

From Russia with Glasnost

Hebrew Manuscript Collections of St. Petersburg Topic of Stern College Lecture

by Hallie Cantor Acquisitions, Hedi Steinberg Library, Yeshiva University

Perestroika. A word meaning openness, freedom. A word affecting many grateful, liberated Jews. Even the libraries have something to rejoice about: the Hebrew manuscript collections of St. Petersburg, for decades sealed off by the communist regime, have once again become available to the public and to scholars.

Dr. Shimon Iakerson, Senior Researcher of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg, introduced Western audiences to these collections. The lecture, held February 29, 2000, at Stern College for Women, was hosted by Arthur Hyman, Chairman of Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies at Yeshiva University, who spoke of the importance of these collections for scholars and researchers of Judaica. Not only do the libraries of St. Petersburg house one of the few major collections of Judaica in the world, but they are unique for their massive amount of Oriental manuscripts which show the Jewish interaction with the Moslem world.

Colorful Legacy

Dr. Iakerson, a specialist in Hebrew manuscripts and the history of the Hebrew printed book, began with a brief history of the city's two major libraries. The Russian National Library (including the Oriental Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences), contains 17,000 Hebrew books, fragments, and documents. The Imperial Public Library, founded in 1775, gained precedence as the cultural center of Russia. Its 11 million books include a substantial collection of Hebrew incunabula and manuscripts. Much of this is the fusion of two private donations of Avraham Ben Schmueel Firkovich, a figure of equally colorful background.

Born in 1786, into a Karaite sect in Lithuania, Firkovich started out his adult life as a simple laborer. As a Karaite, he was spared much of the rampant persecution toward Jews of Tsarist Russia, including forced conscription and taxation, and was therefore allowed greater freedom to travel. During a trip to Jerusalem in 1822, Firkovich purchased a few manuscripts, which marked the beginning of an obsessive collection of anything in Hebrew letters.

His desire to export holy books from the Holy Land stemmed from the verse "From Zion shall go forth the Torah, and the word of the L-rd from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3), which with Karaite literalness he interpreted as the holy necessity of importing Hebrew books from Palestine. Indeed, much of his life's work was motivated by the urge to further the Karaite cause.

Although the Karaites by the 19th century were declining in numbers and influence, their community in Crimea had reached its peak. It was here that Firkovich eventually settled and acquired the title of *chaham gacham*, community leader. His work brought him into contact – and friction – with the local rabbis, who were working out the legal status of Jews and Karaites. Needing literary sources of the Karaite movement on which to base his answers to the Tsarist authorities, Firkovich began an exhaustive search for old manuscripts which took him all over Russia and Asia Minor.

Hidden Treasures

An accompanying slide show displayed some of the acquisitions. In 1851 Firkovich sold 50 manuscripts to the Society for Oriental Study, in Odessa, among them a Codex of the Bible, dated 1008-1013 CE – and according to five different systems: the Greek calendar, the end of the Hebrew prophets, the exile of King Joachim, the destruction of the Second Temple, and *hajira*, the Moslem calendar. Other Moslem traditions permeate the works, as

IN MEMORIAM

Dina Abramowicz (1909-2000)

by Zachary Baker

With the passing of Dina Abramowicz, who died in New York City on Monday, April 3rd, we have lost one of our last vital links to Eastern European Jewish civilization. In her capacity as librarian of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (where she worked for over half a century), Dina would have disapproved being described as a symbol of Eastern European Jewry, though those who came in contact with her often regarded her as such. Symbols tend to be static, and there was nothing static about Dina's probing curiosity or her desire to learn new things, to be *au courant* with current events or the newest books to cross her desk.

Tenacity, energy, strength, and above all dedication – these are the main characteristics that marked Dina Abramowicz's personality. She was dedicated to her work, to her public that she served, to the legacy of Vilna, and to the memory of her father, Hirsz Abramowicz. Dina was also blessed with a phenomenal memory, which she was always able to plumb for elusive facts and helpful research strategies. In addition, she was a polyglot, with native or near-native fluency in Russian, Yiddish, and Polish, with a superb knowledge of English (which she learned as an adult).

Dina Abramowicz was a true product of the *Haskalah*, raised in a Russian-speaking home, educated in a Yiddish gymnasium and Polish

(Continued on Page 6)

evidenced by the gold and blue Hebrew letters that undulate through the page. The Masoretic text is based on the tradition of Moses ben Asher.

