

September 19, 2003

So It Is Written: Books Are Memory

By JONATHAN ROSEN

Once a year, when I was a Hebrew-school student at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Morningside Heights, our class would visit the seminary's rare-book library, which houses one of the great collections of Judaica in the world. Despite our antsy, adolescent irreverence, there was something about those books that commanded immediate attention, even a kind of awe.

I have never forgotten the image of a small High Holy Days prayer book from 15th-century Spain, its odd oblong shape designed, the curator speculated, so that the owner could conceal the little volume in the sleeve of his coat to avoid detection by the Inquisition. All books over time take on a posthumous pathos, but these books — many acquired in the early part of the 20th century when people as well as books were once more threatened with burning — were survivors many times over.

As the city celebrates New York Is Book Country this weekend on Fifth Avenue, I cannot help thinking of the seminary library at Broadway and 122nd Street, where the vitality of books and the precariousness of books are simultaneously on view, a double message inscribed on every page.

I recently went back to the seminary's rare-book collection. You do not browse. Rabbi Jerry Schwarzbard, the librarian for special collections, wearing white cotton gloves and laying out the books on a strip of black velvet, retrieves the old volumes for me one at a time. The first book he shows me is the prayer book I remembered seeing as a student. It was printed around 1480, which makes it an incunabulum. The Latin name means "from the cradle," a reference to books produced between 1450 and 1501, when Gutenberg's invention was in its infancy. The book, printed somewhere on the Iberian Peninsula, is the only one of its kind. What happened to its owner is unknown. Rabbi Schwarzbard handles the volume as if it were still in the cradle, turning the pages gingerly to show me where a passage was snipped out by a censor. But despite its wound, the book is in remarkable shape. Paper was not introduced into Europe until the 12th century, but the high rag content made for low acidity and surprisingly durable pages. I have paperbacks from college that look far worse.

What are 20 years to a book that survived the Inquisition? I, meanwhile, am more than twice the age I was when I saw it last. I am married, I have children and I am mourning my father, who died this year. I can't help thinking that part of the dread I felt seeing those fragile books as a teenager was unconscious anticipation of the moment when I would see them again as an adult and realize that I was the ephemeral one.

Several works in the collection have all but come back from the dead, like the fragments from the Cairo Geniza, which lay for 800 years in the attic of the medieval Ben Ezra Synagogue in Egypt before they were discovered in the late 19th century. A geniza is a sort of above-ground burial chamber for sacred books, which are never thrown away if they contain the name of God; but the books and letters in the Cairo attic included many documents that were not sacred and mysteriously wound up there. They have awakened in a transformed world, but like Rip van Winkle, they have found living relatives to take them in, which is perhaps the true test of civilization.

The seminary has about 30,000 fragments from the geniza, including a letter from Maimonides signed in his own hand in 1170, requesting money to ransom captives taken prisoner by the crusader king Amalric I of Jerusalem. There is a love letter written in Judeo-Arabic by a traveler in 1204 to his wife, and an account of a brawl that broke out in the synagogue after some disliked person was called to the Torah.

Scholars are still working to match these jigsaw pages and tell their stories. For years a Hebrew poem mysteriously bearing the Gregorian notations of the medieval church had baffled scholars — how did Jews wind up with Christian musical notes? — until several pages of a diary, also in the geniza, were pieced together from various collections and the notes were discovered to be the work of one Obadiah the Proselyte, a monk who converted to Judaism in 1102 and brought along a knowledge of church music.

The way cultures flowed into one another is most evident in the polyglots, Bibles printed in multiple languages. I am shown, among others, the Genoese Psalter, which offers each psalm in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Arabic and Aramaic, side by side across a double page. The book was published in 1516 and edited by a priest named Agostino Giustiniani who, in glossing the verse "And their words go forth to the ends of the earth," included the first printed biography of Christopher Columbus.

Alas, the linguistic harmony of the polyglots hardly mirrored the world of flesh and blood that they inhabited. Ferdinand Columbus did not like the little biography of his father and prevailed on the Genoese senate to destroy the Psalter, making the copy before me even rarer than a 400-year-old book would ordinarily be.

Fire and human hatred have always been the ultimate enemy of books. Rabbi Schwarzbard shows me a broadside posted in Venice in 1553 that bears the lion of St. Mark at the top. It calls on anyone with a Talmud to turn it over to the "Executors against Blasphemy" within eight days to be publicly burned in the Piazza San Marco.

"Of the making of books there is no end," the author of Ecclesiastes laments, but there is also no end to the unmaking of books. In 1966 the tower that housed the bulk of the seminary library caught fire. The tower acted like a chimney, the blaze lasted for nine hours before it was controlled, and when it was more than 70,000 books were ashes and many thousands more were damaged by water.

The rare-book library was in another part of the seminary, but many books that would now be considered rare were in the tower, along with the irreplaceable papers of scholars and a collection of Torah scrolls from Danzig sent to New York on the eve of the Holocaust.

The story of the fire was told during the tour I took as a student and it had a riveting effect. It was an accidental blaze that nevertheless seemed emblematic — the hot breath of history pursuing these books to their new home — though in fact the outcome was the opposite of those calamitous European conflagrations. Firefighters from 35 companies doused the flames and hundreds of people from the neighborhood, people of different religions, helped salvage water-damaged books by painstakingly laying paper towels on every other page of each book, multiple times. This was done for nearly 170,000 books.

But the fire was a reminder of the precariousness of books, the very things we count on to remember for us. The tower was still eerily empty when I was a student. It reopened only two years ago, after 35 years. There are haunting photographs of the ash-streaked motto of the seminary, carved into the stone of the tower: "And the bush was not consumed."

It is part of the work of a culture to figure out what endures and what is consumed, though the calculations can never be completed, not least because we ourselves are part of the equation. Books and people keep whispering secrets to each other and this relationship, so full of flaws, is perhaps the best we can do.

After my father died, my sister and I found on his bookshelf a little boxed set of the five books of Moses — the only books my father taken with him when he fled Vienna in 1938 at the age of 14. The volumes are in Hebrew and German, printed in Austria in the dark year 1935.

I thought of my father's Bible while looking at a much older one in the seminary library, handwritten in Toledo in 1492, the year the Jews were expelled from Spain, with a Hebrew inscription, added in 1497 in Constantinople,

describing how the Jews "left Spain dismayed and banished."

My father's rescued Bible was a link to the worlds he fled, German and Jewish both, and now that book has outlived the boy that saved it and is entrusted to other hands. It is a book and a story that I will no doubt share with my children, but not yet. My younger daughter still eats books. The older is almost 4 and loves to be read to with an innocent pleasure that is somehow heartbreaking.

Someday my children will learn how books can be unmade into fragments and fragments bound into books. Someday they will, I hope, visit the seminary library.

But for now I take my eldest to the children's room of the New York Society Library, on East 79th Street in Manhattan, where I went as a child. She settles herself on a tiny chair and I settle myself on a tiny chair — the same one, perhaps, I sat in decades before. My daughter hands me a book. I open at the beginning and start to read.