

Recollections of Warsaw Jewish Book Sellers and Rare Book Collectors

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translated from Yiddish by Mary Blum Devor

I want to describe how things went in my father's Warsaw book store. My father, Yecheil Meir Perelman, died in December 1935. When an individual would contact him to sell some of his books, or a whole cupboardful, he would always offer him money. Since he didn't have to pay the money until several days later, he was able to call in his customers - one at a time - who were always interested in buying his most recent material. These book sellers were from Vilna or Warsaw. The books varied from expensive "regal print," to very cheap print. My father would immediately select the best books to keep. He made his earnings from the remainders, in dribs and drabs, as he used to say. In this way, his own personal library grew.

Since 1894, when I was 10 years old, I had the opportunity to become acquainted with book dealers, who bought books from my father. I used to pay close attention, in case by mistake, someone took a book that he shouldn't have. This practice ensured with time that only books that were paid for were wrapped and taken.

The book dealers in Warsaw were generally scholars. For the book dealer, a writer was his life-blood. I will describe a few of them:

Rabbi Moshe Mocher Sforim, a Polish Jew, was tall and broad-boned, his beard reaching into his ears. He would carry a sack of books on his back. He had many customers, and always had a fund of books to sell. Moshe Mocher Sforim brought many books, mostly on the topic of the Haskalah - the Jewish Renaissance. He knew every price from the Cracow and Frankfurt main catalogues. He could never be without a book called *עקרין* - Treasures. "How can one exist without the Treasures?" I heard him say once, when my father had run out of his last copy (which at that time cost four rubles, and later was totally unavailable).

Rabbi Moshe Mocher Sforim had boundless numbers of books. He kept them in many locations, a portion of them with a daughter, another portion with in-laws, since he never had a home of his own. He would dwell in someone's kitchen, or occasionally would rent half a room. He never had enough places for his books. He was always deathly afraid that someone would steal them.

"Alas people steal my most precious buys," he would cry in pain.

He would buy the books very quickly. They would immediately come to an agreement - never argue. (I would notice in every purchase a rare book *Fear of Yitzhak*¹ - parts of it, or the complete work.) Rabbi Moshe Mocher Sforim lived to a ripe old age. He died around 1906.

Another book dealer, also an elderly man, Rabbi Shlomo Ostralenker, led a similarly regimented lifestyle. But he wasn't quite as sharp as Reb Moshe. He had the style of carrying his books in a red knapsack.

¹Ed. note: *Fear of Yitzhak* is a Talmudic encyclopedia by Rabbi Yitzhak Lampronti (1679-1756) of Ferrara, Italy. It includes all Talmudic subjects in alphabetical order.

I well remember Reb Michal Berman (of blessed memory). He was a great scholar, a grandchild of the Vilner Gaon. When Reb Michal took a book in his hand, he became so engrossed in it, that he forgot how late it was. He also bought books dealing with the Haskalah. He literally starved himself. My father once asked him. "Reb Michal, why don't you eat a meal?"

"What does a meal cost?" he asked.

"A meal cost from 25 to 30 kopeks," answered my father.

"What!" Reb Michal cried out. "I'll spend 30 kopeks on a meal? For 30 kopeks I can buy a Chovat Halevavotal. For several meals I can buy the Treasures. Reb Michal died a very old man - around 1909.

Rabbi Yaakov Yoseph Abeschitz was another type of book dealer, the oldest son-in-law of Rabbi Yitzchakel Fagenboim, the Warsaw master teacher. A very tall, straight Jew, with a clear direct gaze, he never spoke an unnecessary word. He also worked as a shochet - a meat slaughterer. Until noon, he was busy at the slaughterhouse, and afternoons were spent in the book business. He was the most pragmatic of all the book dealers. Reb Yaakov Yoseph never asked the price of a book. He always simply said what he was prepared to pay for a book; and not a grosch more could be drawn from him. Even a year later, if the same book was offered to him, he stated the exact same amount he had said the year before that he was willing to pay. He never changed his mind.

I often wondered how Yaakov Yoseph was able in the blink of an eye to look at an entire Vilner Shas (a huge book)² and conclude with certainty that there was nothing missing. It took him less than half an hour. He checked every book he bought to make sure there was nothing missing. He was a great scholar. He was just over 50 when he died.