The discrepancies in the dating systems point to
(Continue on page 7)

(Cataloging, cont'd)

BookWhere-imported records (from many university libraries) display differently in the OPAC. They don't have the blotches, but instead an extra line before the *h* for the inferior dot. One of the problems in searching in BookWhere, especially older books, is that the romanization rules have changed many times. According to *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan*, we do not follow the rule of romanization that we have now. *Vav* is a *w*, so think of this when searching older records.

Ms. Levine concluded with this piece of advice: For the librarian, finding the records is important. Equally important is making them accessible for the students, many of whom don't even know how to spell in English, let alone in Hebrew. Rule of thumb: remain flexible and try to figure out what the students will be looking for and anticipate their needs.

Do as the Romanizers Do?

In the final lecture "*Ivri, Ketov Ivrit!* How to Write Hebrew Words Without Hebrew Letters," Rabbi Clifford B. Miller – Cataloger, Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, put an amusing twist on the problem above and helped take some of the pain out of Judaica cataloging.

"Who wants to be a romanizer?" he asked. "At least we always have more time to press the buttons than on TV.

"We can also use lifelines," he continued, "calling friends in the office or e-mail." Rabbi Miller's bibliography handout mentions these other reference "lifelines." People who love Hebrew tend to hate romanization, he explained. Rightly so, perhaps. However, most libraries cannot display searches in Hebrew, so if we want these books to be available, like it or not, we have to romanize.

If you the librarian are lucky enough to figure out the romanization, he explained, it depends on what questions you get. Take the word *Tu bi-Shevat* (*b'Shevat, be-Shevat?*). To elaborate on Ms. Levine's remark, the system of transliteration we use changed in 1948, and the 1960's and 1970's. *Bar Mitzvah, Bava Me'zia* (from the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*) and remainders of German scholarship (*Mukzeh* – uniform title or subject heading) may use forms with *.z* although they are not the modern standard romanization. Rabbi Miller mentioned other problems: *Midrash Aseret hadibrot* or *dibberot? Sfardi, Sefardi, Sephardi, Sefaradi?* All are correct, technically. But in romanizing there is only one way to do it: don't forget the *e* for the *sheva*.

Another problem: Hebrew abbreviations. Is it *Yad HaHazakah* or the 14 volumes of Maimonides' code? What about *Or le-Yad* or *Or le-arba esre*? Finally, *Ko'a.h BY"D* – is it *Ko'a.h B[e]t] D[in]* or *Ko'a.h ba-Yad*?

Diphthongs (i.e., *ei*) – are not correct in romanization because one Hebrew vowel should ideally be represented by

(Continued on Page 8)

Sylvia Avner, A"H

by Steven Siegel

Library Director, 92nd Street YM-YWHA

With sadness I report the passing of Sylvia Avner on April 6, 2000, in New York City, at the age of 71, after a long, well-fought battle against cancer.

Sylvia was a devoted member of AJL and of NYMA, the NYC chapter. For ten years, until her retirement of 1993, she was Librarian at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA in Manhattan. Subsequently she became a dedicated volunteer at the Y and frequently attended concerts and lectures there.

Sylvia touched the lives of so many people, both in the Jewish library field and in the numerous circles in which she lived, worked, played and traveled. She was a friend and valued confidante to those who knew her, and she will be missed very much.

She is survived by three children: Phil Avner, Ken Avner, and Annette Feldman; by Phil's wife Elaine and their two sons; and by Annette's husband Richard and their two daughters and a son.

May her memory be for a blessing.

(Manuscripts, cont'd)

possible tamperings in some of manuscripts, for which Firkovich himself may have been responsible – changing names or dates to make them appear of Karaite origin in order to "prove" his people's roots. Dr. Iakerson pointed out some of the forgeries, detectible through ultraviolet light. Firkovich, in fact, had written a book of his own: *Avnei Zikaron*, in which he describes his discovery of Karaite tombstones. An engraving shows him seated on a throne, bearing a staff and wearing the miter and robe of a Karaite leader.

By the time of his death in 1874, Firkovich had sold a collection of 700 manuscripts to the Imperial Library. His second collection, of 10,000 Jewish and Arabian manuscripts, was acquired by the Imperial Library two years later. At the end of the 19th century, the Library intensified its own collections development, obtaining manuscripts from the Russian Archbishop in the Holy Land, who had an active interest in Oriental literature and archaeology. Over 1,000 Cairo Geniza fragments were donated as well.

