
BOOK REVIEWS

Shimon Iakerson, *Evreïskie sokrovishcha Peterburga. Svitki, kodeksy, dokumenty* [Jewish Treasures of Petersburg. Scrolls, Codices, Documents]. St. Petersburg: Arca, 2008. 264 pp., illustrations.

There are several important collections of Hebrew manuscripts in the world. Every scholar dealing with Jewish history knows Judaica manuscripts kept in British Library in London, Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, Bodleian library of Oxford, documents from Cairo *geniza* at the University library at Cambridge and some other less important collections. The unique collection analysed in Shimon Iakerson's book is, in fact, a sort of *geniza* in itself. As well as synagogal *genizot*, which have been for centuries hidden from inquisitive eye of a scholar, Jewish treasures of St. Petersburg also had been virtually closed to academic public until the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Jacob Mann was, perhaps, the last Western scholar who managed to use materials from St. Petersburg in his classical study in the 1930s¹. After this the collection became virtually inaccessible not only for the Western, but also for Soviet scholars.

This is why the book under review is so important. In fact, it represents the journey — in time and space — to the multifaceted and colourful world of Hebrew manuscript treasures kept in St. Petersburg (hence the title of the book). The book focuses on manuscripts kept at two major academic institutions of the city: National Library of Russia and St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies. It is difficult to characterize the genre of the book in one word. It is a colourful album with number of illustrations and facsimiles, a catalogue of the unique Judaica collection, a scholarly study, an introduction to the world of medieval Jewish manuscript tradition, and a bio-bibliographic reference book at the same time. The book is organized in a very elaborate and arty style, with the main text in the middle, biographic

information on a margin, and numerous facsimiles of the most important documents reproduced alongside the text as illustrations. There are as many as 132 illustrations representing a millennium of Jewish manuscript and printed art, from the tenth to the twentieth century. The book ends with the glossary of the most important specialist terms so that even somebody who does not know much about Jewish palaeography can easily read it. The bibliography provides essential references for those who would like to continue their study of Jewish manuscripts and manuscript collections.

As one may deduce from the book, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of the Judaica collections kept in St. Petersburg. The Judaica collection of the National Library of Russia contains as many as 17,870 manuscript items and numerous rare prints (p. 45). There one can find the oldest copies of the Jewish Bible and its books known today; the most complete manuscripts of the works by famous medieval Jewish philosophers, linguists, and exegetes, with some works known only from manuscripts kept in St. Petersburg; the oldest dated manuscripts from certain regions (e. g. from Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Yemen, Spain, Turkey, and Byzantium); the largest manuscript collection of Jewish sub-ethnic groups such as the Karaites, Samaritans and Krymchaks; unique documents pertaining to the history of Judaization of the Turkic Khazars; scandalous pseudo-medieval documents which turned out to be nineteenth-century fakes; numerous printed Hebrew incunabula and paleotypes, and much more.

The book starts with the history of the acquisition of the first Judaica treasures in the nineteenth century. The first manuscripts were brought to the Imperial Public Library of St. Petersburg (today's Saltykov-Shchedrin National Library of Russia) and Asiatic Museum (today's Institute of Oriental Manuscript RAS) by varied figures such as the Protestant Biblical scholar from Germany Constantin von Tischendorf, Karaite collector Abraham

¹ In accordance with the Jewish tradition of giving a child two names (one Hebrew and one European), the author gave his book a second, Hebrew title: *Otsar Nehmad* ("Mnogogrannoe sokrovishche" in Russian; both may be translated by English "Multifaceted Treasure").

² The scholar did not travel to the USSR by himself, but worked with photographic copies of the manuscripts (see: J. Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (Philadelphia 1935)).