

Centre Librarian's new combined post

DR PIET VAN BOXEL, the Librarian of the Centre's Muller Memorial Library, has been appointed to an important new post which he will occupy in addition to the one he holds at Yarnton. The role of Hebraica and Judaica Librarian of Oxford University is a new one, and his appointment reflects the recognition of Yarnton as a centre of excellence and its growing integration into the University.

Dr van Boxel will be responsible for a number of activities. Central to these will be streamlining and synchronizing the acquisitions policies of all University libraries whose holdings touch on Hebrew and Jewish studies. These include Oxford's iconic Bodleian Library, as well as the Oriental Institute, the faculties of Theology and History, the Taylorian Institute and the Middle East Centre. Such coordination is designed to minimize duplication and thereby to maximize the number of new publications that can be purchased. Many books in this area currently slip through the purchasing net due to lack of resources.

This new appointment is part of a project ultimately to centralize most of the University libraries' Humanities holdings in a single location on the former site of the Radcliffe Infirmary, although manuscripts and old books will remain in their current homes. The Bodleian Library's manuscripts in Hebrew, Aramaic, Ladino and Yiddish, numbering more than 3000, form one of the three finest collections in the world (together with those of the British Library in London and the Palatina Library in Parma). Among them is a significant fraction of the Cairo Genizah, the bulk of which is held at Cambridge University. Early printed books in the Bodleian – totalling 30,000 – include the 7000 volumes collected by the eighteenth-century Chief Rabbi of Prague, David Oppenheim, which form the core of the Judaica collection and are also important for the history of Yiddish. Collections held by the Centre which add measurably to the overall holdings of Oxford libraries include the Rabbi Louis Jacobs Collection, which is rich in responsa and in Hasidic material previously lacking in Oxford. The Copenhagen and Foyle-Montefiore collections comprise assemblages that substantially increase Oxford's resources in both European Jewish history and rabbinics. The new policy of unification will confirm Oxford's position as the major bibliographic centre for Jewish Studies in Britain.

Dr van Boxel also plans to coordinate lectures designed to employ the collections of manuscripts and early printed books for teaching. Entitled the Catherine



Dr Piet van Boxel at the Bodleian Library.

Lewis Masterclasses, these lectures will be funded through the Centre, enabling distinguished scholars to be invited from overseas. The first incumbent will be Professor Malachi Beit-Arie, the world expert in Hebrew codicology (the science of dating manuscripts and determining their provenance), who will lecture this spring in the Sheldonian Library using electronic equipment to magnify details of books, such as the shape of individual letters, the texture of parchment and the techniques used to sew bindings, which all provide evidence of origins.

An additional area of activity will be the promotion of exhibition projects, including displays of objects and related lectures. Potential subjects include figures such as Moritz Steinschneider, the Hebrew bibliographer whose classic work was based on the holdings of the Bodleian; and Leopold Zunz, founder of the 'Science of Judaism' and pioneer of the scholarly investigation of rabbinic writings, whose library forms part of the Foyle-Montefiore Collection at Yarnton.

Dr van Boxel's appointment is a major accolade both for him and for the collections he has helped bring to the Centre's Leopold Muller Memorial Library. It underlines the Centre's place in the forefront of Jewish Studies in this country. He will from now on have the assistance of Dr César Merchan-Hamann, who is interviewed on page 2.

The Deputy Librarian

DR CÉSAR MERCHAN-HAMANN, the new Deputy Librarian, has polyglot skills that will be of great value to the Centre in general. He was brought up in Colombia and in 1981 received a BSc in Mathematics at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogota, with subsidiaries in mathematical logic, linguistics and computer science.

After teaching mathematics for a number of years, he moved to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, to work on a PhD in mathematical logic. To relax between intense bouts of concentration on his research topic, he attended lectures on German-Jewish history and literature by Professor George Mosse. This led him in a new direction. César was already well read in German-Jewish culture by the time he went to university, having learned German at home from his mother (who was of German origin) and having also learned Yiddish while young. He read somewhat indiscriminately at first, but was soon struck by the embarrassment and even hatred expressed by German Jews towards the Yiddish language and those who spoke it, a phenomenon to which he has since devoted much of his research.

Realizing that his future lay in Jewish Studies, he travelled to London in 1990 where he studied Hebrew at the Spiro Institute, and also taught history, before taking an MA and PhD at University College London in Hebrew and Jewish Studies. César's thesis, which involved working in German, Yiddish and Hebrew, was supervised by Hugh Denman, a recent Visiting Scholar at the Centre. It was devoted to the works of Sammy Gronemann (1875-1952), lawyer, Zionist activist and humorous writer, whose curious combination of acerbic wit and Zionism (his father, an Orthodox rabbi in Hanover, had lost the support of his congregation by propounding what most German Jews regarded as the 'madness' of Herzl) had been largely ignored by literary researchers. Little of his work has been translated into Hebrew, and none into English.