The Institute of Oriental Studies, the second depository, also houses the Imperial Asiatic Museum. The Hebrew collection, which contains 1,200 manuscripts, traces its beginnings to a private donor, Moshe Friedland (1826-1899), who spent his time trying to synthesize Orthodoxy with the *Haskalah* movement. In 1892 he contributed some 300 manuscripts to the library. In 1910 famed Orientalist Daniel Borsin donated dozens of manuscripts, including an Italian *siddur*, 14th-17th century European incunabula – all in excellent condition – and a Lisbon manuscript, dated 1491, showing Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and other biblical books.

Somehow these collections, which survived centuries of warfare, pilferage, and neglect, outlived the Bolsheviks as well. After the Revolution the library and its museums, were closed, and the manuscripts languished. Thanks to Dr. Iakerson, and the Russian government, they are once again in the forefront. A large chunk of printed Jewish history is being rediscovered and, slowly but lovingly, restored.✡

Comments? Ideas? Suggestions?

Or professional news about yourself? Please write to:

AJL-NYMA NEWSLETTER COMMITTEE,
c/o Marion Stein,
28 Douglas St.,
Brooklyn, NY 11231.

E-mail: marions@panix.com Fax: 718-428-3617

Out of Egypt:

Friedberg Geniza Project
at Spring Reference Workshop

by MARION STEIN

Librarian, Yeshiva Har Torah

On March 9, 2000, at Ramaz Lower School, NYMA members were treated to a special presentation by Rabbi Yaakov Elman of Yeshiva University and coordinator of the Friedberg Geniza Project. Rabbi Elman spoke about the unprecedented work being done by this worldwide group of scholars on the collections of fragments taken from the Cairo Geniza.

Introduction

The Geniza fragments are distributed among several collections throughout the world. The largest, the Schechter-Taylor collection, is located at Cambridge University, England. The other main repositories are the Elhanan Adler collection at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the Firkovich collection in St. Petersburg, Russia (see article on page 3), the Goitein archives at Princeton University, and the collections at the Jewish National and University Library, in Jerusalem.

The people involved in the Friedberg Project specialize in particular subject matters. The fragments, for example, that contain examples of *piyyut* (liturgy) are being worked on by Ezra Fleischer in Jerusalem at JNUL, the *teshuvot* (responsa) of the Geonic period by a group of scholars in New York. All together twelve teams are working in different areas of Geniza scholarship. Their ultimate goal is the creation of a union catalog of *all* the fragments worldwide which would enable scholars to find scattered pieces of the same manuscript and make better analyses.

Rabbi Elman mentioned a few of these scholars and their specialties:

– Mark Bregman is working on some of the earliest fragments of *Talmud Bavli* dating before the 8th century. These include 10 folio pages of *Hullin* (from 20-25). He is also

(Continued on Page 5)

From the President

The 1999-2000 academic year was quite busy and productive for AJL-NYMA. Let me begin by thanking the devoted, hard-working members of the NYMA board. I particularly want to thank Tzivia Atik, a long-term board member, who will be retiring from the board this year. Tzivia has served in many positions, including NYMA President and cataloging workshop coordinator. The entire board will miss her eye to detail and her calm approach.

This year we had two successful conferences and three workshops. The cataloging workshop is described at great length in this issue, as well as the reference workshop on the Friedberg Geniza project, which offered a unique glimpse into the world of Geniza research. Thank you to all our coordinators and our presenters. I also want to thank the hosts of our events: New York Public Library, Hebrew Union College, Jewish Theological Seminary, and Ramaz Lower and Middle School. Without them our events would be without venue.

Lastly, I want to thank our Newsletter editors, Hallie Cantor and Marion Stein. They do a spectacular and time-consuming job in creating this publication.

As summertime approaches, think about ways in which you can participate in NYMA. Perhaps you have an interesting project which you have been working on and would like to share your work with others, or perhaps you would like to join our NYMA board. Perhaps you would like to write an article for the newsletter – a library profile or any other related topic. Please contact us and let us know your interests and your input.

Have a wonderful summer,

Naomi M. Steinberger,
Chapter President

AJL-NYMA needs YOU!

Wanted: administrative assistant in the New York AJL office. Please refer anyone who might be interested in a 4-8 hr/week part-time job in New York (115 East 26th Street) to Elizabeth F. Stabler (lizastabler@aol.com) or to Toby Rossner (tobyross@home.com). The job involves answering and forwarding snail mail, e-mail and telephone inquiries, providing stationery to Board and Council members, helping with mailings and most importantly, developing the AJL publicity database. All requests may still be sent to ajl@jewishbooks.org with a cc to lizastabler@aol.com.