



The history of the old Hebrew books of Fürth: A journey down memory lane

by
Willie Glaser

 <p>Etching by Amer, titled <i>Rabbi and scroll</i>, below the Hebrew and German name of Fürth (Photos: Willie Glaser)</p>	Table of contents
	A first encounter in Baiersdorf
	As a <i>Minyan Man</i> in Schwabach
	Fürth revisited
	Back in Canada
	The lost and found books
	What the Nazis planned
	The <i>Jewish Cultural Restoration Committee</i>
	An idea fruited
	Looking at the books as a former citizen of Fürth
	A brief history of Jewish book printing in Fürth
Credits	
Sources	
A selection of frontispieces of Hebrew prints from Fürth	

A first encounter in Baiersdorf

My interest in Hebrew *Sforim* (books or tracts) was awakened at an early age. I was about five or six years old when my parents spent the Rosh Hashanah (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) holidays in Baiersdorf, Franconia (approx. 20 km northeast of Fürth, see map). We stayed with the in-laws of my father's brother Benno, the Bigeleisens. They lived in a big *Bauernhaus* (farmhouse).



Aaron, the High Priest (from a Fürth print of 1802)
(Photo: Willie Glaser)

I always was looking forward to spend a Yom Tov (Jewish holiday) in Baiersdorf. I still can smell the aroma of the brass *Schabboslampe* (Sabbath lamp), hanging in its ornate glory from a beam, its six arms with the oil fed wicks flickering and spreading a soft glow in the room.

The main reason for our visit to Baiersdorf was to provide the man power *to make a Minyan*. A Minyan is, according to the Jewish law, a quorum of ten men necessary for a prayer service. Between the Glaser and Bigeleisen families we were able to muster six men. The other four men came from Jewish families in Baiersdorf. Father Bigeleisen conducted all prayer services.

The synagogue in Baiersdorf was established in 1530 and destroyed during *Kristallnacht* in 1938. It was a small, but massive building. During the hours long prayer service it was hard for me as a young boy to sit still beside my father. I roamed around in the synagogue, looking into and investigating all nooks and crannies. I was busy leafing through the many dusty, leather or parchment bound old Hebrew books and tracts sitting on the shelves.

I was fascinated by the title and frontispiece pages with their wonderful illustrations. I carried one of the heavy books to my father's seat and asked him: *Why are there so many holes in this book?* My father's answer was: *There are worms that want to be clever, so they go inside the words in the book.*

It was Yom Kippur, my mother came to take me home for a snack (all adults were fasting). The house was only a few steps from the synagogue. I told her about the clever worms in the books. She rushed me home, undressed me, carried the clothing to the yard and shook it out. I asked her: *Why do you do that?* Her answer was: *I have to get rid of the bookworms in your clothing.* That is why today, at the age of 82, I am still a *bookworm*.

As a *Minyan Man* in Schwabach

My next encounter with a large selection of old Hebrew *Sforim* was in the synagogue of Schwabach (approx. 17 km southeast of Fürth, see map). This synagogue was built in 1799 and still exists today as a building in private hands.

At age 13, just past my Bar Mitzvah when, according to Jewish law, a boy becomes an adult, a friend of the family living in Schwabach asked my father if I would like to be a *Minyan Man*, meaning to be the tenth man for the quorum, because a Jewish family had moved from Schwabach and the small community was shy one man.

I eagerly accepted, always ready for an adventure. It meant a short train trip every Friday for Sabbath and on the eve of Jewish holidays from Fürth to Schwabach and return. I was paid the train ticket and three Reichsmark.

The Jewish community, as small as it was, was presided over by Rabbi Manes. After the Minchah service (afternoon prayer) he conducted a religious study class. Sometimes I would sneak out and climb to the attic of the synagogue. The attic had many shelves crammed with a large collection of Hebrew books. I could determine from the hand-written and dated notes, that they were penned during the late 1600s to the late 1800s.

Historians told me, that in Schwabach a *Judenschule* (Jewish school) existed as far back as 1707. This building located in the *Judengasse* (Jews' lane) was opposite the synagogue.

