuscripts and archives. The department tries to gather as many leaflets as possible, but collecting such an amount prevents them from a full and exact registration of the complete collection.

The library main catalogue, which does not yet include the catalogue of the manuscripts and archives department, contains approximately 5500 properly catalogued leaflets. In addition, the department of archives has a rough registration of part of the material. Many leaflets were part of personal archives left to the library by their owners. One of them, for example, was prof. Gershom Scholem, the famous kabbala researcher, who collected leaflets, being aware of their importance to historians and researchers.

There are subjects which are fully covered by registration in the archives, such as: The underground movements in Israel during the time of the British rule in Israel and the pamphlets of the parties in Israel before elections.

Today, due to computer technology, a lot of leaflets are published in Israel. The library tries to collect the desk top publishing material and to keep them, being the mirror of the period.

The Hebrew catalogue department tries to purchase important leaflets but there are two main problems which prevent us from obtaining more than a few of them: The first problem is that leaflets are very expensive and budget problems increase from year to year. The second one is that in auctions libraries from countries outside Israel want to obtain this material and it is impossible to compete with them. Being so important we think the best place for the ephemera material is the National Library of Israel which is the library of the whole Jewish people around the world and we hope that in the future that fact will be taken into consideration.

The importance of leaflets for the researcher of Jewish history lies in the fact that they reveal apparently insignificant, uncommon aspects of the past and expose marginal phenomena which are not mentioned in comprehensive works.

This unique way of communication can be found all over the Jewish Diaspora, In Europe as well as in North Africa. In every country only some of the leaflets have been recovered and many of them are in poor physical condition, because they were not treated as books. A great effort is needed in order to restore them properly.

The leaflets were meant for a varied public, which included people of different levels of culture. Therefore they were often written in the local Jewish dialect – Yiddish, Ladino or Judeo Arabic.

These historical facts serve as the background in understanding the many difficulties and problems concerning the cataloguing of the ephemeral material.

1. The leaflets generally do not have any title and the document starts with expressions or words as: Dear brothers, Dear holy congregation, Announcement etc. Such words, serving as a title, oblige the librarian to use other means in order to inform the reader about the contents of the leaflet. He can write a brief comment, which describes the main issue dealt with in the document. He can write a citation taken from the text in this note, or he can write a subtitle, using the text itself. Any way he chooses, compels him to read the whole document in order to point out its main theme. If the language in which the document is written is unknown to the librarian, he has to consult with those who understand these languages, for instance: Ladino or Judeo Arabic.
2. The date and/or place of publication are often missing in those leaves. Being concerned with the present, the publisher often refrained from mentioning this data, which was self evident to the reader at that time. The librarian has to decide where and when it was published. He can get assistance from the content of the document or from its external form: Its language and dialect, the form of the print, the name of the publisher or printer, if they are mentioned, the signatories, the seal, the frame, the adornment and illustrations in and around the text. If, by chance the author is mentioned the librarian can trace the imprint according to the place and time in which the writer lived and created. Dealing with prayers in honour of an emperor, the imprint can be traced according to the period and place of the emperor's activity. In an amulet against an epidemic illness, the librarian can find assistance in the historic details known about the epidemic: when it took place and in which countries.
3. The author is usually unknown, but sometimes his name is hidden in between the lines or in the first letters of each line. Sometimes the leaf is written as a riddle and we can trace the writer by solving the riddle.
4. These documents are often, as we have already seen, in poor physical condition and the upper or lower part of the page is missing. This deformation creates a problem for the librarian in tracing essential data – the intended public, the imprint, the writer. Great parts of the text are missing and this makes the understanding of the content extremely difficult. The librarian has to use common sense and imagination in order

to write a proper note which describes what, supposedly, was written in the document.

The uniqueness of this material compels the librarian to use his knowledge and that of subject specialists, who are ready to cooperate with him. He has to consult many reference books and rely on his own common sense. He must be able to compare documents in order to reveal crucial data essential to create a proper catalogue entry.

Pamphlets are still in use today. We see them every Shabbat in the synagogues, for instance, or on the walls of the Mea Shearim neighborhood. One hundred or even fifty years from now they will be sold as rare ephemeral material. There were times when current leaflets were not purchased in the National library. Nowadays the librarians understand that in a few years this material will be rare and therefore they try to obtain whatever is available.

I hope that I have succeeded in showing you a glimpse of the rich, fascinating world of leaflets and have aroused your curiosity and your wish to go on and research this field of library science and its treasures.