

Lending Libraries

Categories: Locations

Soon after the ghetto was established, before the Jews expelled from Łódź could settle into the new residential area, it became obvious that “people of the Book” would need reading material. The need was fulfilled by the J.W. Sonnenberg’s Lending Library (19 Zgierska St., or 19 Hohensteinerstrasse), which had been operating there continuously since 1931. All other libraries were dissolved by the Propaganda Office of the Wartheland during the first winter of the war in 1939/40. Sonnenberg initially had 1,900 books in Polish, with members recruiting from the middle class and residents of the Bałuty district. From April 1940, he bought books in various languages from the resettlers from Łódź and other places, some of them in German and English. In the beginning of 1944, the library held 7,500 volumes, including 800 in German. Apart from works of literature, Sonnenberg purchased school textbooks, encyclopedias, a wide variety of scientific compendiums, as well as foreign-language books. The membership fee was later 2 Mk monthly, with a deposit of 5 Mk also required.

Beginning in May 1942, prospective German members had to bring a German book instead of the registration fee. Therefore, the collection of books in German increased quickly. In the spring of 1944, Sonnenberg’s Lending Library had 4,000 members. The most popular Polish authors (apart from crime novels and thrillers) were classics such as Żeromski, Strug, Orzeszkowa, Sienkiewicz, or Prus; from the Soviet Union: Pilnyak, Ehrenburg, Gorki, and Aldanov. German members took great delight in reading monographs, books on history and philosophy, as well as German classics. The most popular authors were Heine, Ludwig Feutwanger [Feuchtwanger], and translations of literary classics. As for Yiddish writers, members asked for I. L. Peretz and Asch.

Apart from Sonnenberg, S. Otelsberg, a bookseller from Łódź, opened a library (44 Wolborska St., or Rauchgasse) with a collection of 2,000 volumes and 2,000 members, which meant that all the books were on loan all the time. Several small libraries were also arranged in private homes. However, most of them closed after some time.

Finally, there were also many private libraries in the ghetto with books in Yiddish; buildings where they were located were marked with posters that read “Attention! Ikh borgn aroys idishe bukh tsu leynen¹.”

The authorities tolerated all libraries. However, German books about war were forbidden, as well as works banned by the Reich.

Oskar Rosenfeld

Footnotes

1 Ikh borgn aroys idishe bukh tsu leynen – “I lend out Jewish [or Yiddish] books to read”.

Resources

Encyclopedia, s. 124-125.

References

The same text is published in The Daily Chronicle under the heading “Ghetto’s Small Mirror” (Kronika, vol. 4, entry dated April 26, 1944 pp. 269-270).

In the Łódź State Archive, in the section of documents related to the

Archive of the ghetto, there is a handwritten text in Polish that could have served as working material for the entry: "Reading. Hunger for books in the ghetto, increased by the general inactivity, has been satisfied, albeit to a limited extent, by the large number of private libraries. With incomplete collections, sets of a few, a few hundred, or a few dozen books or individual volumes of various works, people opened book rental services. Subscription fees varied, depending primarily on the state and scope of available titles. Ranging from 1 Mk per month in the best-equipped library to 10 pfennig a week or even 10 pfennig for borrowing one book for one week.

The unique living conditions resulted in specific forms of libraries. Collections were formed that can be called contributory, because they only allowed contributors to borrow one or more books for a very low fee (Management Department). Private rentals took books as deposits.

Also, instead of collecting the subscription fee in cash, many private libraries were happy to levy it in goods, namely in books.

The best-equipped book rental [of J.W. Sonenberg] held about [...]2 volumes, including novels [and] scholarly titles" (APŁ, PSŻ 1105, Korespondencja z Wydziałami i resortami..., p. 82).

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