

# JEWISH STUDIES AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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## THE LOST CHILDREN OF GERMAN-JEWISH CULTURE

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With which version of the Bible were the Jews in the German speaking countries acquainted during the Haskalah?

Which texts were responsible for creating the image of America as a new world among European Jewry?

How were the historical images of European Jewry constructed. What was their nature and who were their heroes?

What role did the texts for Jewish children, published by the Philo Verlag during the Third Reich, play in the creation of an alternative identity for Jewish children under the new Regime?

In other words: What do we know about books for Jewish children in the German speaking countries?

Until very recently the answer would have been—close to nothing.

The fact that in the German-speaking countries, books for Jewish children were written and published systematically and regularly over hundreds of years remained unknown. Until recently academic research has hardly dealt with these texts, failing, in fact, even to acknowledge their existence.

However, thanks to a joint research project of Tel-Aviv and Frankfurt universities conducted by Prof. Dr. Hans-Heino Ewers and myself with the support of the GIF—German Israeli Foundation—over the last seven years the research teams were able to recover the field, to reconstruct a large portion of the corpus of texts and to begin extensive study and analysis.

Once the dimensions of the corpus began to take shape in front of our eyes, it became clear that the reconstruction of the texts involves much more than merely reclaiming a certain forgotten chapter of German-Jewish history. I would like to maintain right from the beginning that already at this stage of our research, it is clear that this reconstruction throws new light on German Jewish cultural history, for at least two reasons:

a) These texts played a major role in the emergence of the new Jewish cultural life in Germany, especially in the shaping of Jewish identity and in the creation of the cultural images of Jewish society.

b) The texts bear on processes of interference between German and Jewish cultures, traditionally described as symbiosis, shedding particular light on the modes of interference and on the cultural agents involved.

The project is vast. The *Handbuch* presently available in a Metzler Verlag publication (Shavit and Ewers 1996) encompasses 1495 pages.

The presentation of the work involved in the project requires numerous seminars.

I believe that the best way of giving here a slight idea of the project is to limit myself to the presentation of several of our preliminary methodological decisions and to some of the working hypothesis and to describe briefly the process of the reconstruction of the field itself.

### *Preliminary methodological decisions*

A mandatory condition for the realization of this project was the actual invention of the field. Since the field never existed before as a discipline in its own right, some methodological decisions were essential.

The single pioneering study of the field, that by Uriel Ofek (Ofek 1979), did refer to the existence of dozens of books published in Hebrew for Jewish children in Germany. However, Ofek was not acquainted with the dimensions of the field nor with the existence of numerous books for Jewish children in German or in a bi-lingual format. Neither did other scholars of related fields, such as Jewish social history (Katz 1935, Katz 1973), the history of Jewish pedagogy (Eliav 1960, Rappel 1986), the history of German children's literature and the history of childhood—all of them were not aware of the existence of a rich field of books for Jewish children and hardly ever referred to it in their studies.

Assuming that the field remained unknown primarily because none of the existing disciplines would or could have explored it, another approach had to be adopted. Due to its inherent interdisciplinary nature as well as to its dynamic-functional conceptualization, the semiotics study of culture was found to meet the needs of the project most fruitfully.

Once the methodological issue was settled, we could begin with the reconstruction of the field. To use a metaphor—our work resembled an archaeological excavation. We had to expose unknown cultural strata and unearth countless fragments, whose origin and date were often hard to confirm. We had to locate the lost cities and villages, determine which parts should be excavated, which elements belonged to which period and which scenario, and which were entirely irrelevant.

In more a down-to earth formulation, the reconstruction of the field involved several preliminary difficulties concerning the definition of a "Jewish book" as well as the linguistic and geographical boundaries of the project; Needless to say, their solution required modifications time and again.

The first difficulty concerned the definition of what is a "Jewish" book. The criterion of the "Jewishness" of the author was rejected straightaway—needless to explain why racial definitions had to be avoided. We came to the conclusion that the only possible criterion for identifying texts as "Jewish" should be a cultural-historical one. By that we meant the adoption of the *point of view prevailing at each of the periods involved*, namely the internal historical point of view of the time: *books identified at the time as Jewish by various channels were consequently identified as such by us.*

The adoption of the internal point of view also entailed the inclusion of certain kind of books at a specific point of time and their exclusion latter. For instance, school books were included or excluded in our corpus according to their treatment during the various periods. As long as the system of texts for children did not distinguish between school books and literature for children, the former was included in our project. However, our research followed the development of the historical notion of books for Jewish children: around 1850 the opposition between school books and literature for children became clear. School books written since 1850 were, therefore, not considered part of the corpus of our project. Scholastic books from later periods were taken into account only when they were intended as literature for private reading.