Gronemann became legal advisor to the Zionist organization and president of the Zionist Congress court before 1914, travelling throughout Europe and becoming familiar with local Jewish communities in a way that few German



Dr César Merchan-Hamann.

Jews had done previously. Serving on the Eastern Front in 1916-18 in a unit responsible for German relations with occupied populations, he helped compile a seven-language dictionary for the use of administrators. One of the seven was Yiddish.

Gronemann's first novel, the humorous *Tohuwabohu* (1920), satirized German-Jewish contempt for so-called *Ostjuden*, depicting German-Jewish self-hatred through the eyes of an East European Jew aspiring to become westernized. The German army features in his equally satirical *Hawdloh und Zapfenstreich* (1924), based on his Eastern Front experience. There followed several plays. Prevented from practising as a lawyer in Berlin after 1933, and expelled from the writers' guild despite having provided services to its members gratis over many years, he moved to Paris, from where he campaigned for German Jews to recognize the gravity of their situation and helped them to obtain visas. He left for Tel Aviv in 1936.

Dr Merchan-Hamann joined Leo Baeck College in London in 1997 as assistant to Dr Piet van Boxel, now the Centre's Librarian, and succeeded him there as Librarian in 2002. At the Centre, Dr Merchan-Hamann will initially catalogue the Rabbi Louis Jacobs Collection, with its wealth of responsa literature and Hasidic writings.

He will also be responsible for the day-to-day running of the Library while Dr van Boxel is engaged in his new role as Hebraica and Judaica Librarian of Oxford University (see page 1 of this *Newsletter*).

Dr Merchan-Hamann has just completed a joint project with Dr Ada Rapoport-Albert of University College London. This was on a manuscript from eighteenth-century Prague, written in German language but Hebrew characters by one of the few Frankists to remain Jewish. (Most members of this messianic sect, led by Jacob Frank from Podolia, eventually converted to Catholicism and moved westwards.)

Another current interest is a Hebrew work known as *Mishlei Sendebat*, a version of the 'Tales of Sindbad', which passed from India to Persia and thence into Arabic, before reaching Hebrew and medieval Castilian. César aims to compare the Spanish version, apparently commissioned in the thirteenth century from Jewish and Muslim translators who had access to a very early text, with the Hebrew version which survives in a number of manuscripts, including one in the Bodleian Library. One of the many European languages into which the book was translated was Scots, a language Dr Merchan-Hamann says he does not propose to add to the dozen or so he already knows.

A snapshot of Yiddish research at the Centre

DR JOSEPH SHERMAN'S current flurry of publication projects exemplifies the vigour of research at the Centre.

At present he is preparing two books on the work of David Bergelson (1884-1952), the twentieth century's most significant Yiddish prose writer. From 1909, in work of startling modernism, Bergelson charted the decay of the tsarist empire and the Jewish bourgeoisie that prospered in it. As a leader of the 'Kiev Group' that sought to build a secular culture for Jews in search of emancipation without assimilation, he welcomed the 1917 Revolution and helped establish Kiev's *Kultur-lige* (League for Culture). This was a Yiddishist body aiming to set up networks of schools, publishing houses, theatres, libraries and clubs, an ambitious programme replicated throughout Europe and America. Although the pogroms of the Russian Civil War drove Bergelson to Berlin in 1921, he grew increasingly convinced that Yiddish culture could have a viable future only in the Soviet Union, in the Jewish enclaves being established in Birobidzhan and the

Crimea. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 made a bright future elsewhere seem impossible, and in 1934 he returned to Moscow. On Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 he became prominent in the work of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFK), canvassing support in the West and publicizing Nazi atrocities. After 1945, however, a series of anti-Semitic state repressions culminated in the arrest and imprisonment of leading members of the JAFK, Bergelson among them. On 12 August 1952 he and eleven other Jewish writers and intellectuals were shot.

No other Soviet Yiddish writer has attracted as much interest from Western critics, although in the Cold War he tended to be cast as a gifted writer whose best work appeared before the Revolution, and who then prostituted his talent to serve Stalinist propaganda. But this is to ignore Bergelson's innate scepticism, how he delayed returning to Moscow until no other option remained, and the fact that compromises were made by all who hoped to stay alive in Stalin's USSR. In wishing to save something of Yiddish culture after the Nazi Holocaust he may have trusted falsely, but so did millions of others.

David Bergelson: From Modernism to Socialist Realism (edited jointly with Gennady Estraiikh), is a selection of papers arising from the sixth Mendel Friedman Conference held at Yarnton Manor in 2005, which will include a comprehensive biography, bibliography and previously untranslated theoretical essays by Bergelson. It will be launched in August.

Dr Sherman is also currently translating Bergelson's *When All Is Said and Done* (*Nokh Alemen*), the first truly modernist novel in Yiddish, which appeared in 1913, the same year as Marcel Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann* (*Swann's Way*),

D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, and Osip Mandelstam's first volume of Acemist poetry entitled *Kamen* ('Stone'). In this great novel Bergelson's idiosyncratic syntax objectivizes his narratives, its euphony transforming Yiddish's manifest orality into complex literary prose. His dialogue startlingly deploys a technique learned from Flaubert which blurs the voice of the narrator with those of characters, and actual speech with unspoken thoughts.