It also served as the *Rabbinerhaus* (rabbi's house). This explains the presence of the many beautiful old Hebrew books, many in prime condition in the attic of the synagogue.

Fürth revisited

After I came to Canada, there were occasions to hold and look into an old Hebrew tract like I had seen in my boyhood days. I started to wonder, whatever happened to these wonderful antique Hebrew books of yesteryear? Many years past and the answer came to me later.

In 1997 a group of citizens of Fürth decided to invite me and other *ehemalige jüdische Bürger von Fürth* (former Jewish citizens of Fürth) to spend some time in our hometown. We visited the temporary quarters of the Jewish Museum Fürth. I browsed through their library and admired the many *Sforim* on the shelves. I asked for details about these books and was told that many of them are very special to the museum because they were printed in Fürth.

That was the third time in my life that I looked at a collection of Hebrew tracts. Sitting in my seat during the flight back to Canada and not being able to sleep, I started to think about the Hebrew volumes printed a long time ago in Fürth and the many Jews bent over the pages studying the Talmud in candlelight. Thinking about when in my boyhood I walked by the houses where the Jewish printing establishments used to be located ... - and an idea germinated.



Partial map of Central Franconia with the highlighted locations of Fürth, Baiersdorf and Schwabach
(Generated with Microsoft AutoRoute Express)

Back in Canada

For many years I have spent time as a staff assistant (volunteer) with the National Archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC). I was aware of the large collection of old Hebrew books in the library. I looked at the books. To my pleasant surprise many were printed in Fürth. Where did these old Hebrew books come from? How did so many Hebrew volumes find a place in the archives of the CJC? The answers I was given, were a surprise for me.

נרפס פה ק'ק פיורדא י'ע'א

A remarkable text: The translated Hebrew reads *Printed in the Kahal Kodesh* [holy community] *Fiorda* [Fürth] followed by the telling abbreviation *yud ayin 'aleph* for *yagen 'aleha Elohim* or in English *may God protect her*, meaning protect the city of Fürth. Learned people have established that the abbreviation K ' K = Kahal Kodesh is a masculine form, even if one is used to say Kehilla.

Since about the 17th century the citizens of Fürth always showed a degree of tolerance not often found in other German cities. This mutual respect lasted till the onset of the Nazi regime.

This appreciation manifested itself also in the prominent display of the Fürth coat of arms, a cloverleaf (Kleeblatt) on the frontispieces of many Hebrew books printed in Fürth.

(Photo: Willie Glaser)

The lost and found books

The story of this lost and found heritage is a long one. I do not intend this to be a long scholarly narration, nor do I pretend to be an expert on antique Hebrew books. I leave that for historians and librarians. It should serve as a reminder for everybody and myself about the assault on Jewish lives, communities, culture and heritage by the Nazis.

What the Nazis planned

During the war, Hitler gave the order to establish a special unit, with the sole purpose to scour the libraries of Jewish institutions and private collectors in all German occupied countries. In Germany itself this looting of Hebrew books was a fact at least since *Kristallnacht* in 1938, not only centrally organized but also initiated by local Nazi leaders like the infamous publisher of *Der Stürmer*, Julius Streicher in Nuremberg or pseudo-scientific institutions researching the *racial question*.

What was the purpose of gathering and confiscating all these books besides propaganda and what the Nazis understood to be 'science'? It is generally assumed by historians, that the *Endlösung* (literally *final solution* meaning the extinction of the Jewish people) would have been concluded by Hitler's announcement, that the Jews have been eradicated from Europe. In line with this thinking, Hebrew books were brought to several locations in Germany and Austria, deposited in warehouses, libraries, archives and like. The Hebrew books left behind by an exterminated people would have been placed in libraries or museums in order for people from all over the world to come and study the decadent nature of the Jewish people.

A foretaste of their cynic ideas was given by the Nazis in Prague, where the preparations for the *museum of an extinct race* were continuing almost throughout the entire war.