The second difficulty concerned the question of geographical borders, which turned out to be more problematic than expected. As we studied the texts, it became clear that the books often crossed the boundaries of the so-called the "deutsche Raum." For instance, some of the books first published in Germany, were later published in various places other then Germany: Prague, Vilna, Warsaw, Tel-Aviv, Odessa and even Baghdad. Although the research focuses on German speaking countries, latter developments of titles whose career, so-to-speak began in Germany, could not be ignored. Neither could we ignore implications of the crossed boundaries for the cultural relations between the German-Jewish center and other Jewish cultural centers. Therefore we included in several cases other publishing places as well.

The third difficulty concerned the question of language. The linguistic situation of our corpus involved no less than three languages: Hebrew, German and Yiddish. The first one never became the mother-tongue of the children but prevailed in the writing of the texts for children at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. The second, the German-language, was gradually appropriated by more and more Jews. As is well known, Jews began to use modern German in the eighteenth century, as part of their integration into the German society. In the nineteenth century, however, it was not necessarily their first language. Thus, the two languages of the books remained for a long time the second or third languages of their readers, while Yiddish remained their mother-tongue. But, books in Yiddish (Yiddish in the modern sense of the word) began to be written exclusively for children only at the end of the nineteenth century, a process which did not occur in the German-speaking countries but in Eastern Europe. Before such time, the majority of texts in Judeo-German, traditionally designed "for women and children," in fact addressed a variety of audiences. The rise of Modern Yiddish, and with it a distinctive textual activity for children and youth, lay therefore beyond the scope of our research.

The fourth difficulty concerned the question of the addressee. Until the middle of the nineteenth century the Jewish cultural system was characterized by the existence of blurred boundaries between the literary system and other textual systems. The boundaries between the adult and the children's systems remained blurred until the end of the nineteenth century. More often than not, the same texts were published for adults as well as for children. Literary material



which was first published by various Jewish periodicals was later recycled in the form of "Readers"—Lesebücher for children. Books for adolescents were read by adults as well.

We have good reason to assume that the "Readers" frequently served as reading material for adult Jews, especially those who had no formal education. They read the texts for children as means of changing their mode of life and paving their way into a modern and different world. Also in this case we adhered to the internal point of view. Regardless of their actual addressees, we took into account all the texts *which were considered at their time texts for children*.

### *Constructing the field*

The attitude towards the texts for Jewish children was ambivalent from the beginning, despite the deep involvement of almost every Jewish community in their publication. The texts were not regarded as having significant cultural value, nor of being worthy of preservation. Consequently, many of them failed to survive their own era, and have never been systematically collected by any of the Judaica libraries. Even a partial collection of the texts for Jewish children as a category in itself did not exist anywhere.

Our first mission was to construct the *"library" of texts*. In other words, to *reconstruct the field*. At first we estimated that the total number of titles would amount *at most* to a couple of hundreds. We studied various sources in order to unearth the texts: meta-bibliographies, bibliographies of comprehensive Judaica and Hebraica collections, bibliographies of children's books, catalogues of smaller or specialized collections, including catalogues of second-hand book shops and exhibitions, lists of books prohibited by the National Socialists, advertisements, archives of the various publishing houses, of the Kibutzim, libraries of Old People's homes, private collections, lists of recommendation and book lists of the libraries of Jewish organizations and schools, Rabbis' suggestions for purchasing books, recommendations of departments of municipal libraries, and lists of reviews by Jewish organizations.

As we already knew, the documentation of titles of German and Hebrew books for Jewish children was to say the least, poor and inadequate. We had to visit the libraries and search them in order to find the books we were looking for. Sometime, we found them in basements and boxes under trash—literally. Journeys to private and public libraries, archives and collections could not be spared either.

We made every possible effort to ensure the comprehensive nature of our sources and have tried to trace and to cover all possible catalogues and other sources. When we begin to encounter frequent recurrences of repetitions in our sources, we concluded that our corpus is to a large extent reconstructed, but of course not completed.

After a thorough inspection of the various sources, we realized that we are talking about *many hundreds of titles*. Once numerous doubtful cases were discarded, we concluded that our corpus encompasses 800 Hebrew or bilingual titles and 1,600 German titles. Added to this core of texts are a considerable

number of texts which were privately distributed, mainly by the various Jewish youth movements, as well as part of the oral tradition, which was put into writing, in an effort to establish a Jewish-German folklore.

