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The Salvaging of Jewish Books in Europe after the Holocaust: the Efforts of the Hebrew University and the Jewish National and University Library – Success and Failure

For about 30 years, from the mid 1940s to the beginning of the 1970s the Hebrew University (HU) and the Jewish National and University Library (JNUL) exerted efforts to salvage books of Jewish public and private ownership in Europe after the Holocaust. As a matter of fact deliberations on the fate of Jewish collections had already taken place in the mid 1930s. By the end of the War one of the first steps to be taken by the HU was the formulation of a policy which defined the claims of the Jewish people to its cultural treasures. The efforts of the HU and the JNUL and their policy were based on a legal report of three eminent professors of law, which eventually provided the legal basis for a JNUL's trusteeship of the remnants of Jewish cultural property.

This paper is focused on the post-war missions sent by the HU and the JNUL to Germany and to the Nazi-occupied countries in order to trace the remnants of Jewish collections, to collect information on the fate of these collections, to try to locate and inspect them, to get in touch with Jewish institutions and the governments of the liberated countries in order to negotiate their transfer to Jerusalem. Eminent scholars, librarians and diplomats were recruited to carry out these missions. Among these were G. Scholem (professor of Jewish Mysticism), H. Bergmann (Professor of Jewish Philosophy), Sh. Shunami and A. Yaari (senior librarians at the JNUL), Z. Schek (diplomat), M. Schneurson (treasurer and financial consultant to the HU) and others. Their reports reflect achievements and disillusionments. Success and failure of the missions are evaluated and analysed against the background of changing political and social conditions in Germany and the liberated countries in the three decades following the end of the War. As a result of the activities of the missions several hundred thousands of books have reached the JNUL but precious treasures of Hebrew manuscripts and incunables have probably vanished forever.