Adriaan Offenberg: The Quintessential Bibliophile*

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Abstract
In 2004 Dr Adriaan Offenberg retired as curator of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, the special collection of Judaica and Hebraica at Amsterdam University Library. This article discusses his development as a bibliographer, his road to the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana and his most important contributions to bibliographical scholarship. His greatest achievement in his many publications in the field has been the ability to introduce the principles of Anglo-Saxon analytical bibliographical scholarship into the field of Jewish bibliography. Of crucial importance are his catalogues of the Hebrew incunables in the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, his many publications on Amsterdam Jewish book-making of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Hebrew and non-Hebrew, and his First International Census of Hebrew incunables. This contribution also incorporates a review of his most recent work, the thirteenth volume of the BMC, describing the Hebrew incunables in the collection of the British Library.

Keywords
Hebrew bibliography, library history, Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, Hebrew incunables, Judaism

Adriaan Offenberg was born in 1939 in a small wooden house by the proverbial ditch in Zaandam, a town to the north of Amsterdam whose industrial roots date back to the shipbuilding boom of the seventeenth century. His early childhood, under the shadow of the German occupation, was largely spent in hospital. After the war, his persistent ill health prompted the family to move to Santpoort, then still a picturesque rural village beside the dunes on Holland’s North Sea coast. There he went to school, proceeding to gymnasium at nearby Velsen, where his love of languages was allowed to blossom.

Not content with the usual diet of five or six modern and classical languages, the young Offenberg added Old Norse, Danish, Swedish, Javanese, Japanese as well as Yiddish and Hebrew to his repertoire, before graduating in 1958 and entering Amsterdam University to study Dutch Philology and Bibliology. For subsidiary subjects he chose Scandinavian languages and Hebrew. Naturally, it was not long before he came into contact with Leo Fuks (1908-90), the curator of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, who had taken up a post at the university teaching Yiddish and Hebrew.

Offenberg’s focus was books. And like many a Dutch bibliographer of his generation, he received his training from the brilliant, somewhat quixotic Wytze Hellinga (1908-85). Disdaining the apparently prosaic title of bibliographer and incunabulist, the renowned professor referred to himself as a neophilologist: his terrain was language and the printed word, the significance of text from its inception to its appearance in published form. To this he brought the new Anglo-Saxon tradition of analytical bibliography, founded on the work of authors such as W.W. Greg, A.W. Pollard, R.B. McKerrow and the later paper historian Allan Stevenson researching the original editions of Shakespeare’s plays – the earliest being considered the more authentic. Hellinga taught that every aspect of a published edition contributed to identifying its date and place of printing, who was involved in the publication, how it came to be produced and thus to determining its wider significance; besides typography, ornamentation and illustrations, the size and texture of the paper and its watermarks were also crucial to the analysis of a published volume.

**Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana**

In 1962 Offenberg found himself in the basement of Haarlem’s Vleeshal, today an archaeological museum, where the city’s book collection required cataloguing. As a Hebraist, Hellinga had invited him to work on the Hebrew section of the inventory. Having acquitted himself well, not least in his description of the library’s copy of the Benveniste Talmud of 1644-8, he was subsequently recommended by the professor for the post of assistant to Leo Fuks at the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana. So it was by a roundabout route that he arrived at

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