

Site Insight : History of the Rabbi Falk Library

"A place for bookworms"

The Rabbi Falk Library had its genesis in 1934 when 400 books were purchased from the estate of the late Rabbi F. L. Cohen, to be housed in the Great Synagogue for use by the congregation. The collection was called the Rabbi Cohen Memorial Library. In 1935 a handsome bookcase was presented to the synagogue to hold the collection which was located in the ministers' room. It was, however not yet ready for use by the congregants. During 1936 the collection was catalogued. In 1938 it was ready for congregational use as a reference library, but no borrowing was allowed; permission for use was through the secretary.

In spite of the hijack attempt, the collection was still being considered for relocation. The collection was as yet too small to be considered a proper library. During 1945, the Great Synagogue Journal noted that there was no Jewish library in Sydney. At that time no public Jewish collection was held in the New South Wales Public Library; the August 1946 issue of the Great Synagogue Journal stated that B'nai Brith were compiling a list of books in Jewish "libraries" in Sydney, "libraries" meaning personal collections of a reasonable size.

In 1949, a Library Committee was appointed by the Synagogue board of management with the aim of establishing the Rabbi Cohen Memorial Library "as a useful reference instrument for religious, historical and philosophical subjects". The committee wanted donations of books of Jewish interest in Hebrew and English. More books were purchased and additional bookcases were purchased; however, people still had to contact the secretary to use the collection.

During 1951 and 1952, new books continued to be added to the collection. In 1953 it was decided that Rabbi Falk's book collection should be purchased for the Rabbi Cohen Library. The Rabbi Falk collection consisted of 5,000 items valued at 8,000 pounds, which was added to the original collection after sorting for duplicate material. In March 1954 the president of the synagogue announced the acquisition of Rabbi Falk's collection at a cost of 3,000 pounds. In February 1957, the Rabbi Cohen Library moved to the Great Synagogue War Memorial Centre.

On 11 August 1957, the official opening of the Rabbi Falk Library was held in the Rabbi Cohen Room. Sir Charles Bickerton Blackburn, Chancellor of the University of Sydney, opened the library. By 1961 it comprised three main collections, from Rabbi Falk, Rabbi Cohen and David James Benjamin. This brought the holdings (unsorted) to 15,000 items. In 1962, the holdings of the library included 2200 Hebrew items and 3000 other items, plus 500 donations making a total of 5700 items. After sorting in 1963, the total library holdings excluding duplicates was 4500. In 1965 total holdings were 6,000 items. The collection then was valued at 10,000 pounds. In 1971, 9,000 books were held.

The library has on several occasions been threatened with closure. In 1965 the Synagogue board wished to make room for additional classrooms and hall space by the removal of the library. One option was transferring the Rabbi Falk Library to the Fisher Library at Sydney University. Another option was to house the collection within the Public Library of NSW in the Mitchell Library section, also the Mitchell Library agreed to accept the collection. Mr John Metcalf from the University of New South Wales proposed moving the Rabbi Falk Library into a public library. Other options included transferring it to a Jewish school or college. The Melbourne Jewish community would also have been prepared to take the collection. The Falk family, however opposed any move. In March 1967 the Synagogue board decided to have a two-year trial to promote the collection and if this did not work the collection would be transferred elsewhere.

In 1971, the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies set up a commission of enquiry into the Rabbi Falk Library. Proposals included shifting the collection to Victoria, creation of a Sydney Jewish collection or transfer to a public or university library. One comment from a congregant was: "We have too few bookworms reading the books and too many bookworms eating them", underlining the need for preservation of the collection and lack of use.

Also in 1971, students who called themselves "The Ad Hoc Committee for Preservation of Jewish Books, Jewish Museum Items and Jewish Identity" hijacked several hundred books. The books were hidden in the air conditioning unit in the southern dome of the Synagogue. The group did not intend to return the books unless they were retained in Jewish hands. Some books were accidentally dislodged and fell, becoming damaged. After ten hours the Ad hoc committee helped return the books. Police were notified of what was occurring. The Rabbinate praised the actions of the young people. Rabbi Abramson said the students had done "a great service to the community" in providing a reminder to the entire community of the Rabbi Falk Library's existence.

In spite of the hijack attempt the collection was still being considered for relocation during 1972. The Great Synagogue board was still considering moving the collection to Fisher Library or perhaps purchasing property in Bellevue Hill to house the collection. Rabbi Porush believed that the collection should not go outside Jewish hands. During 1973, Rabbi Apple was promoting the retention of the collection. During 1975, donated funds were used to rebind deteriorating books. A further donation of money was used to restore and rebind an additional number of books. Mr Gerald Falk donated an antique lamp, previously owned by Rabbi Falk to be used as a Ner Tamid to enhance the appearance of the library. In 1978 Prof. Sol Encel and Prof Melvin Weinstock proposed moving the library to the University of New South Wales. But such suggestions are no longer seriously considered by the Synagogue.

In 1979 the Library and Archives Committee was re-established. Mr Solomon Stedman donated some books. A special ark and reading desk were installed for religious services held within the library. The library was once again safe, and no more threats of closure have occurred since then.