Hebrew books looted by the Nazis in Europe and recovered by the Allies being sorted by CJC official Mr. Lavy Becker after their arrival in Canada, 1949

(Photo: CJCNA PC1-6-272)

The Jewish Cultural Restoration Committee

It did not work out this way for the Nazis. When allied armies occupied Germany they discovered hundreds of thousands of these Hebrew book treasures in caches all over Germany. In 1945, Dr. Shlomo Shunami of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem was sent to Germany as the head of the *Jewish Cultural Restoration Committee* to investigate the warehousing of Jewish and Hebrew books and tracts by

the Nazis. It was his mandate to salvage and protect this huge Jewish cultural treasure. To this end, it was agreed on sending some forty percent of these inherited books to Jewish institutions in North America. The archives and library of the Canadian Jewish Congress received a portion of these *Sforim*.

An idea comes to fruition

Looking at one of these beautiful old Hebrew books and knowing this particular book was printed in Fürth (Germany) and its journey to Montreal (Canada), an idea, which germinated during my return trip from Fürth started to take on a life of its own. I suggested to Ms. Janice Rosen, Director of the Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives (CJCNA), Montreal to donate several Hebrew books printed in Fürth to the Jewish Museum there.

We had a serious discussion on this subject and considered all, including political implications. In the end we decided to go for it. The request was sent through the usual channels to the leadership of the CJC. In a short while the heads of the CJC gave the go ahead for this remarkable undertaking.

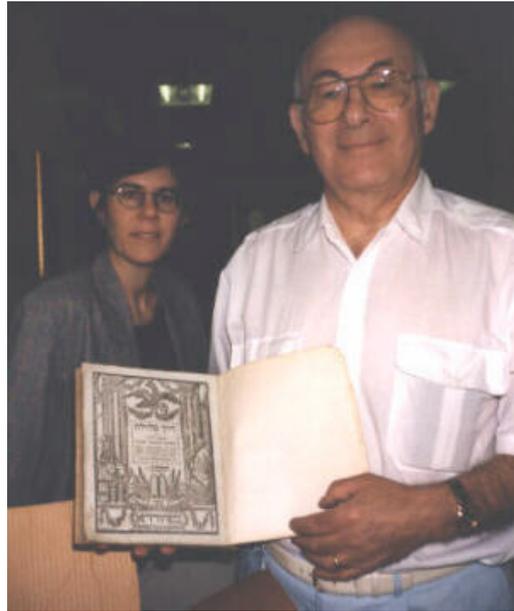
I was given this task to choose several volumes. In the end I selected seven books printed in Fürth, ranging from the years 1701 to 1846, all in a very presentable condition. My selection was accepted. In the meantime several phone conversations and email messages were exchanged with the director of the Jewish Museum in Fürth, Mr. Bernhard Purin and Ms. Janice Rosen.

I carefully packed the books. They were posted by special delivery. Because the donated books also had quite a monetary value, some nail-biting was going on while waiting for an email from the Jewish Museum in Fürth to confirm the receipt.



Montreal, May, 1998 - Seven antique Hebrew texts dating from between 1732 and 1804 were donated by Canadian Jewish Congress to the new Jewish Museum Franconia in Germany, located in the small Bavarian city of Fürth where they were originally printed.

(Photo: CJCNA, Mr. Michael Beigleman)



Montreal, May 1998 - Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives volunteer Willie Glaser (at right), a former resident of Fürth, Germany, is seen here with CJC Archives Director Janice Rosen in the background. He holds one of the 7 antique Hebrew books donated by CJC to the Jewish Museum of Fürth.

(Photo: CJCNA, Mr. Michael Beigleman)



Montreal, May 1998 - On the suggestion of CJC National Archives volunteer Willie Glaser (pictured here), a former resident of Fürth, Germany, Canadian Jewish Congress donated 7 old Hebrew books back to the community where they were printed, to form part of the collection of Fürth's new Jewish Museum. The books reached CJC after the war through the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Committee.

