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« Où sont les bibliothèques spoliées par les nazis ?

Tentatives d'identification et de restitution, un chantier en cours »

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# Books on diaspora – A few remarks on a research strategy in tracing the postwar fate of Jewish book collections on the example of the Esra library

Monika Biesaga

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**Books on diaspora –  
A few remarks on a research strategy in tracing the postwar fate of Jewish book  
collections on the example of the Esra library**

The Second World War brought to an end a thousand-years existence of Polish Jews and their cultural heritage. From over 748 secular Jewish libraries<sup>1</sup> and unnumbered religious and private book collections that existed in Poland before 1939, only fragments remained. During the war, Jewish collections were systematically destroyed, but some of them coming from libraries and institutions of major significance in history, were confiscated by the Nazis for so-called 'research' purposes and transferred to Germany. However, for many years after the war little attention was paid to these *Bibliocaust survivors*. Some books were returned to their previous owners or handed over to Jewish cultural and historical institutions, but thousands of volumes are still waiting to be rediscovered and restituted.

Since the late 1990s, some of the German libraries have attempted to resituate Jewish book collections that went into their possession after the war. One of the latest projects is an online database called Looted Cultural Assets which includes provenance details about the plundered collections<sup>2</sup>. However, nowadays the main difficulty lies in finding their previous owners or their rightful successors. This is particularly true of the institutional libraries that before the war were run by Jewish organizations, associations and communities that no longer exist.

One such example is the Esra<sup>3</sup> Public Library and Reading Room – one of the first Jewish public libraries on Polish lands<sup>4</sup>. It existed in Cracow for 40 years (1899-1939) and its aim was to collect mainly modern secular literature. The history of this institution goes back as far as to the 1880s. The library was a joint project of the Association of Progressive Jews, the „B'nei B'rith”, the Cultural Association „Sfas Emes”, and the Jewish Religious Community of Cracow. Its book collection consisted of around 6000 books and periodicals in Hebrew,

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<sup>1</sup> *Biblioteki oświatowe: spis na dzień 1 stycznia 1930 roku oraz tablice statystyczne*, oprac. Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego. Warszawa; Lwów: Nakł. Państwowego Wydawnictwa Książek Szkolnych, 1932.

<sup>2</sup> This project was launched in 2016 by four German libraries: Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin – Centrum Judaicum Library, Freie Universität Berlin University Library, Potsdam University Library and Berlin Central and Regional Library. See: <http://lootedculturalassets.de/>

<sup>3</sup> Also written in some sources as Ezra.

<sup>4</sup> In the year 1795 Poland was partitioned between three neighbouring countries and disappeared from the political map of Europe for 123 years. It regained the independence at the end of World War I.

Yiddish, German and Polish. Though this collection was neither very precious in terms of rarity of the items nor extensive (e.g. the book collection of the Jewish public library in Białystok consisted of about 40 thousand items) the Esra library was considered of research interest by the Nazis. For this reason, its collection was dismantled and partly transferred to Germany<sup>5</sup>.

Using the Esra example, this paper aims to present a research strategy in attempts to trace and virtually reconstitute remaining Jewish book collections. In addition, it puts an emphasis not only on finding the books themselves, but also to map the routes the books have travelled to their present location(s).

#### *Steps of the research process*

The dispersion of Jewish books after the war is evident and practically limitless. The holdings of looted libraries, lending libraries, reading rooms and private book collections can be found simply everywhere – in American, Israeli, Western and Eastern European libraries, museums and historical institutes, in antiquarian bookshops, on internet auctions, in bibliophiles' collections and in private hands. That is why, also a research strategy can be practically limitless and encompasses all possible routes that researchers may think of.

One possible research path leads from documentation to books. Reconstructing the postwar story of a certain book collection needs to be started from studying its history, meaning, size and book stamps<sup>6</sup>. This can be done by browsing archival documents, newspapers cuttings and other sources that allow us to understand the importance of the library and the role it played in the life of Jewish community.

The study of wartime fate of book collections can be based not only on the Nazis documentation, but also on diaries and memoirs of eyewitnesses. Sometimes the smallest piece of information can lead to a great discovery.

