**“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 talk, I wish to ponder what new insights we could gain from the recently identified fragments retrieved from book bindings in Austria regarding their characteristics and qualities.

The discovery of the Hebrew fragments in Europe and the history of this research field was documented into minute details by Simcha Emanuel, Martha Keil, Andreas Lehnhardt, Judith Olszowy-Schlanger among other scholars of the field. The increasing discoveries of new fragments retrieved from book bindings of European libraries is flourishing thanks to the intense efforts of these dedicated scholars. Even at the very beginning of this research, when knowledge started to arrive mainly about bible fragments and several Talmud pages, scholars of Jewish studies have not found 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 there are still "complains" to be heard about the "boring" character of this material. Nevertheless, this is a comparative, prejudiced and misleading judgmental attitude, since there is no European "Genizah" indeed. This mistaken name is an allusive one and was borrowed from other field of knowledge which has very less to do with recycling of manuscripts as materials for book covers. Therefore, it would be simply unfair and wrong to compare between the two phenomena and it must be understood that the contexts of these phenomena are two completely different issues, two different aspects of the treasured Jewish library, that was not fully survived to the destructive historical background – the survived Jewish library that is transmitted and preserved is much smaller than the literature was available to the savants (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" ([www.hebrewmanuscript.com](http://www.hebrewmanuscript.com)) founded 2007 oriented its target to fill this historical lacuna and to discover the hidden treasures from book-bindings in European libraries. As a cooperation 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, St. Pölten), has given online accessibility to all the Austrian fragments that have been preserved and detected as book bindings (currently 1265 fragments). The recently catalogued fragments at the Austrian National Library are additionally to be all scanned, identified and afterwards accessible to the public. Our team at INJOEST and the Austrian National Academy of Sciences (ÖAW) research the materials existing in the Austrian libraries – both monasteries and academic libraries (67 institutions all-inclusive with Tirol) and aimed to firstly create the accessibility of the database of these materials to scholars of different fields for a better understanding of the religious Identity, Erudition and Text Production in the Medieval Jewish Community of Austria particularly, and of Ashkenazi Jewry in general. I have taken upon myself the classification of the different genres, identification of the remaining unidentified fragments, correction of falsely identified fragments and publication of the new essential discoveries of unknown fragments containing unique materials.

The research report of Josef Oesch and the results of Almut Laufer’s and Keil's research show that for practical reasons the most comfortable materials for bindings were the most regular and standardized materials that were used for the codex preparation. Therefore, the expectation to find unique materials is low from the outset. The content of most of the fragments represents a 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 of this material culture is therefore highly important for historians who are looking for evidences to build a fuller picture of mediaeval 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 Issac b. Joseph from Corbeil etc. All these are interesting findings for the 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 to be found thanks to a journey of my Colleague Emanuel Wenger and myself. The target of these journeys was to better document the findings that we already have 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 are visiting. The character of this material is very evasive. In Klosterneuburg monastery, for example, we found a box with halakhic fragments which were neglected and finally unknown to the scholarly community at all, with the exception of Alois Haidinger who saw the manuscripts in the 90s – his handwriting appears on the box – however never came to digitize them. So these materials were simply forgotten.

One of the reasons for this oblivion is the obscure character of the materials – dissected pieces cut into narrow stripes. The research institution of the Klosterneuburg library photocopied all these fragments for us, yet the "puzzle" work and its identification is to be completed, due to the complicated character of this material.

This is not an extremely rare example and most likely represents the situation in the rest of the libraries in our collection: the attendance of the scholar and the direct accessibility to the manuscripts are decisively significant for the exact description of the collections and the reliability on scans and digitalization cannot substitute the subjective experience leading to the new discovery. Sometime the significance of the visit is in better comprehension of the already known fragments upon their actual condition and the way they are preserved in the monastery or in the academic library.

