**The Jewish Narrative is written on the bookbinding**

**Searching for the Roots of Jewish Traditions in** **Hebrew Fragments of Hidden Treasures from Austria – New Developments and Discoveries**

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In my presentation, I will ponder new insights that can be gained from recently identified fragments retrieved from book bindings in Austria, especially with regard to their characteristics and qualities.

The discovery of the Hebrew fragments in Europe and the history of this research field were documented in minute detail by Simcha Emanuel, Martha Keil, Andreas Lehnhardt, and Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, among other scholars. Increasing discoveries of new fragments retrieved from book bindings in European libraries is flourishing thanks to the intense efforts of these dedicated scholars. Even at the very beginning of this research, when knowledge came mainly about Bible fragments and several Talmud pages, Jewish studies scholars did not find the discoveries fascinating, especially due to their growing expectations after the monumental discovery of the Cairo Genizah in the 19th century. Even among Talmudic scholars today ’complaints’ are still heard about the ’boring’ character of this material. Nevertheless, this is a comparative, prejudiced, and misleading judgmental attitude, since there is no European ’Genizah’. This mistaken name is allusive and was borrowed from another field of knowledge which has less to do with recycling of manuscripts as materials for book covers. It would be unfair and incorrect, therefore, to compare the two phenomena and understand that their contexts are two completely different issues. and two different aspects of the treasured Jewish library, that did not fully survive the destructive historical background. The Jewish library that persisted is transmitted and preserved is much smaller than the literature that was available in the past (Rishonim and Kadmonim). Jewish literature survived, therefore, largely in a scattered way. Jewish life, culture, and history must be reconstructed from dispersed literacy remnants.

The project "Books within books**:** Hebrew fragments in European Libraries" ([www.hebrewmanuscript.com](http://www.hebrewmanuscript.com)), founded in 2007, oriented its objective to fill this historical lacuna and to discover the treasures hidden in book bindings in European libraries. As a cooperative partner in this enterprise, the Austrian project ([www.hebraica.at](http://www.hebraica.at\)), founded in 1991 and directed by Martha Keil (head of the Institute for Jewish History in Austria), has provided online access to all the Austrian fragments that have been preserved and detected as book bindings (currently 1,265 fragments). The recently catalogued fragments at the Austrian National Library will be scanned, identified, and afterwards made accessible to the public. Our team at INJOEST and the Austrian National Academy of Sciences (ÖAW) researches the materials existing in the Austrian libraries, in monasteries and academic libraries (67 institutions all-inclusive with Tirol). Our initial aim is to first create a database of these materials for scholars in different disciplines for a better understanding of the religious identity, erudition, and text production in the medieval Jewish community of Austria in particular, and of Ashkenazi Jewry in general. As part of this work, I have worked on the classification of the different genres, identification of the remaining unidentified fragments, correction of falsely identified fragments, and publication of the new discoveries of unknown fragments containing unique materials.

The research report of Josef Oesch and the results of research by Almut Laufer’s and Keil show that for practical reasons the most comfortable materials for bindings were regular and standardized substances that were used for codex preparation. Therefore, the expectation to find unique materials was low from the outset. The content of most of the fragments represents daily use and routine aspects of everyday life, therefore, also traditional learning in the most common use such as Torah-scrolls, Pentateuch, Bible and Bible commentary, Talmud, and local Ashkenazi Biblical and Talmudic commentaries. The research into this material culture is, therefore, highly important for historians who are seeking evidence to build a fuller picture of medieval Ashkenazi Jewry. Most of the halakhic materials that appear in Austria are quite known: Meir of Rotenburg (MaHaRaM), Eliezer Bar Natan (RaaVan), Eliezer ben Yoel HaLevi of Bonn (‬Ra'avyah), Sefer HaMordechai, SMaG of Rabbi Isaac b. Joseph from Corbeil, to name a few. All these are interesting findings for scholars who are researching them as a main interest of study, yet, they mostly do not supply any outstanding information about new contents documented in these fragments.

Some of the materials were only lately found thanks to a journey I took with my colleague Emanuel Wenger. The goal of these expeditions was to better document the findings that we already had at our disposal, to gain better readings of specific fragments, to come closer to a reliable conclusion regarding identification issues, and even to receive new images from the libraries we visited. The character of this material is very evasive. In Klosterneuburg Monastery, for example, we found a box with halakhic fragments which were neglected and unknown to the scholarly community, with the exception of Alois Haidinger who saw the manuscripts in the 1990s; his handwriting appears on the box. Haidinger, however, never digitized the materials, they were simply forgotten. One of the reasons for this oblivion is the obscure character of the materials, which are dissected pieces cut into narrow stripes. The research institution of the Klosterneuburg Library photocopied all these fragments for us, and the ’puzzle’ work identification is yet to be completed, due to their complicated character.

The Klosterneuburg Library example is extremely rare and most likely represents the situation in the rest of the libraries in our collection. The presence of the scholar and the direct accessibility to the manuscripts are decisively significant for the exact description of the collections. In addition, the reliability on scans and digitalization cannot substitute for the subjective experience leading to a new discovery. In some cases, the significance of a visit is improved comprehension of already known fragments upon seeing their actual condition and the way they are preserved in situ.

