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Towson University Raises Awareness about Unique Collection

Nadia Nasr, with a contribution from Joyce Garczynski (Towson University)

Imagine this: You're two years into your first job as an archivist and just as you're moving into your institution's recently renovated facilities, you receive a gem of a collection: nearly three thousand volumes of rare Judaica books dating from the fifteenth through twentieth centuries. Only half the collection is cataloged and most of the material is printed in languages other than English, including Hebrew, German, Russian, Polish, French, Latin, and Yiddish. Much of it is in need of conservation work, but you don't have an in-house lab and would need funding to outsource the work. You immediately recognize the value of the collection, along with the monumental task of ensuring it's put to good use.

The scenario described is the situation I found myself in during the summer of 2009. Baltimore Hebrew University (BHU), a small, independent Jewish university, integrated its Judaic Studies programs into the academic offerings at Towson University (TU) and became the Baltimore Hebrew Institute (BHI) at TU. This merger brought in tow the Joseph Meyerhoff Library, which is now housed at TU's Albert S. Cook Library and consists of more than seventy thousand

volumes, including the rare Judaica books. Since the arrival of the collection, staff members in TU's Special Collections and Archives (SCA) have been working on physically stabilizing the collection, continuing the cataloging work, and engaging in outreach activities to increase the visibility and use of the collections. One step we've taken to boost awareness about the collection—and potentially pinpoint donors to support it—is hosting White Gloves Sessions.

If the Glove Fits . . .

The idea for the White Gloves Sessions came from our communications and development librarian, Joyce Garczynski. Garczynski recalled that the University of Georgia Libraries conduct white glove dinners, when attendees—who are usually potential donors—don white archival gloves and are permitted to handle some of the most prized treasures in special collections. Garczynski and I worked to adapt this program to fit with our collections and potential donor populations and have taken it on the road.

We decided to pilot the sessions by repurposing a 2011 Holocaust Remembrance Day exhibit, which focused on the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR) books, a subset of books contained within the BHI rare books collection. The exhibit includes thirteen JCR volumes accompanied by enlarged photographs mounted on foam core and acquired from Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Israel.

The books, their display equipment, the labels, and copies of the exhibit handout all pack neatly into one record storage box and four 12-by-18 inch clamshell boxes. All these materials fit into a rolling crate, with the record storage box sitting on top. To ensure the safety of the books, one SCA staff member records a loan of the materials on the day of the session, and at the conclusion of the session, I bring everything directly back to campus to document their return before going home.

With the help of Garczynski, I scheduled two White Gloves Sessions last fall with local Jewish community groups. I started



Courtesy of Nadia Nasr.

each session with an overview of the collection's history and how it came to TU. I displayed and spoke about each of the ten photographs and then talked about the books and their exhibit labels. Finally, I concluded by inviting participants to don a pair of white gloves so they could closely examine the books for themselves and ask questions.

Three Keys to Success

1. An Engaging Story

To run a successful White Gloves Session, entertaining participants with a relevant story was key, and the story of the JCR books takes center stage. At the conclusion of World War II, millions of pieces of European Jewish cultural heritage seized by German soldiers from archives, libraries, schools, synagogues, community centers, and private individuals were discovered by Allied forces in thousands of storehouses across Europe. Much of it passed through the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD), a U. S. Army clearinghouse established to identify and restore the material to its rightful owners. An obituary honoring our recently departed colleague and first director of the OAD, Colonel Seymour J. Pomrenze (a Fellow and longtime member of SAA), described

this material as "... the literary remains of a decimated Jewish civilization. And if a collection of stolen books could properly be

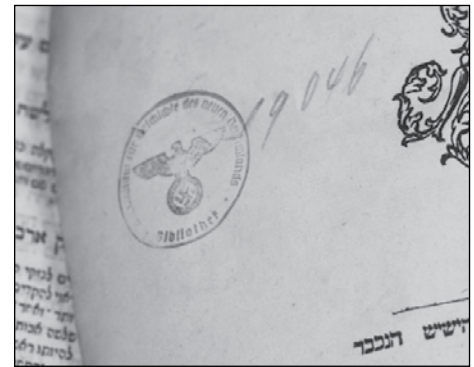
called a library, then at the time it was the largest Jewish library ever assembled."

The OAD restituted approximately three million items to their original owners. Unfortunately, because of massive loss of life or lack of marks of ownership, half a million unidentifiable items remained heirless. The U. S. Army transferred custodianship of these to Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Inc., the cultural arm of the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization. In turn, JCR distributed them to religious, cultural, and educational institutions in the United States, including BHU.

2. Artifacts

A second key attribute of a successful White Gloves Session is to provide tangible artifacts to illustrate the story being told. The books from the exhibit were arranged to illustrate the following:

- The JCR bookplate and OAD stamp.
- The stamp of the Reichsinstitut für Geschichte des Neuen Deutschland, a German research institute established to study the "Jewish Question." (Courtesy of Nadia Nasr). →



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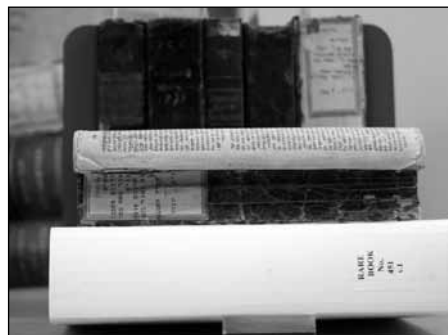
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- The deteriorating condition of some of the books due to age or poor storage conditions (Courtesy of Nadia Nasr). 
- An incomplete multivolume set that represents not only those lost but also those who survived.
- A surprising non-Jewish text: a 1700 edition of Martin Luther's Bible (Courtesy of Nadia Nasr). 
- And finally—and perhaps most poignantly—a volume temporarily borrowed by the American Joint Distribution Committee to restore daily life for refugees in post-war displaced persons camps (Courtesy of Nadia Nasr). 

The photographs from Yad Vashem show scenes of the seizure and cataloging of books by German soldiers and the OAD processes to receive, sort, preserve, pack, and ship the materials back to their countries of origin and original owners. One photograph shows the unidentified



materials neatly stacked in a warehouse awaiting decisions about their disposition. The books and the photographs pair nicely to document their special history and the effects of war on cultural heritage materials.

3. Hands-On Experience

Based on information collected in evaluations following the sessions, the response has been enthusiastically positive. Participants generally reported that they enjoyed all aspects of the event, especially the opportunity to see and handle the books in person. Although it is too early to say what the long-term impact of these outreach sessions will be, I think it is safe to say that we have achieved some increased visibility for the collection. Anecdotal comments from participants indicate that there is some interest in the donation of funds to support the general collection, and we hope to launch an adopt-a-book program to allow donors to support the conservation of a book of their choice.

With such enthusiasm, we look forward to continuing with the JCR exhibit and other exhibits of similar size as White Gloves Sessions and also intend to adapt them for use in the classroom. ■