Even discovering actual and potential places where looted books had been stored is only the initial step in the research process. After the war, there were different policies towards returning cultural treasures, hence some of the book collections were further dismantled and sent to different locations<sup>7</sup>. Institutions that have received such collections usually scattered them throughout the general collection holdings, and no information about previous ownership were incorporated into catalogue records. Nowadays it is very difficult to locate the items within

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<sup>5</sup> More about this library, see: Monika Rausz, *Biblioteka i Czytelnia Ezra w Krakowie*, in: *Kraków - Lwów: książki, czasopisma, biblioteki. T. 7*. Kraków 2005, pp. 148-157 ; Monika Biesaga, *Biblioteka Judaistyczna „Esra” w Krakowie (1899-1939)*, „Krzysztofory. Zeszyty Naukowe Muzeum Historycznego Miasta Krakowa” (in print).

<sup>6</sup> One library could have changed a stamp or have more than one.

<sup>7</sup> The Allied forces in the American occupation zone set up a few collecting points at Munich, Wiesbaden, Marburg, and Offenbach, and each of them had its own restitution policy.

libraries' holdings, especially when it comes to big institutions such as research, academic, or national libraries.

Moreover, many books after the war found their way to the black market and could have gone from one hand to another, without any note of provenance. Rare and valuable volumes could have been sold at auctions (so there is a chance to find records for them in auction catalogues), but a lot of books found their way to small antiquarian bookshops or internet auctions. In this case, the internet becomes a very helpful tool. We can promote our research project through social media, by creating our own website, joining specialist discussion forums, or simply by passing this information through word of mouth (e.g. on conferences, workshops or public lectures).

### *Wandering books*

The „Esra” library, one of the first secular libraries located in the building of the Jewish Religious Community in Cracow, was regarded with great importance for Cracow's Jews. In 1941 its book collection was dismantled and part of it up to 10 carts was transported to the Jagiellonian University Library (then Staatsbibliothek Krakau)<sup>8</sup>. According to some sources<sup>9</sup>, the Nazis transported around 4000 items to the library, but these numbers cannot be easily verified because of the lack of provenance information in the catalogue. To find out whether any books from this collection are still in the possession of the Jagiellonian Library, the author requested over 300 chosen items that match the description of the prewar collection<sup>10</sup>, and out of this research two books were found from the Esra library<sup>11</sup>.

Even if we assume that 4000 items are stored in the Jagiellonian Library, the fate of the remaining 2000 is still to be discovered.

Taking into account that during the war the most precious volumes could have been transferred to Germany along with other stolen assets from Cracow, the documentation of the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD)<sup>12</sup> was browsed. 414 books from the Esra library were listed

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<sup>8</sup> Archiwum Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej [eng. Archive of the Jagiellonian University Library], *Sprawozdanie z przewozu książek Judische Bibliothek „Esra” do BJ za czas od 1.07.1940 – 15.03. 1941; Sprawozdania z przewozu książek Judische Bibliothek „Esra” do BJ za czas od 28.10.1940 – 21.05. 1941.*

<sup>9</sup> Piotr Lechowski, *Biblioteki Krakowa w okresie okupacji niemieckiej 1939-1945*, Kraków 1999, p. 159.

<sup>10</sup> The author has selected from the catalogue books printed before 1939, dealing with Jewish topics in 4 following languages: Hebrew, Yiddish, German and Polish.

<sup>11</sup> Hopefully, in the future there will be a chance to further explore this case, but for the purpose of this research, at least it is established now that the Jagiellonian Library is one of the Polish institutions holding a part of this collection.

<sup>12</sup> The Offenbach Archival Depot was a collection point for all Jewish looted books and religious memorabilia in the American occupation zone in Germany. It was located close to Frankfurt am Main, where there was the Institute for the Exploration of the Jewish Question. By 1949, OAD returned 2.8 million to over 14 nations (out of more than 3.2 million items).

in one of the monthly reports dated to September 1946<sup>13</sup>. As only part of the books from OAD were returned to their previous owners, and others were sent to American, Palestinian (later Israeli), German, Soviet and other libraries, again, it gives us a lot of potential destinations.

