THE STORY OF MY LIBRARY

MOSES GASTER

INTRODUCTION

The distinguished Romanian Jewish linguist, literary historian and folklorist Moses Gaster (Bucharest, 1856 – London, 1939) assembled an enormous library in his fields of interest and specialization: Hebraica and Judaica, Samaritana, and Romanian and related studies. Gaster's library was divided between a number of institutions over the course of nearly forty years, both during his lifetime and in the generation after his death.

The major portion of Gaster's Hebrew manuscripts was acquired in 1925 by the British Museum. (This was the single most important addition to the Hebrew collections since the accession of Almanzi's manuscripts in 1865.) Gaster's second, lesser, collection of Hebrew manuscripts was acquired in 1955 by the John Rylands Library in Manchester. His collection of Samaritan manuscripts was similarly divided between the British Museum and the John Rylands Library, the major portion going to the latter, together with his collection of Samaritan correspondence, most of his Genizah fragments, and miscellaneous Oriental manuscripts. Gaster's collection of Romanian and related manuscripts and printed books was divided between the Romanian Academy in Bucharest, and the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London, the latter receiving a major portion of the printed books. Gaster's printed Judaica were sold en bloc to the bookdealers Bamberger & Wahrmann in Tel-Aviv, whose final stock was ultimately acquired by the University of California at Los Angeles. In fact, there is hardly a major research collection of Judaica in the world which does not hold a book from the celebrated library of Moses Gaster, with his distinctive autograph on the frontispiece (see fig. 1).

Gaster wrote several surveys of the contents of his library, as well as the memoir given below, apparently penned in his seventy-fifth year, on how he built his library of books and manuscripts – Hebrew, Samaritan, and Romanian. The original German typescript, entitled ‘Die Geschichte meiner Bibliothek’, was forwarded to the bibliographer Herrmann Meyer, of the Soncino Gesellschaft der Freunde des jüdischen Buches, in Berlin in February 1931. Perhaps it was intended for publication in the journal Soncino Blätter or in the Mitteilungen of this society of bibliophiles, but it seems not to have been printed. It is published here in translation for the first time, on the seventieth anniversary of the acquisition of the Gaster Collection by the British Museum Library.¹

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I myself do not really know how over the years I came to possess thousands of volumes, chapbooks, and manuscripts. A library seems to grow like a tree. Even untended it
Fig. 1. 'Cansonetta da Purim', table song for the feast of Purim, in Judaeo-Italian, circa 1700.
Or. MS. 10463 (= Gaster no. 678), f. 1r
sprouts forth, as long as it puts down its roots in good earth. Already in my earliest childhood I was surrounded by books; from the days of my youth I was immersed in the magical atmosphere of the world of writing.

My father, a diplomatic officer in Bucharest, was — if I am not mistaken — one of the few who counted himself a member of Philippsohn’s ‘Library for the Advancement of Jewish Scholarship’, some of whose first publications I hold in my library. One will understand if I say that I was practically born into a realm of books. In my home in Romania — a land where so many languages are spoken — were to be found together on the shelves books in Romanian, French, German (especially the classics), and other languages — but most importantly Hebrew.

During my student days in Breslau, I spent much time rummaging around the library of the Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar. It is to the late librarian of the Seminary, Dr Zuckermann, that I owe particular thanks for allowing me to engross myself in the different parts of the library. In this way I became familiar with a large number of books.

My intense interest in various areas of scholarship led me gradually to acquire quite a number of books, especially in the fields of folklore, Romanian and Oriental languages, history and so on. I must say that I bought up a considerable number of books while still in Romania, as I was then occupied with the history of Romanian literature and folklore. Without my being aware of it, my library grew, a fact which — when I now think back on it — represented an unspoken need in my life, and one which still exists. Among other things, I was the first to lay particular importance on manuscripts. This love of manuscripts has remained with me to this day. It was possible for me over the course of time to collect some several hundred Romanian manuscripts.

In chests and trunks I then brought my printed friends with me to England. But this was not all. In addition to the books I brought with me, three chests full of books from Romania — in part my father’s legacy, and in part my own acquisitions — were unloaded at my house. Here in London I could give in entirely to my urge and my love for books. Both of these ‘principles’, which were the basis of my collecting and through which I came to possess a large library, are in my very nature. Indeed, from the very start I rarely bought single books, with the exception of important editions and manuscripts; rather I would always acquire a larger number of books in one fell swoop. In this way I could more easily convince the bookdealer to let me have them at a favourable price. This was also materially preferable to him, in that he received a large sum all at once and did not need to wait until the individual volumes were sold. On the other hand, the books were all average in cost to me, in that the very dear and the very cheap volumes, purchased all together, came out relatively equal in price.