(Photo: CJCNA, Mr. Michael Beigleman)

In short time the receipt of the books was acknowledged by the museum. Everybody was very pleased. In a thank you letter the director of the Jewish Museum wrote: *Our board, my staff and I were deeply impressed with this unexpected gift. Apart from the material and scientific value which the books have for our museum's collections it was above all the gesture which impressed us so much. Because it is not self-evident that an important Jewish organization abroad donates such valuable books from its collections to a museum in Germany.*

Looking at the books as a former citizen of Fürth

Many of these magnificent books printed in Fürth and located in the National Archives of the CJC have a special meaning for me. As a former citizen of Fürth I recognized right away the significant connection between Fürth and its Jewish printers. When I looked at the pages more closely, I found to my surprise, that the title pages of a few of these rare *Sforim* showed the coat of arms of Fürth, which is a three leaf clover. This mark was shown in combination with other distinct coats of arms of that time such as the Prussian rising eagle during the episode of Fürth belonging to Prussia since 1796 or the crowned Bavarian shield of rucs since 1806.



Combined coat of arms Kingdom of Bavaria and Fürth as printer's mark (1814)
(Photo: Willie Glaser)

Also of interest is the way the printers spelled the name Fürth in Hebrew letters. In one *Sefer* (book) Fürth is written as is in Hebrew letters. In another book the name Fürth is spelled in Hebrew as *b'Fiorda*, meaning *in Fürth*.



Hebrew *b'Fiorda* meaning *in Fürth* (clipping from a print of 1732)
(Photo: Willie Glaser)

A brief history of Jewish book printing in Fürth

In 1450 Johannes Gutenberg from Mainz invented the printing process by using individually combinable letter stamps made of lead. His invention also opened up a new world for Jews, the *People of the Book*, destined to enrich their lives. From then on, the printing of books and tracts had a tremendous impact on Jewish religious studies.

The first Hebrew books were printed only a few years after Gutenberg's revolutionary invention. One of the first tracts to be printed was Rashi's commentary on the Pentateuch in 1475. The early centers of Hebrew book printing were Italy, Saloniki in Greece and Constantinople.

Since the influx of Jewish refugees from Prague around 1670, among them skilled Hebrew book

printers, such establishments were also founded in what is Bavaria today. The small Central Franconian village of Wilhermsdorf harbored the Jews evicted from Bohemia. In 1669 the local authorities allowed Isaak ben Jehuda Löb Kohn from Prague to open a Hebrew printing workshop here and Wilhermsdorf became one of the important hubs of this trade in southern Germany besides Sulzbach in Upper Palatine.

Fürth, a center of talmudic learning established its first Hebrew presses in 1691. It was owned by Solomon Schneur (Schneior) and his son Joseph. Solomon's son Abraham and a son-in-law Isaak Bing continued the business from 1730 on. Another early Fürth printing establishment was founded by Hirsch ben Josef Frankfurter with the financial backing of his brother-in-law, the Court Jew Mordechai Model of Ansbach.

In 1712 another Jewish printer from Prague, Israel ben Meir, started to print Hebrew books in Wilhermsdorf but soon afterwards had to sell his trade to Zwi Hirsch ben Chaim from Fürth (1683 - 1772). In 1739 Zwi Hirsch ben Chaim dissolved the business in Wilhermsdorf and moved the workshop to his hometown.

During the 1760s the production of talmudic, rabbinical and juridical books in Fürth reached its peak and the town became famous as one of the European centers of Hebrew printing. In projects of a larger scale such as the splendidly illustrated *Machsor* (prayer book for the holidays) editions, the Hebrew printers co-operated with each other, e.g. Zwi Hirsch and his competitor from Fürth's Alexanderstraße, Itzig Buchbinder (Itzig, the bookbinder).

In 1774 the printer Itzig ben David Zirndorfer married the widow of Chaim, the son of Zwi Hirsch. In the years to come the members of the Zirndorfer-Sommer dynasty evolved to be the most recognized among Jewish printers in Fürth. Over the years and through the generations they used a variety of *Druckerzeichen* (printer's marks) in their high quality products printed at Schindelgasse 10. Fürth's last Hebrew printer, Juda Sommer died in 1866.