Karol Estreicher, an acclaimed Polish art historian and the head of the Restoration Commission of the Polish government-in-exile in London, played an important role in restitution of Polish assets looted during World War II<sup>14</sup>. After the war, he made seven restitution voyages to Germany in search for stolen goods. In his vast archive, there are a few documents regarding Jewish books. One of the documents, which bears the stamp of the Offenbach Archival Depot (dated to September 1947), indicates the transport of 414 Jewish books<sup>15</sup>. Although the document does not mention the Esra library, it is most probable that it was not just a coincidence. Unfortunately, the archival documentation is not detailed enough to declare univocally what have happened to these books. We only know that for about two years the books were stored on the Wawel Castle. A further document dated to 1949 point that 18 carts of Jewish books were sent to Warsaw. Although no information about the exact institution is given, we can assume that the collection was handed over to the library of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (pl. Żydowski Instytut Historyczny)<sup>16</sup>. Unlike the Jagiellonian Library, searching for the Esra books in the collection of this institution was much easier. The library of the Jewish Historical Institute created a card catalogue of the prewar Jewish library stamps. Only in this catalogue, there are over 50 books listed from the Esra library. However this number can be higher, as the catalogue is not complete and encompasses only a part of the collection.

### *Books speak!*

Browsing archival files is not the only way of tracing the fate of stolen books. We may also reconstruct the routes the books have travelled by examining material evidence in them. Many items coming from libraries' or eminent bibliophiles' collections bear a stamp, an exlibris or handwritten annotations that help to indicate the original legal owner. In case of looted books, some of them can also bear additional evidence of looting and/or restitution process.

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<sup>13</sup> *Offenbach Archival Depot, Monthly Report, September 1946*, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> *Dokumenty rewindykacji polskich dóbr kultury zrabowanych przez Niemców w latach 1939-1944 z archiwum Karola Estreichera jr., największego rewindykatora w historii Europy (1939-1975)*, ed. Zbigniew Kazimierz Witek. Kraków 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Copies of the documents can also be found in the Ardelia Hall Collection, Offenbach Administrative Records, Cultural Objects Restitutions and Custody Reports, Poland.

<sup>16</sup> The Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw was created in 1947 as a continuation of the Central Jewish Historical Commission, founded in 1944.

In the book collection of the Old Synagogue, the branch of the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków, the author have found over 170 Esra books. As the book collection stored in the synagogue is not vast, it was possible to browse the whole collection and identify the Esra books by the stamp. Furthermore, the museum documentation<sup>17</sup> indicates the Social-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland<sup>18</sup> (pl. Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne Żydów w Polsce) as a donator of these books during the years 1977-1979<sup>19</sup>.

Another interesting example coming from the Esra library is a bound volume of *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*. This item is now in the possession of the library of the Jewish Institute in Cracow, but thanks to the book stamps we may dig deeper to the provenance history of this book. The second stamp gives us clear evidence of the previous owner – the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies (now the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies at the University of Oxford), which is the institution that donated the item to Cracow's library. Additional information on the same stamp tells us that this book was previously the part of the Kressel Collection<sup>20</sup>. Although, further research on how Getzel Kressel went into the possession of this item still has not bring any results, the story of this book shows how after many years this book has found its way back to Cracow.

#### *Exploring further*

Other copies of the Esra books have been found as a result of promoting the project through public presentations, information spread through the social media, and monitoring the most popular internet auctions. For example, two items were found by researchers, who came across them accidentally while working on their own projects. Thanks to them, it is proved that so far unnumbered copies of the Esra books are in the general holdings of the Salomon Ludwig Steinheim-Institut für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte an der Universität Duisburg-Essen and the National Library of Poland in Warsaw. With the help of the staff at the corporate archive of the Polish library, the author was able to establish the source of this acquisition, and it occurred that the book was donated to library in the 50s by a private person.

The growing number of digital libraries, subject databases and projects on provenance facilitate the research process in rediscovering looted books within the general

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<sup>17</sup> Archiwum Muzeum Historycznego Miasta Krakowa [eng. Archive of the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków], *Protokoły z posiedzenia komisji wyceny księzek judaistycznych (lata 1977-1979)*.