I trained people to collect little chapbooks, especially Judaeo-German literature, in order to protect these pamphlets before they were thrown away and destroyed on account of the disinterest of their owners. I then bought them up in batches of fifty at a time, never less than that. In this way I ensured that people would collect and save these printed leaves, until they accumulated a certain number. They knew from experience
that I was a good customer, and we always arrived at a satisfactory understanding over the price in the end.

Thus I once also acquired no less than fifty manuscripts in a single shot. This was a mixed bag: old and new, valuable and worthless, all together. In this way I was able in less than thirty years to purchase more than 1,500 manuscripts.

Moreover, I taught people to be bookdealers. I would give them money in advance, and tell them to look around and buy books, and I then appraised for them the value of the individual volumes. When they travelled to the Orient, they would bring back for me a large number of books. Some of them profited from this much more than myself, for I could not afford the luxury of paying very high prices; this I had to leave to others. In any case, much of that which was brought from the Orient to Europe in the last forty years is the result, directly or indirectly, of my initiative.

One day the bookdealer Fischel of Leipzig came to me and showed me a chest full of manuscripts which he had offered to the [British] Museum for what he believed to be quite a low price. When he saw that they wanted to haggle with him, he was so outraged that he brought the whole collection to me and made me a much lower offer. We soon came to an agreement and the collection was added to my library.

At this point I must recall another source by which my library was enriched. In my capacity as Haham of the Sephardic community [of England], I came into close contact not only with the members of my congregation but also with the communities in the Orient. I convinced people that when they keep books in their own house, sooner or later they are lost and consigned to oblivion. I could easily show them that often after the death of the owners, such books, even valuable volumes, are dispersed or destroyed by the heirs out of sheer disinterest. In order to avoid this literary barbarity, I induced people to donate their books to me, in effect to hand them over to the ordered care of my library. After all, in a large library a book will simply not be lost. In gratitude for their giving me their books, I had the donors’ names entered in the respective volumes. Aside from that, I asked them to bring back books for me on their trips to the Orient; this was for me the dearest gift. They gladly acceded to this request, and one can find as a result many valuable manuscripts in my library.

Similarly, I once acquired a valuable collection of manuscripts in Bucharest. On one trip to Salonica, Constantinople, Aleppo, and Beirut, where I had access everywhere, it was easy for me to bring home a considerable number of books and manuscripts.

And so, often thanks to coincidence, my library grew imperceptibly from year to year. I must add that my bibliographic knowledge, by which I could easily determine the value, whether in content or materially, of many books, served as a great help.

I do not wish to speak about modern books, which one can readily obtain at auctions or through common exchange, such as review copies and the like. Even at auctions I held to the same principle: to acquire a large number of books all at once. Many of them were chaff, but they came with the purchase. Still, it often turned out that even an insignificant book could find its place in my library, and was not necessarily without value. Rarely have I exchanged books, at most a few duplicates. Through experience I learned that as
soon as one gives a book away, one needs it the next day. I also lost many books by lending them out; only the slip of paper signed by the borrower remained as a memento. For many years I have made it almost a rule that anyone who wants to read a book can do it only in my library.

I would like now to touch on an interesting episode. At the beginning of this century, four Samaritan priests came to pay me a visit. They showed me a wonderful old handwritten Bible on parchment and were not a little surprised when I flipped through the leaves to find the cryptogram indicating the date and the name of the scribe. Seeing this they realized that I was somewhat familiar with Samaritan literature. We became friends, and this friendship has lasted over thirty years until today. I remain in contact with them, and have a large collection of letters we have exchanged.

At this point you may be interested to learn that I created the first typewriter with Hebrew characters. I then had Samaritan letters cut to my specification and put onto the Hebrew typewriter in place of the upper case, so that I would have both alphabets together: with the upper case I write to the Samaritans in their script, while with the help of the lower case I transcribe Samaritan letters and writings. My relations with the Samaritans are like something out of a novel, but I cannot go on about that here. Suffice it to say that I possess perhaps the richest Samaritan library in the world, in which there are innumerable valuable manuscripts written by their scholars according to my specifications and to my wishes. Perhaps I will have occasion to write elsewhere about this in more detail, perhaps when I have prepared my catalogue. But this is a matter for the future.

I hope that the above account gives some insight into the history of my library. Of course this sketch can provide only a superficial view. One must not forget that every book has its own life, and many of them had remarkable fates. Allow me to cite a single example. Many years ago, I acquired half of a book in Ladino, written by a certain Vizino, which is among the oldest imprints from Salonica. Twenty years later the second half of this book crossed my path, found among the many valuable manuscripts originating in Persia (among them also the Pentateuch which I published in my work The Titled Bible). Is it not strange how the fate of books resembles that of people?