In a theme reminiscent of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Bergelson's *Nokh Alemen* traces the discontented life of Mirl Hurvits, a spoiled woman for whom life in the shtetl is intolerable. Marrying without love, she rejects her good-natured husband and the child she is carrying, undergoes an abortion and sets out to live her own life. Bergelson's dispassionate and sardonic study of Jews in the declining tsarist regime is deeply pessimistic, hinting at the overthrow of all secure values. This new English translation will be published by Yale University Press in 2008.

Dr Sherman's other projects include, first, a volume entitled *Der frier Bashevis/The Early Bashevis*, a selection of Isaac Bashevis Singer's work dating from before he left Poland for America in 1935. The book will include some hitherto unpublished stories that Dr Sherman discovered in manuscript in the Singer archive at the University of Texas. He has also edited *Modern Yiddish Writers*, due out in June 2007, in which twenty-five academic contributors outline the work of forty Yiddish writers of the modern period. It is one of more than 300 volumes of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* to have appeared, each designed to place writers in the wider perspective of their national literature and culture.



David Bergelson.

The New Cowley Lecturer

DR JORDAN FINKIN, who has succeeded Professor Glenda Abramson as Cowley Lecturer in Post-Biblical Hebrew, brings an interdisciplinary flavour to his subject. He believes that the similarity of cultural context in which Modern Hebrew and Yiddish were spoken and written in prewar Europe calls for a joint approach.

Authors in these languages in the earlier twentieth century shared cultural assumptions and described similar social situations in whichever tongue they were using. They also reflect common Jewish mannerisms, such as the tendency to answer questions with other questions, and to probe relentlessly around concepts and situations even in informal contexts. The desire to overturn every argument - derived in part from the Yeshiva-student's hunt for the intellectual 'novelty', the mark of excellence and therefore of intellectual status - is a behaviour pattern that has often been caricatured, but never fully analysed. These mannerisms can be traced to writers' contacts with rabbinic writing, a form of literature culturally so privileged in Jewish society that it coloured thought-patterns. Linguistic structures were similarly affected, often due to contact with languages such as German or Russian.

Dr Finkin was born in Dallas, Texas in 1976, grew up in Champaign, Illinois, studied for his BA in Philosophy at Chicago, moved to Jewish Studies for his MA and received his PhD from Berkeley, California. During this time he moved gradually from Biblical to Modern Hebrew, and then also to Yiddish, specializing in early modernist poets such as

Avraham Shlonsky (1900-73), who wrote in Hebrew, and Peretz Markish (1898-1953) in Yiddish.

He was struck in particular by differences between the Yiddish writer Markish, and the non-Jewish poet, Georg Trakl (1887-1914). For Trakl, his native Austria was a territorial certainty that he sought to understand through the dimension of time. Markish, feeling at home in the world of time, used that perception to talk about and in effect evoke a territory which Jews did not have, thereby highlighting essential differences in perception between Jewish and non-Jewish writers. Extending this idea to Hebrew literature, Finkin notes how European Hebrew poets occasionally base themselves on the spacial certainties of biblical writings. In doing so they celebrate landscapes which are recognizably those of their homelands, or of merely imagined, unearthly visions (not unlike Italian Renaissance painters). The land and climate in their works become recognizably Middle Eastern only when they live and write in Palestine, at which point the biblical models reflect the reality around them. One of Dr Finkin's long-term plans is to investigate the roles of space and time in Hebrew and Yiddish modernist poetry. He is drawn to modernist poetry by the complicated concerns about language which it highlights.

Among Dr Finkin's courses is one entitled 'Is Modern Hebrew Literature Jewish?' The idea for this came out of observing the reflexive association between the Hebrew language and the idea of Jewishness, although analysis of Hebrew literature since the late nineteenth century reveals how tenuous that association can become. An Israeli Arab writer such as Anton Shammas also chooses to work in Hebrew. One has to ask whether - or how much - an author's culture percolates into a different language, and whether styles are determined by cultural background. Such questions have wider implications for literary studies in general.

The proposal to teach Hebrew and Yiddish in tandem seems more surprising in Britain than in America, where interdisciplinary approaches have for some time been common. But Dr Finkin compares the links between these languages to the traditional pairing of Hebrew and Aramaic in rabbinic studies. His proposal may take time to achieve consensus, but he is confident that it will eventually do so. There may likewise be some way to go before the poetry that he himself writes in Hebrew, Yiddish and combinations of both finds a readership, but here too he looks forward to a time when readers will embrace the qualities of interlinguistic literature. In the meantime he takes a wry pleasure in the fact that his wife, whom he hopes will eventually join him in Oxford, works in the 'Division of Signs and Markings' of New York City's Department of Transportation. He describes this name as 'a semiotician's dream'.

Dr Jordan Finkin.



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