<sup>18</sup> Social-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland was established in 1950 becoming the first Jewish organization in Poland after the war. From the beginning its main task was to help Jews returning to Poland by documenting the fate of Polish Jews, helping to find lost family members and cultivating Jewish tradition.

<sup>19</sup> So far, no further information about the source of this acquisition was obtained.

<sup>20</sup> The Kressel Collection is the collection of nearly 400,000 newspaper cuttings mostly from the Hebrew press gathered by Getzel Kressel (1911-1986), Galician-born Israeli journalist, and acquired by the university in 1974.

holdings of libraries. All the signs and annotations are visible on digitized items, and sometimes the information about provenance is also incorporated into the databases' records. Following this route, the author have found Esra books on the database of the Central Jewish Library<sup>21</sup> and the Looted Cultural Assets.

Summing up, so far books from the Esra book collection were located in 4 countries, 9 institutions and 2 private collections<sup>22</sup>.

### *Conclusion*

Reconstructing the fate of each of the stolen collections requires a lot of time and effort, as well international cooperation between institutions and researchers. In many cases, the total cost of identifying the rightful owners exceeds the value of the books themselves, since many of them are neither precious nor unique. Moreover, these volumes require conservation work as a result of mishandling, mold, and other damages, which incur additional expenses. Hence, unlike pieces of art, many of the books even after the restoration will never get a high market value. All this discourages previous owners and institutions from tracing particular book collections and claiming them. However, like other cultural assets stolen by the Nazis, these books have a particular memory value, and at least such a virtual restitution of Jewish libraries can be our sign of remembrance about the vivid intellectual life of *the People of the Book*<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Central Jewish Library is a an online database that contains scanned documents from the archive and library of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. See: <http://cbj.jhi.pl/>

<sup>22</sup> Stara Synagoga, oddział Muzeum Historycznego Miasta Krakowa (Old Synagogue, the branch of The Historical Museum of the City of Kraków), Cracow, Poland ;  
Żydowska Gmina Wyznaniowa (The Jewish Religious Community), Cracow, Poland ;  
Biblioteka Jagiellońska (The Jagiellonian University Library), Cracow, Poland ;  
Henryk Halkowski private book collection, Cracow, Poland ;  
Żydowski Instytut Historyczny (The Jewish Historical Institute), Warsaw, Poland ;  
Biblioteka Narodowa (The National Library of Poland), Warsaw, Poland ;  
Salomon Ludwig Steinheim-Institut für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte an der Universität Duisburg-Essen, Essen, Germany ;  
Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden, Hamburg, Germany ;  
prof. Gershon Bacon private book collection, Israel ;  
Leopold Muller Memorial Library, Oxford, United Kingdom (now in the library of the Institute of Jewish Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow).

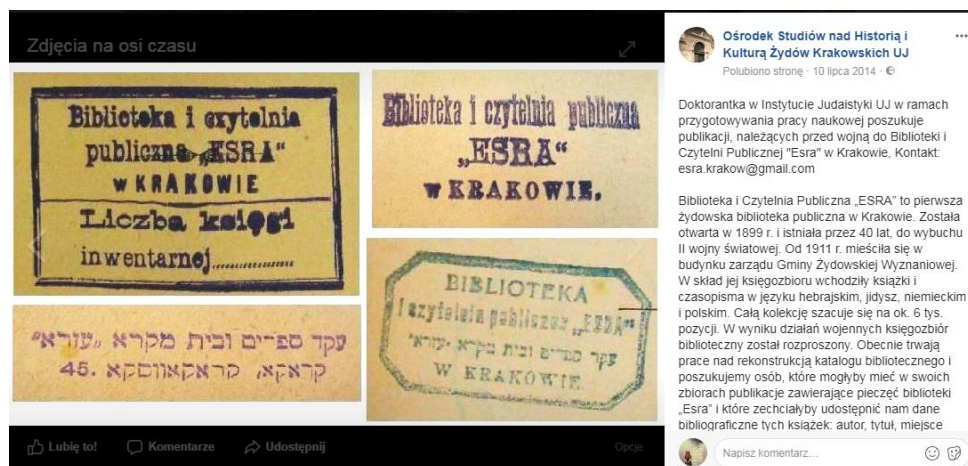
<sup>23</sup> Here, I wish to express my thanks to all the people who helped me in my research: prof. Gershon Bacon, dr Magdalena Bendowska, Anna Dawidowicz, dr hab. Michał Galas, Marta Gołąb, Olga Horain-Schlappa, Iwo Hryniewicz, Monika Jaremków, Jörn Kreuzer, dr Alicja Maślak-Maciejewska, dr Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikov, dr Daniel Reiser, dr Marek Tuszewicki and Małgorzata A. Quinkenstein. Also, if someone reading this article has come across the „Esra” books, please contact the author at [esra.krakow@gmail.com](mailto:esra.krakow@gmail.com).