*Some working hypothesis in light  
of the construction of the field*

The dimensions of the reconstructed corpus were more than puzzling. We never expected to find so many titles, especially after we had compared the data concerning the number of Jewish pupils with the number of books published. There were periods during which the number of published books was almost equivalent to the number of children who attended Jewish schools. In other words: there were almost as many books as children addressed by the texts.

Officially the texts addressed Jewish children who came to study in the various new Jewish schools. According to Eliav, the average number of pupils in the Berlin school, between the years 1800-1813, did not exceed 55. The school in Breslau which was opened in 1791 had 120 pupils in its first year, but this number declined to 90 in the second year and never went up again. The entire number of pupils in Jewish schools in 1807 (including girls) was around 440, and in 1812 about 900 children studied in the schools of the Haskalah movement. The number of Jewish pupils never exceeded a few thousands during the entire period. Moreover, it is far from clear whether, at certain periods, there were enough children whose knowledge of either Hebrew or German sufficed to make the texts legible.

*How can we account for the dimensions of the corpus?*

I am afraid, the answer to this will have to be given in another seminar. Just briefly, let me mention that the number of books, especially those published until the middle of the nineteenth century, should not be taken as an indication of the real scope of readership (i.e., children and adolescents), but rather as a mark of the status of the texts within the various Jewish ideological movements, which regarded children's books as a social vehicle intended to achieve social goals.

For German Jewry, literature for children was a means of ensuring, through texts, the appropriate socialization of the next generation. Every community facing the challenge of the child's education responded to it *inter alia* by the production of texts for children. These texts endeavored to offer practical solutions to the kind of socialization given to the child and to the type of identity the community wished to create. Every community and every social group offered different solutions to these two issues:

The issue of identity

The issue of socialization.

To my mind, the dimensions of the corpus serve primarily as an indication for the role played by the texts for Jewish children and young people in the process of the modernization of the Jewish society. This process which involved a



change of the Jewish *Weltanschauung* was partially made possible through the appropriation of several sectors of the German culture by the Jewish culture. In this process the texts for children functioned as a major agent and secured a certain foothold in the German world of the Jewish people. Therefore, the study of the emergence of books for children explores the motivations behind the creation of Jewish culture in Germany and its translation into practical terms. In other words, texts for children, being a vehicle for the appropriation of specific sets of values, serve as a first rate source for the study of communal values in their most pragmatic appearance.

*How far has the research gone beyond  
these working hypotheses?*

The working hypothesis make it clear that years, perhaps even several generations, will be required before a comprehensive and exhaustive study of the issues involved in the project is completed. Each and every case-study we began to pursue has proven the complicated and intricate nature of the project. Be it Ran HaCohen's M. A. thesis on *Bible Stories for Jewish Children during the Haskalah in Germany: The Bible, History and Models of German Children's Literature* (HaCohen 1994), Nitsa Ben-Ari's Ph. D. on *Historical Images and the Emergence of a New National Literary System. Jewish-German Historical Novels for Children and Adolescents* (Ben-Ari 1993), or Rima Schichmanter's M. A. thesis *Texts for Children and Youth as Ideological Agents. Case Study: Children Youth Literature of the Liberal Stream in German Jewry, 1933–1938* (Schichmanter 1995), Anne Völpel's research on *Deutschsprachige jüdische Mädchenliteratur als medium jüdischer und weiblicher Emanzipation* (Völpel 1996)—my own work on the translation of the German writer Joachim Heinrich Campe into Hebrew (Shavit 1992)—all research projects conducted to date have raised new questions, pointed to processes which have never previously been studied. There is good foundation to believe that the field established by our project will give rise to additional case-studies which still lie concealed and wait to be unveiled. So far our research project has reconstructed the field by, so-to-speak, building a unique "library" of the existing Hebrew-Jewish-German texts for children, by initiating the in-depth study of a few case-studies, and by working on the first historical scheme of the development of books for Jewish children.

The "library" we built is obviously first of all a unique monument to Jewish life in Germany, but more than this, it is a goldmine for further studies in the field of German-Jewish cultural history. Although our historical analysis is in its opening stages, what we have already accomplished clearly indicates the centrality of the corpus at stake to the history of Jewish culture. It provides new research options for studying German-Jewish culture from a unique perspective, while offering a special perspective on the study of Jewish-German cultural relationships.<sup>1</sup>

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