Other types of book dealers were Reb Chaim Sholom and his father, a Jew who lived on Krochmalneh Street. We would refer to him as Reb. Chaim Sholom's father. Reb Chaim Sholom dealt with both intellectual and Chassidic books, and his father bought only Chassidic books. Both the father and the son would sell their books in Chassidic houses. The son had started the book business before the father. They dealt very honestly, didn't manipulate to squeeze higher prices out of people, and dealt in a very pleasant way. They didn't earn much, wanting mainly to spread the books from hand to hand. They never bought books to keep in stock; Every day they might make a small purchase and immediately sell it. Father and son were a little competitive with each other. They would likely encounter each other at a buyer's house. I have even occasionally seen them express anger at each other. Both were nonetheless extremely honest dealers. Their word was holy.

Anyone who remembers the second-hand book business in Warsaw on Bankplatz Street in the years 1896 to 1900, would clearly remember Binyamin Sheinfinkel. He was a great bibliographer. He was a widower who had a daughter. He came from a wealthy

²Ed. note: Publishing the *Vilner Shas*, a book consisting of the Torah and commentaries, was a huge undertaking by the Romm Publishing House of Vilna. The goal was to assemble a new layout with many additions, rigorous proofreading, and commentaries that had never before been published. The first edition was published in 1854, and a second and even better edition, in 1886.

family. He was a quiet man and deeply engrossed in his books. Whenever he entered the shop, his first question would be: "He's not here?" He would mean my father. He would then turn around and leave immediately.

In our kitchen, there was a large cupboard, where my father stored incomplete or defective books, or even single pages. Whenever he found that a book had a page missing, he was able to replace it. When Sheinfinkel discovered this treasure, he told my father, "I would like to take a look at what you have there."

My father would reply, "Why would that even occur to you to rummage in the dusty titles?"

"So that you don't have to do it. I'll do it myself," said Sheinfinkel.

"As you wish, Sheinfinkel. People are waiting for me. I have to leave, and you can do as you wish."

One day I entered the house. I saw no one but I heard a noise. I noticed Sheinfinkel standing by the cupboard reading from a page that he found there. It was apparently a page from an extremely rare book. He was not interested in its monetary value. His sole passion was in finding antique Hebrew intellectual writings.

Among the book collectors I knew, there were some extremely interesting characters: Rabbi Dovid Pick (1827-1898), a Jew in his seventies, was an optician. His son Yaakov was also an optician.³ He had an office on Frantsishkaner Street. He was very popular in Warsaw. A great scholar, possessing a large number of books, and especially rare ones.

Rav Dovid would visit us often and would buy many books. He would take the books home to make sure that he didn't already have them in his collection. (My father was already certain that he didn't have them.) The next morning he would come and pay for them. I am sure he went by foot even though it was a far distance from Frantsishkaner to Tvarda. He would spend a long time sitting and scanning through a little book, taking this time to rest.

Rav Dovid never tried to bargain down the price. He didn't want to demean the book by quibbling over it.

Once I had the opportunity to be at Rav Dovid's place of business on Frantsishkaner Street. My mother had taken me with her to order eyeglasses. Rav Dovid was sitting at a small table by the window. There he had all his work materials and was plying his trade. While he was discussing with my mother her request for eyeglasses, I was busy looking around the room, wondering, "Is this an eyeglass business or a book business?" It was difficult to say because you could only see shelves and cupboards full of books, separating his office from his residence.

"And where is your apartment?" my mother asked him.

"Over there, behind the cupboards," said Rav Dovid. We were curious to see both his library and his apartment, and we quickly asked him if we could. And what did we see there? Two beds held up by books. Over the beds were shelves of books; next to the beds, another cupboard with books. And next to the door, on a small table and some stools, were more books. In every corner of the room lay more books. We also saw his

³His grandson, Severin Pick, converted to Christianity in 1900. A second grandson also converted.

second wife, who could easily pass for a daughter or even a granddaughter.

In Volkovist (a suburb of Grodneh) lived a well-known person - Areleh Shatsky, a great-uncle of Dr. Yaakov Shatsky. He had a small shop, which was run by his wife Taibeh, but Rav Areleh would assist her. Between 1892 and 1902, he would come twice a year to Warsaw to buy goods for the shop. He managed each time to drop in at my father's to buy some books.

What was interesting about him were the type of books he would buy. His was a very unusual collection. He would buy Russian books, but only those in Russian script. He would also buy grammar books, geography books, dictionaries, and any word books. My father would put aside these types of books for Reb Areleh when he came across them. And when Areleh dropped in, he would be delighted to get them. Each time he would spend about 10 to 15 rubles. I figured he would buy similar books elsewhere because he had a huge collection.