The library has often been used for a range of functions and groups. In 1961, a book evening held in February included a Bible display from the collection. Between 1962 and 1966 the Jewish Adult Study and Discussion Group met in the library. The library was also being used as a classroom. In 1973, the library was being used as a Synagogue for morning and evening weekday services, as a room for children's and adult classes, and as a library and quiet reading room. In 1979, Rabbi Apple's students, the general public and university students used the library. The library continued to be used for morning and evening services; worshippers would also browse through the collection whilst they were there. Shiurim (adult study groups) met in the library. Rabbi Silberman was running a Talmud study group in the library on Wednesdays. The library was also being used by a variety of people including research students and academics. In 1982 the library was re-located to the other side of the building near the main office. Students and researchers were still the main users of the collection. The library was and continues to be used for Shiurim, adult courses and weekly worship. It has always been a place of interest to tourists and visitors.

In 1982, Ulpan classes were being conducted in the library. The library was also being used for Synagogue executive meetings. It was not a lending library but books were available on interlibrary loan. In 1987 the tour guides course was conducted in the library. The library continues to be used as a room for adult education classes.

Maintaining the collection has been the work of a dedicated group of both paid and volunteer library staff. In 1953 Rabbi Falk was working on listing the collection prior to its incorporation into the Rabbi Cohen collection. In 1954-1955, Miss Zoe Bertels was cataloguing books for the library. During 1958 Rabbi Hassida catalogued the Hebrew books and was in charge of the collection. In the later part of 1958, Mr H. I. Wolff became custodian of the collection. In 1960, Mr Emmanuel Holding was cataloguing the English books. Between 1962 and 1964, Mr A Dobrovitz was organising the library collection. In 1964 Gillian Lupton and A. Harkness were assisting him. During 1966 and 1968 Dr George Bergman was the librarian. He resigned after differences of opinion with the Synagogue board. In January, Mr Wells was the honorary librarian and was involved in Hebrew book sorting. Jacqueline Crown was part time librarian until March 1969.

Since 1973, Rabbi Apple has supported and promoted the library and its services. He has sorted, purchased and selected books. In 1982, Mrs Helen Bersten was cataloguing new acquisitions and incorporating them into the library. Mr Asher Solomon assisted in unpacking books. During the early 1990s, Mrs Shirley Cohen was looking after the library, cataloguing and sorting materials. From 1992, Mrs Pearl Cutter and Mrs Ilana Cohen have worked on maintaining, cataloguing and conserving the collection with the assistance of various other volunteers.

The library is composed of a number of large collections from people such as Rabbi Leib Aisack Falk, Rabbi Francis Lyon Cohen, David James Benjamin and Mr Eric Meth. The collection also includes smaller donations from congregants and from Rabbi Apple. There are now approximately 7,000 books held in the library. The Rabbi Falk collection consists of four sections: English and other European languages; Hebrew and Yiddish; rare books;

and journals. There are many scholarly works within the collection, which are of interest to rabbis, scholars and learned laypeople. The collection includes valuable Bibles, (several printed before 1800), Talmuds and related commentaries, and historical works on the Jewish people of Europe, Israel and Australia. Books on Hebrew language and Jewish customs abound. There is also a collection of Jewish novels and the works of Flavius Josephus. Newspapers and journals from Australia, England and America complete the collection.

The Rabbi Falk Library continues to stand proudly within the historic sandstone walls of the Great Synagogue. Its leather bound tomes, in neat rows, having been treasured by generations past, are ready to serve, entertain and educate for many years to come.

Ilana Cohen

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The Worst Subject Heading of the Year Award

At this year's conference different cataloguers (even non-cataloguers) had examples in mind of religious subject headings that defied belief, as well as the rules and common sense. Some ANZTLA librarians are quite evidently perturbed by absurd, meaningless, uninformative, incongruous or just plain bad subject cataloguing that is showing up in records as authorised proper subject access points.

In an attempt to reassure ourselves that we are not alone in thinking there is something fishy about some of the subject headings that pass under our noses, it has been decided to institute an unofficial Worst Subject Heading of the Year Award. When you see a subject heading that seems to be all a bit odd by the rules and tradition, you are invited to submit the said subject heading (with the title of the work it is meant to describe) to one of the following emails :

Philip Harvey at : Philip.Harvey@ormond.unimelb.edu.au

Helen Greenwood at : Helen@stjohns.auckland.ac.nz

Submissions can be kept anonymous if you wish, though personal comments on why the subject heading is thought a particular howler can always be included.

No correspondence will be entered into about the results, though we are always ready to talk about individual subject headings if you need to talk about the why and wherefore of such a cataloguing wonder.

At a certain time of the year, probably close to the next conference, a Top Ten will be announced on ANZTLA-forum, and the winner (if he/she agrees to be identified) will be presented with award (very likely in the form of a large chocolate bar!)

Just to kick things off, the following offering has already gone into the barrel :

Book title : *A 12-step approach to the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* / Jim Harbaugh (Sheed & Ward, 1977)

Assigned Subject Heading : Twleve-step programs – Religious aspects – Christianity – Meditations

Comment : Meditations on 12-step programs? Not feasible surely!

Please do not hesitate to submit your howlers, if only for your own peace of mind!

Philip Harvey
Joint Theological Library
Parkville

Helen Greenwood
Kinder Library
St John's College