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Willie Glaser

Following a selection of frontispieces of Hebrew prints from Fürth



**Fürth's coat of arms, the cloverleaf, in a
print of 1802**
(Photo: Willie Glaser)

Credits

I am deeply grateful to Ms. Susanne Rieger and Mr. Gerhard Jochem for their outstanding support to make this site a reality. My thanks also to Ms. Janice Rosen, Director National Archives, Canadian Jewish Congress for her kind help and providing her valuable support. I appreciate the help provided by Ms. H el ene Vall e, Assistant Archivist, National Archives, Canadian Jewish Congress. Last but not least, I am indebted to Mr. Carlos Henriques for his great technical support.

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The history of the old Hebrew books of Fürth: Example #1



(Photo: Willie Glaser)

Frontispiece of *Sefer Eshel Avraham*, the book *Eshel Avraham*, a cabalistic commentary, printed Fürth, 1701. Note the biblical characters of Moses and Aaron to the left and right, also the vignette at the bottom with a battlefield scene. The characteristic baroque frame with dramatically warped curtains, columns and pedestals resembles the spectacular illusionist architecture of that time.

Expensive copperplates like this one were not used for one book only, but many different prints. For this purpose the titles and content descriptions were inserted into the blank vignettes. It is of particular interest to compare this page's design with the frontispiece of a print of 1802 in which the described elements were also used but adapted to the taste of the early 19th century.

The history of the old Hebrew books of Fürth: Example #2



(Photo: Willie Glaser)

Frontispiece of *Eliya Rbah*, talmudic laws on marriage and divorce, printed Fürth, 1758. The decorative design on top with the two angels holding a crown in a floral frame is damaged in the original. The last word in the Hebrew text is the name of Fürth.

The Latin text refers to a common (and discriminating) practice of those days: The book had to be approved by a non-Jewish expert not to contain any texts which are opposing *the Christian denomination or morality*. To this purpose the author Elia Schephira from Prague had to present the book to the Jesuit Leopold Tirsch, royal professor for languages and censor for Hebrew books by appointment of the archbishop of Prague.

Only books with such a sealed (the *LS* in the left corner stands for *loco sigilli* which means in Latin *in the place of the seal*) certificate called *Imprimatur* (also Latin, literally meaning *it may be printed*) were allowed to be distributed by the bookstores in certain parts of the ancient German Reich. Also of interest is the Cyrillic stamp to the right of the *LS*. Otherwise illegible it gives the year 1838 and indicates towards the fact that the book was owned for some time by a citizen of Tsarist Russia or a Jewish institution there.

The history of the old Hebrew books of Fürth: Example #5

⊗ ספר בראשית ⊗

חלק ראשון של

תמשה חומשי תורה

והוא

תקון סופרים

כשמו כן הוא , תקון הוא לכל כותבי ספרי תורות , לידע ולהבין הסדרות ויחזרות , פתוחות ופתומות , ע"פ הטעמה גדולה וקטנה . והועתק מהחומש של ר' איצק פרעמסלא . וע"פ החומשים המחייקים הנדפסים בברלין , על ידי החכם המפורסם מוהר"ר משה דעסויה זצ"ל :

עם פי' רש"י , והרגום אונקלוס : והרגום אשכנזי , ובאור , ותקון סופרים . כמו שגדפסו בברלין שנת תקמ"ג לפ"ק :

ונתוספו הספירות וחמש מגילות , גם האזע עם פי' רש"י , והרגום אשכנזי , ובאור . ונכל תקום שנמנה צפי' רש"י מלת בלע"ז , נבחרת מלת בלע"ז והסיה , בלשונית בלשון אשכנזי . ובפרט בהספירות וחמש מגילות , אשר עדיין לא היו לעולמים : גם הקריאה מארבע פסיות , כל אחד על רגלו , בפרט הרחיה לו : ועניינם חסום אומיות גדולה ויפה , ודפוס נאה ומאצחות , ובניגוד לכן לא ונמנעה , ונבחר ההג"ה והדפוס והמנחה , כאשר בהקדמה ומורה ומעלה :

בפי' ורדא

בכרת ובדפים

המשוכם של החורני כהר"ר איצק יצז בן כהר"ר דוד צערנדארף זצ"ל :
לפרט תורת ה' תמ'מה מש' בת נפש לט"ק

(Photo: Willie Glaser)

Frontispiece of *Tikun Sofrim*, biblical text revised by scribes, updated by the famous philosopher and theologian of the enlightenment Moses Mendelssohn (1729 - 1786), printed Fürth, 1801.