However, the appearance of several innovative fragments and interesting findings are significant enough to report and to reflect upon. Among the fragments found in Austria, are quite unique and even surprising materials such as a few Kabbalistic fragments. In the State Archives of Upper Austria in Linz (Buchdeckelfunde, Schachtel 3, II/3g, f.1), a single fragment of a ’Shiviti’ was found that represents the Lurianic Kabbalah in its 18th century format with Tetragrammaton and the Kabbalistic sacred names that are connected with it according to common combinations for this liturgical tradition.[[1]](#footnote-1) How this fragment came to Austria is still unknown; it was most probably produced by a non-Jewish-Austrian author, since from after the Wiener Gasera until 1850 there were no Jewish settlements in upper Austria, Thus, it was probably imported from another diaspora. In the Saint Paul, Benedictine Monastery in Lavanttal, (Cod. 165/4, HDS), we found another remnant of the book *Ruach Chen* of Jehudah Ibn Tibbon which might teach interesting minor historical facts about the owners as culture customers (צרכני תרבות) and as available target audience learned these materials, maybe even professionally, and the erudition stands behind living according to this tradition. One work translated from the Judeo-Arabic philosophical tradition of Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in Spanish handwriting, was also found in the same Saint Paul Monastery (Cod. 278/2, fol. 1r ff.); it reflects the relative openness of Ashkenazi scholars in the Middle Ages to secular and foreign materials, even though their primary field of interest remained in traditional erudition.

Even more obscure are the Samaritan Torah translations which were found in the Austrian State Archive in Klagenfurt, “Geschichtsverein”, (Cod. 8/12, fol. 1-20). These were a part of a *Codex Discissus*, namely pages from the same codex that had fallen apart, and which completed Mss. Paris BN Sam 6 in which many other pages from this lost Samaritan Manuscript were preserved.[[2]](#footnote-2) One of the contributions of these fragments is, therefore, the completion of a known manuscript preserved elsewhere. In these rare cases, the reported treasures help to reconstruct and broaden a larger picture of the lost Jewish library. The Hebräische Fragmente in Österreich (<http://hebraica.at>) started reconstructing these lost codices and online links between fragments of the same original codex discissus.

In the archive of Wilhering Cistercian Monastery, the project documented a fragment without any signature/shelfmark, which I identified as Tosafot HaRaShba (Samson from Sens), (Bava Batra 46b-47a). Professor Simcha Emanuel confirmed this conclusion and the fragment with a full critical edition will be included in his 2nd volume of מגנזי אירופה, *Hidden treasures from Europe* (forthcoming). The evidence for my identification was the changes in the person in the text. The Tosafot for this spot in Bava Batra quoting the RaShBa: ''the RaShBa found a difficulty'' (וקשה **לרשב"א**) while in the fragment the author writes the same wording in first person singular ''I find it difficult'' (וקשיא **לי**).

These fragments and many others reflect the multifaceted character of the particular hidden treasures, mostly retrieved in of book-bindings from Austria. Several hundred fragments from the Austrian National Library (ÖNB) are currently the focus of our scientific work; in our forthcoming report, I will reflect on important identifications and new discoveries from this collection to date. The excellent catalogue compiled by Arthur Zacharias Schwarz in 1925 serves as a reliable basis for this research and all the identifications are done in comparison to his achievements, which were made without the technological tools now at our disposal. Several times we reconfirmed an identification of a certain fragment, rejected Schwarz’s conclusions, or added information and update his findings, such as the joining of fragments from the ÖNB collection or from different libraries, adding bibliography, and more. The reconsideration of some of his achievements is currently under process, while the ÖNB and, therefore, also The International Collection of Digitized Hebrew Manuscripts, the Ktiv-Website of the National Library of Israel based their identifications on Schwarz verbatim.

Two challenges and difficulties of this research are quite obvious to point out. From a philological point of view, the challenge of the identification stems from the very poor physical condition of many fragments. Most are single fragments currently not unconnected to others or fragment single ’joins. Thus, many missing pieces of the greater puzzle of the historical Jewish library are indeed missing. Moreover, even after the scholar succeeds in his technical goal of deciphering the accurate content of a certain fragment, many fragments are far from being of interest to the learned scholar of Judaic studies. The search for new discoveries turns into a Sisyphean task that many scholars find exhausting and not optimally profitable. They prefer to dedicate their time and efforts to works that survived in full, that are easier to interpret and derive meaningful comprehension, and to add to the knowledge of well-known Jewry. Much more is hidden than visible, however, and these new discoveries are only the tip of an ancient iceberg. The interim report prepared by Josef Oesch, various articles by many scholars, and more recently, *Hidden Treasures from Europe* by Simcha Emanuel show that these discoveries strengthen our knowledge about the existing masterpieces while extending the scope of the historical medieval Jewish library already known to us.

In conclusion, I hope that many more fragments will be found and fulfill the scholarly expectation of enriching the knowledge about Jewish life and erudition in the Middle Ages. Since the phenomenon of binding hand-made books with recycled materials taken from other books was a widespread method, the expectation of discovering diverse Jewish narrative**s** written on book bindings is becoming realistic.

1. See also the alphabetic fragment in St. Pee al collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Menhardt 227 after Neumann: Num. 16,14-28,10 (hebräisch in samaritanischer Schrift; Londoner Polyglotte I 615-669). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)