## Appendix



1. The „Esra” library book stamps. Fot. Monika Biesaga.



2. One of the adverts of the project posted on the Facebook account of the Centre for the Study on the History and Culture of Krakow's Jews at the Jagiellonian University. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/oshkzkuj/>.




**Dane dotyczące aukcji**

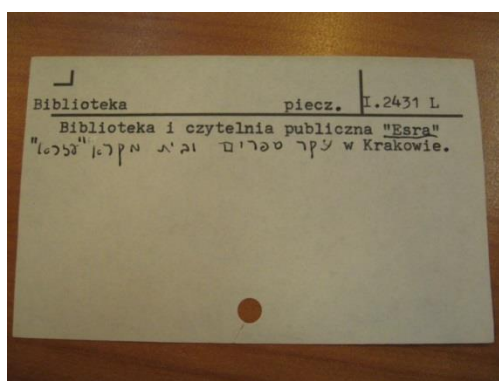
Tytuł:  
**BIBLIOTEKA CZYTELNIĄ PUBLICZNA "ESRA" (numer 2611634912)**

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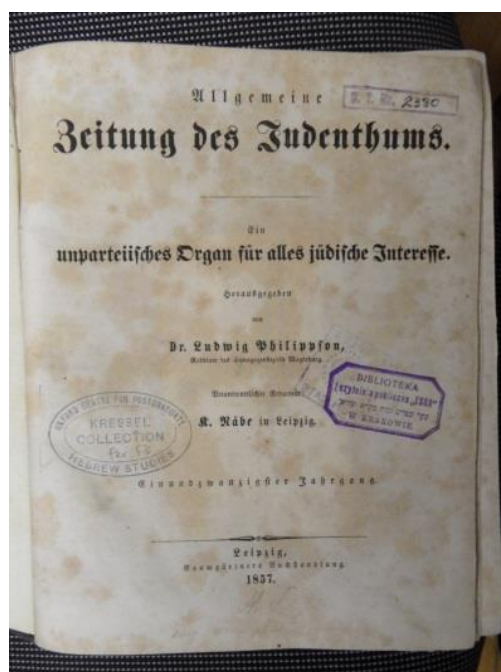
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[Numer użytkownika \(1\)](#)