The history of the old Hebrew books of Fürth: Example #6



(Photo: Willie Glaser)

Frontispiece of *Derech S'lulah*, The Straight Path, printed Fürth, 1802 by Isaak David Zirndorfer (see monogram beneath the Ten Commandments). This page is special because it had been printed during the short period of Prussian rule in Fürth (1796 - 1806). Therefore it shows the royal Prussian eagle holding the town's coat of arms, the triple cloverleaf. To the left and right of the Ark of the Covenant standing are the High Priest Aaron blessing bread and wine with the incense barrel and Moses with the portable flaming altar.

When comparing this frontispiece to another with an almost identical setting from one hundred years before (example #1), the changes in the taste of the times are obvious. Artist *Moses* (see his signature in the lower left corner) knew his predecessors and the traditions of his trade. Still he uses elements of baroque architecture and lavish flower garlands, but his copperplate is clearer in its lines and emphasizes self-confidently the motifs from the Torah. It is the spirit of the enlightenment and the beginning emancipation of the German Jews which speaks to us from his work. Another evidence for this opinion is the bilingual vignette giving Fürth as the place of the printing both in Hebrew and in German.

The history of the old Hebrew books of Fürth: Example #7

מישניות

סדר קדשים

עם פירוש הנאונים המפורסמים
דבינו עובדיה מזרמנורה • ותוספות יום טוב
כפי שגדפסו עד היום •

ואלו נחמסו בכמה דברים

א כל חלטי גרסאות ומסמאות שישו חכמים כלשון המסנה - אחת בפנים - ואחת בחוץ - אלו מוכאות :
ב חדשים נפלאים, מהחדד השלם הרב המפורסם, מהררר שמשון וציל סאלמאנא
משאלו באוני זמניו • זקרא בשם

תוספות חדשים

ג לכאר ולחקן - בעקום שרברד התיש מחסית הכנה - מלוב השנה - וקצורו באמרים - בהעקף הראשונים
והירושלמי - הכל בערו להבין הכונה :

ד מראה מקום בפסוקי תנ"ך - זפדקי ורפי השם העלשים - וגם הגרמים - שגזרו חזק סמקום - ובאלו סמקנים -
ה כל הדברים הנהגים והשכחים באלו התמים - בהסמט שלע יאחרונם - בהרצה מקום על הסימנים - מה מוכנים :
זה דבר השכחה - הדיב אוקסחות מהגמרא - וקושיות ותירוצים פתוספות - אשר לא זכרם גדולי המפרשים האלי :

והונה בעיני דב - על ידי בקי זהמל בעבודה זו - ובתלמוד קודם למעשה הדפוס
כמו שגדפסו ברפום בהררר יעקב בן מהררר שלמה פרופס כץ וציל סלמ תקלה לדין :

באמשטרדם

<p>הנה לעושים - הוא פירוש ערוכה תיבות בדעז - ללשון אשכנז : זהמוכר ספרים בן מהררר רודי צירנדורף וציל by Isaac David עקרה ערמ לסק</p>		<p>זתה המודש לו דבר שלא משה נוכאר כל התיבות החדת - ובג בבית המדפים דבמשוכה והחורגל הידיד איצק ציל <i>Zirndorfer, in Fürth.</i> בשנת</p>
<p>בפירדא</p>		

(Photo: Willie Glaser)

Frontispiece of *Mishnayot Seder Kodshim*, Mishnah, order of sacrifice, printed in Fürth by Isaac (Isaak) David Zirndorfer, 1814. The information about the printer is given in German (see second line from the bottom). The respective text is flanking a combination of the coats of arms of the Bavarian Kingdom to which the town belonged since 1806, and of Fürth, decorated with a palm leaf and a laurel or olive branch. It seems that the banner beneath the shield had been emptied from an original inscription.

[Index](#)

[Home](#)