

Joshua Teplitsky, *Prince of the Press: How One Collector Built History's Most Enduring and Remarkable Jewish Library*, (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 336.

by *Mirjam Thulin*

Leopold Zunz's (1794–1886) grief when in 1829 the Bodleian Library in Oxford purchased the book collection of the late rabbi David Oppenheim of Prague (1664–1736) is almost legendary. Together with the collection of the Hamburg merchant Heiman J. Michael (1792–1846), acquired in 1848, the Oppenheim collection showed a Jewish version of early modern passion for collecting, and a treasure of the Jewish book culture in Central Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The descendants of Oppenheim sold the library which had originally been worth 150,000 thalers for only 9,000 thalers/ 2,080 pounds, as they were in financial distress. Fortunately, thus the collection remained intact until today.

Collections like Oppenheim's library are a treasure for the history of (Jewish) booklore and book cultures, but also for the history of ideas and knowledge. Joshua Teplitsky, an assistant professor of history at Stony Brook University, tells us the story of Oppenheim and his collection knowledgeably and enthusiastically. He presents Oppenheim as the spider in a net of Jewish scholarship, printing, and "early modern Jewish governance" (p. 2). Although Teplitsky focusses on the building of the library and on how Oppenheim used the book collection for various purposes, he devotes also much of his study to the dazzling life of the "Prince of the Press."

David Oppenheim was born in Worms; one of his earliest tutors was the well-known rabbi Yair Hayim Bacharach (1639–1702). Oppenheim was wealthy and related to contemporary Jewish court factors, among them his powerful uncle Samuel Oppenheimer (1630–1703), court agent of the Holy Roman Emperor in Vienna. David Oppenheim became even richer when he married his first wife Gnendl, the daughter of Leffman Behrends (Liepmann Cohen, 1634–1714), the court agent of Hanover. In 1684 Oppenheim was ordained as a rabbi. His first post as a rabbi was in Nikolsburg in Moravia. In 1702 he moved to Prague to follow the call to become chief rabbi of Prague and later Landesrabbiner of Bohemia. In addition, he assembled honorary titles, among them "Prince," or Nasi, of the Land of Israel.

These posts and honorary offices found symbolic expression in his library, a collection of ultimately about 4500 printed Hebrew and Yiddish books and 1000 manuscripts. Consequently, it constitutes the center of Teplitsky's study, along with the quest for Oppenheim's personality, intellectual life, politics, and the passion for collecting books. Following the understanding of collecting as knowledge, Teplitsky describes Oppenheim's library as a "deeply material way of knowing" (p. 7), and as a mirror of how cultural and political authority interacted and were intertwined. Moreover, he frames his study as a contribution to the history of Jewish political cultures and practices (pp. 13-14), not least because books became a form of currency for Oppenheim and his circles, all based and set in a specific early modern power structure of early modern Central Europe.

Dissertation-based books typically benefit from a clear focus and structure, and this holds true in Teplitsky's case, too. The endnotes, bibliography, and the index make up a third of the book, quite unusual for an American academic book. They allow readers to follow up topics easily. The book is divided into five chapters. Every chapter ends with a conclusion that brings together all results and places them in the bigger picture of (Jewish) book cultures and history of knowledge. Pictures of and from Oppenheimer's book collection, photos of his notes, manuscripts, and printed title pages make the written narrative vivid.

Following a concise but thorough introduction, the book starts off in the first chapter on the making of Oppenheim as a book collector (pp. 22-55). Teplitsky introduces Oppenheim's life and legacy, how the collection started and how family and kinship, related or befriended court Jews, scholars and rivals were involved in the process. Chapter two turns to "Politics, Patronage, and Paper" (pp. 56-92), and relates the significance of Oppenheim and his library up to the early years of the eighteenth century. It shows how Oppenheim further developed his library through purchases. Moreover, he increasingly received books as gifts from various people who hoped that he would use his outstanding power position in both the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds for advocating for the donor. In this context, Teplitsky also discusses the court Jews' and Jewish communities' networks in which Oppenheim was involved as mediator, as well as Oppenheim's involvement and engagement in the support of the Jewish residents in Jerusalem, who gratefully and respectfully called him "Prince," or Nasi, of the Land of Israel.

Chapter three turns to knowledge and cultural history (pp. 93-129) and discusses the significance of Oppenheim's book collection for the decision-making in Jewish legal questions. Thanks to his library, Oppenheim was ahead of many of his

rabbinic colleagues in this regard because he was able to consult the relevant literature quickly. From 1793 onward, the collection was housed at Oppenheim's father-in-law's home in Hannover in order to protect it against Catholic censorship in his hometown of Prague. In Hanover, the library was accessible through guardians and librarians for multiple users, among them rabbinical scholars and judges, but also Christians like Johann Christoph Wolf (1683–1739), a Protestant theologian and author of the *Bibliotheca Hebraica* (first published in 1683, revised and expanded between 1715 and 1727). Chapter four focusses on the Jewish printing press (pp. 130–161). Oppenheim invested in the new media of the time not only as collector of valuable incunabula and books, but also as the holder of copyrights and printing privileges. Chapter five turns to Oppenheim as a legal scholar and to books as political objects (pp. 162–187). Teplitsky analyzes how Oppenheim shaped the Jewish book market, for instance through his *haskamot* (*approbata*) for Hebrew books, and how he dealt with criticism and accusations against books he supported, as well as the involvement of Catholic censorship. In fact, his *haskamot* were one of the few writings of Oppenheim that were printed before the twentieth century (p. 171). The chapter-long epilogue and conclusion (pp. 188–205) tell about the fate of the library after Oppenheim's death, the cataloguing of the collection in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which came about not least with the aim to selling it at a good price.

The exposition of the chapters already shows how many important topics and details Teplitsky covers in his study. The author effortlessly takes the reader into a lively world of courts and politics, patronage and philanthropic networks, and he tells in detail of local and regional Czech-Jewish history. He only touches on Oppenheim's economic activities in the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. It must remain open if Oppenheim's financial activities were limited to the court factor families with which he was related. At the same time, Teplitsky respectfully deconstructs legends, such as Oppenheim's mythmaking relationship to his powerful uncle Samuel (p. 228, FN 39). In contrast to the somewhat hyperbolic subtitle of the book, Teplitsky calls the Oppenheim collection in his conclusion a "library of Ashkenaz" and "Ashkenazi library" (pp. 204–205). Nonetheless, he successfully places his study not only in the history of (Jewish) book cultures, but also of early modern European (book) collections, cabinets of curiosities, giving and traveling. Ultimately, Teplitsky does a worthwhile service to Oppenheim, too, because until this book there was – surprisingly – no comprehensive biography of David Oppenheim and the legacy of the "Prince of the Press."

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