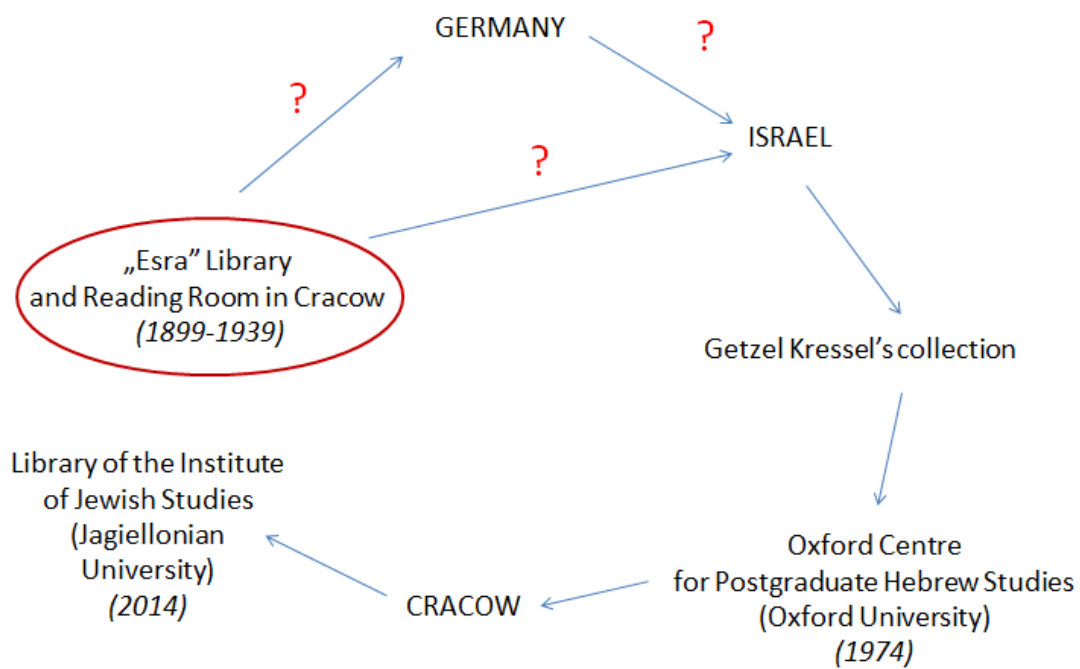
3. The exlibris from the „Esra” library sold on the internet auction. Source: <https://allegro.pl/>



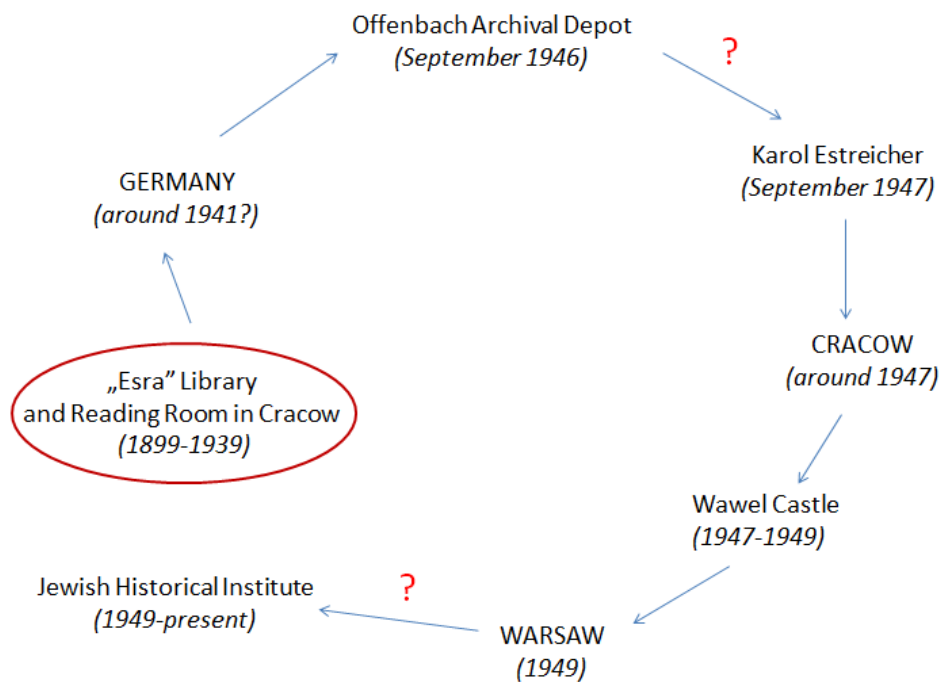
4. One of the catalogue cards from the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw indicating the book from the „Esra” library. Fot. Monika Biesaga.



5. One of the „Esra” books, now in the collection of the library of the Institute of Jewish Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. Fot. Monika Biesaga.



6. Reconstruction of the routes that the volume of „Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums” from the „Esra” library has travelled.



7. Reconstruction of the routes that 414 „Esra” books (registered in OAD Monthly Report in Sept. 1946) have possibly travelled.