Reb Areleh also must have been something of a scholar. After his death, his widow once told me that she wished to sell his books. I asked her who would buy these Russian books. She replied that he also had scholarly books.

Reb Areleh was a rather quiet man. He seemed to be mainly interested in those unusual books mentioned above. He had a large family. He would drive around looking for books, and would buy them accompanied by relatives, and at times, with a caravan of relatives.

Another unusual character was a man named Tiegel; a collector of old titles. He was a bookbinder, but far from typical. He had enough time to go into the Aaron Sardinier Synagogue at #4 Twarda,⁴ and search books amongst their collection. Tiegel gave one the impression that he never demanded anything for himself. Always with a smile on his lips, he appeared satisfied and happy whenever he found a book he wanted, even if parts of it were missing. He wasn't lazy and would keep searching until he found the missing pages. After buying several such books, between the years 1912 and 1919, he became increasingly self-important, as though he had serious business to discuss with Herr Perelman (my father). He would enter the store, and say, "Good morning Miss Perelman. Today I have some especially rare antiques for you. I am willing even to pay you extra if you will accept these in exchange for a Koran or Toldot Yishai. Tiegel had already bought these books many times. He probably sold them and again longed for them.

Another type of collector was a young Warsaw man who frequented our store since 1899, when he was only 17 years old. He was quite an educated young man named Joseph Silberstram. He was well acquainted with Tanach and had clever interpretations of the texts. He had an excellent memory. In addition, he was well versed in five or six languages. He was the son of wealthy parents and would spend all his money on books. What does this mean? Not only would he buy all kinds of old and rare books, but also those of the best quality. When he became certain that there was no better edition available, he would take this one to the best bookbinder he could find, and request that he bind it with gold trim and the finest leather, and even expensive locks; the same way that

⁴Ed note: The Nozyk Synagogue, completed in 1903, the only synagogue surviving from pre-Holocaust years is located at 6 Twarda Street in downtown Warsaw.

a sacrificial object was bound in the olden days.

After the book was bound with this glorious binding, and he happened on a more beautiful binding, he went back to the original bookbinder and requested the new and more beautiful cover. If the cover was too large, he would have it cut down to size; but the edges had to be carefully trimmed. If the cover was too small, the bookbinder would have to add additional material to make it match perfectly.

I witnessed the following: Silberstram wanted to impress my father with an unusually beautifully-bound copy of a well-known book. My father held the book, examined it, and said, "It's truly very beautiful. But how does it compare to my copy?"

The young man opened his eyes wide in shock, "Is that possible?" he asked, feeling quite reduced. My father went to the cupboard and took out a small book bound in special grained leather with two gold Gothic initials - J.S. The young man was left standing immensely overawed; father literally held his soul in his hands. As expected, the man paid my father well, and went home happily with this special book.

This young man had a terrible addiction to books and editions printed in tiny volumes. The smaller the format, the more valuable!

A rarer type of collector in Warsaw was Igmatz Bernstein (1837 - 1908). This millionaire only collected books with proverbs. He bought every book he saw that had proverbs in it.

Rabbi Yishayahu Ratnemer⁵ was a huge book collector. He would lend my father money to buy an entire personal library from someone. Ratnemer wrote a beautiful Hebrew script. He was a well-mannered, highly intelligent Chassid. He had collected a rich library, specializing in Hebrew and Jewish books. He owned all the Renaissance books as well as the best scholarly books. He would buy books in Warsaw, Berlin, Vienna, Cracow, Frankfurt and other cities. Many scholars found their way to him, and begged him to lend them books. He did so with the greatest pleasure. Bella Polyankovitch, Ratnemer's daughter and the wife of the Hebrew publisher, Moshe Polyankovitch (who died at an early age in 1937), wrote me a letter after her husband's death, saying that her father would have loved to sell this great collection. It hurt her deeply that he never had this opportunity.

Together with the total destruction and elimination of Warsaw Jews, all these great private collections were destroyed as well.

⁵Ratnemer's library was mentioned in Balaban's book on Jewish archives in Poland, and in the works of Dr. Yaakov Shatsky "Jewish Libraries in Poland" - *Polish Jews*, No. 28, April 1945, p. 13. His was the greatest private library in Poland. In 1937, the tentative list of Jewish Cultural Treasures consisted of 26,000 items. Ed. Note: Mayer Balaban's book, *Bibliography on the History of the Jews in Poland and in Neighboring Lands: Works Published During the Years 1900-1930* (Jerusalem: World Federation of Polish Jews, 1978) is in the British library.