[POSTSCRIPT]

After I finished my studies in Breslau, I went back to Romania and threw myself into the study of Romanian literature, particularly Romanian popular literature. It was during this period that I assembled my Romanian library, which is now in London. It comprises the richest collection of Romanian manuscripts and printed books outside Romania. The Jewish antiquarian booksellers in Bucharest helped me a great deal in this, but nevertheless much valuable and important material escaped my notice, which I regret to this day. Many strange things happened in this regard. The Romanians
themselves were surprised at my purchases, but they quickly followed my example, and so the competition grew, until [the date when] I had to leave the country. Only with great difficulties did I have my Romanian books sent after me. I am still today in regular contact with the bookdealers there, but nothing valuable can be had any more, except by chance, and for that one must be on the very spot at the right moment.

And this is how it always was with me. First I made people aware of the value of these things, then I had to pay for it. The same was true also for Hebrew literature. In any case, I am happy that in this way many books and manuscripts were saved. They are in safe [private] hands, or in larger libraries.

The result of this collecting is reflected in my history of Romanian popular literature, in my chrestomathy, as well as in my history of Romanian literature; for these works I made use of no less than 400 previously unknown manuscripts.10

1 A carbon copy of the original typescript is held in the Gaster Papers within the Library of University College, London. Thanks are due to the Library and to Ms Gillian Furlong, archivist in the Library, who have kindly provided a copy of the typescript to the Hebrew Section of the British Library. Translation and notes are by Brad Sabin Hill.

2 Abraham Emanuel Gaster published in Bucharest several ephemeral poems in honour of King Willem III of Holland, including Shir mizmor (1863 and 1864) and Shirot ve-tishbahot (1873).

3 Gaster is referring to the Institut zur Förderung der Israelitischen Literatur, founded by Ludwig Philippson of Magdeburg in 1855.

4 This is Dr Benedict Zuckermann (1818-1891), mathematician and librarian, who compiled the Catalog der Bibliothek des Breslauer jüdisch-theologischen Seminar, 2nd edn. (Breslau, 1876).

5 Gaster is probably referring to J. Fischl Hirsch, long a supplier to the British Museum; cf. S. van Straalen's memoir which prefaces the Catalog der von Herrn Fischl Hirsch nachgelassenen Bücher und Handschriften [Rishmah mesfarim hadashim gam yeshamim ve-kitvo yad yekare ha-metsi'ut asher hish'ir ahavav... Fishl Hirsh] [catalogue by H. Malter and D. Künstlinger] (Berlin, 1899). A collection of Karaite and other Hebrew manuscripts in Fischl's possession was once catalogued by Steinschneider, in Verzeichniss karaitischer und anderer hebräischer Handschriften (im Besitze des Herrn J. Fischl) (Berlin, 1872); on the latter see S. Shunami, Bibliography of Jewish Bibliographies, 2nd edn. (Jerusalem, 1965), p. 559, no. 3123.

6 It may be noted here that Gaster possessed a scroll of the Pentateuch written in 1905/6 by the Samaritan High Priest and his son, containing a lengthy cryptogram (tashqil) indicating it was written 'for the scholar Gaster, may it be a blessing and a bestower of blessing upon him'. See Edward Robertson, 'The Ancient Scroll of the Samaritans', in B. Schindler (ed.), Gaster Centenary Publication (London, 1958), p. 1.

7 This unique Hebrew-Samaritan typewriter is today held in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, New York University (according to personal communication from Prof. Lawrence Schiffman).

8 Gaster is apparently referring to the book She'erit Yosef by Joseph b. Shem Tov b. Joshua Hai, printed by Joseph Jabez in Salonica in 1568, containing Zacuto's Be'ur Luhot, or astronomical tables, in Spanish transcribed in Hebrew characters by Joseph Vicinho [Vizino]. The tables, which comprise the last thirty leaves of the book, are known to be preserved in only two copies, indeed one of the earliest and rarest texts in Judaeo-Spanish ('Ladino'). A complete copy of the book, containing the tables, was held in the Saraval collection at the Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar, Breslau, whence perhaps Gaster's familiarity with the book. (The library of the Seminar was transferred to Switzerland after the Second World War, and divided between the Jewish communal libraries of Zürich, Basle, and Geneva.) On this book, see M. Marx, History and Annals of Hebrew Printing in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries (microfilm, Cincinnati, 1982), under Salonica, 1568.