However, there are appearances of several innovative fragments and interesting findings to report and to reflect. Among the fragments to be presented in Austria there are quite unique and even surprising materials e.g.: a few Kabbalistic fragments. In Linz, state archives of Upper Austria (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 not produced by a Jewish-Austrian author, since from after the Wiener Gasera until 1850 there were no Jewish settlements in upper Austria, rather it was most probably imported from other diaspora. In Sankt Paul im Lavanttal, benedictinian monastery, 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 translated work from the Judaeo-Arabic philosophical tradition of Ibn Rushd (Averroes) made in spanish handwriting, was found in the same Sankt Paul im Lavanttal, monastery (Cod. 278/2, fol. 1r ff.); reflecting the relative openness of Ashkenazi Jewish scholars over the middle ages to secular and foreign meterials, even though their main field of interest remains in traditional erudition.

Even more obscure are the Samaritan Tora translations which were found in Klagenfurt (State archive of Carinthia, “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, completing Mss. Paris BN Sam 6 that preserved many other pages from this Samaritan lost Manuscript.[[2]](#footnote-2) One of the contributions given by these these fragments is therefore completing a known manuscript preserved somewhere else. In these rare cases the reported treasures help reconstructing and broadening a bigger picture of the lost Jewish library. <http://hebraica.at> started reconstructing these lost codices and the website links between fragments of the same original codex discissus.

In the archive of Wilhering, Cistercian monastery, the project documented a fragment without any Signatur/ Shelfmark. I identified the fragment as Tosafot HaRaShba (Samson from Sens), Bava Batra 46b-47a. Prof. Simcha Emanuel confirmed this conclusion and the fragment will be included, with a full critical edition, in his 2nd volume of מגנזי אירופה *– Hidden treasures from Europe* (forthcoming). The evidence of my identification is the changes in the person. 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 says the same wording in first person singular ''I find it difficult'' (וקשיא **לי**).

These fragments brought above and many others reflecting the multifaceted character of these particular hidden treasures, mostly retrieved out of book-bindings from Austria. A bunch of several hundreds of fragments from the Austrian National Library (ÖNB) are currently focused on in our scientific work, and in our forthcoming report I plan to reflect on important identifications and new discoveries from this collection due date. The excellent Catalogue by Arthur Zacharias Schwarz already written in 1925 serves as a reliable basis for this research and all the identifications are done in comparison to his achievements, being made without any of the technological tools we nowadays have at our disposal. Several times we could reassure an identification of a certain fragment, to reject the conclusions of Schwarz or to add information and to update his conclusions, such as joining fragments from the ÖNB collection or from different libraries, adding bibliography etc. Reconsideration of some of his achievements is currently under process, while the ÖNB and therefore also Ktiv-Website of the Israeli national library based their identifications on Schwarz verbatim and ready-made.

Among other challenges and difficulties of this research, there are two that are quite obvious to point out. From a philological point of view, the challenge of the identification stems from a very poor physical condition of many scattered fragments. Most of them are single fragments currently not connected to any other fragment or fragment single "joins", therefore many missing parts of the greater puzzle of the historical Jewish library are missing indeed. Moreover, even after the scholar succeeded in his technical goal of deciphering the accurate content of a certain fragment, many fragments are far from being interesting for the learned scholar of Judaic studies. The searching after new discoveries turning a Sisyphean task, that many scholars find exhausting and not optimally profitable, therefore prefer to dedicate their time and efforts in works that fully survived, that are easier to interpret and to derive meaningful comprehension and to gain reflection of the depth of well-known Jewry. However, there is much more hidden than known and these new discoveries are only the tip of an ancient iceberg. The interim report composed by Josef Oesch, various articles by many scholars and lately *Hidden Treasures from Europe* by Simcha Emanuel show that these discoveries not only strengthen our knowledge about the existing masterpieces rather extending the scope of the historical medieval Jewish library known to us.

I would like to conclude with the hope that many more fragments will be found and will fulfill the scholarly expectation of enriching the knowledge about Jewish life and erudition throughout the middle ages. Since the phenomenon of binding hand-made books with recycling materials taken out of other books was a widespread method, this expectation of discovering diverse Jewish Narrative**s** written on the bookbinding is now becoming a realistic one.

1. See also the alphabetic fragment in St. Pölten 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)