

HENRY W. CLUNE'S

Seen and Heard

Rare Jewish Books Found in Canadice

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THE DISCOVERY by Rabbi Abraham J. Karp, of the Congregation Beth El, of a cache of rare books in a roadside antique shop in Canadice may not make the same sort of stir that was created a few years ago when Col. Ralph H. Isham turned up, in an Irish castle, James Boswell's "London Journey" and an account of Boswell's visit to Holland, but the good rabbi feels, nevertheless, that what he came upon in Canadice is a little like a literary mother lode.



Henry
Clune

Returning from a motor trip through the Bristol Hills three or four weeks ago, Rabbi Karp stopped, by chance, at the antique shop of Otto H. Uthe, perhaps with the notion of picking up a tavern chair or an antimacassar or one of those fancy bottles in which Hop Bitters used to be sold, and saw books all over the place.

He started examining the books on the shelves, moved in time to the rear of the shop, saw many old books in cardboard boxes, and, scrabbling through these, picked up a Hebrew book which had been printed in Prague in 1833, which he instantly realized was a rare item — so rare, indeed, that Rabbi Karp feels that there may not be another volume like it outside of the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, or the Widener Library at Harvard.

And there is a possibility that none of these institutions has the book.

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IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY, THE MODERN sect of Hasidim, which opposed the inflexible rationalism of the Talmud, was founded in Poland and for a time it had a wide following. The first book of value which Rabbi Karp selected in Canadice was written by Joseph Perl and its purpose was to expose as heretics the members of the Hasidim cult. The book, Rabbi Karp believes, will be of great use to Hebrew scholars.

His interest quickened by the discovery of this prize, Rabbi Karp made a sketchy inventory of other Hebrew and Yiddish books in the back of the Uthe shop, which was turned over to Israel Emiot, Jewish scholar and poet in residence at the Jewish Community Center; Samuel Gordon, director of adult activities at the Center, and Manny Hoffman, who has been active for years in Jewish cultural programs.

ONE COLD MORNING, EARLY THIS MONTH, the three men named above drove to Canadice and made a thorough examination of the Hebrew and Yiddish books in the antique shop.

"We nearly froze," Mr. Gordon said yesterday. "We arrived at Canadice before Mr. Uthe had formally opened his shop and the stove that heated it had not yet been lighted. Despite our chilled hands and bodies, we gained warmth from our enthusiasm at what we found. There were books in the collection — we selected 162 for purchase — that may not exist any other place in the world. All of the other copies of some of the books may have been burned at the time of the Nazi pogroms, or destroyed by the Russians."

Mr. Gordon believes that the New York Public Library may have the most complete collection of important Hebrew and Yiddish books in the country, but he said that there is no certainty that the great library has all of the books that are now being catalogued for the Jewish Community reading room.

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THOUGH THERE ARE SEVERAL LOOSE theories as to how these rare volumes found their way into a country antique shop, no one has been able precisely to explain the mystery. But the fact that books that were printed in Russia, in Germany and in Poland, often as early as the third decade of the last century, have been discovered in such an unlikely place has added a romantic zest to the scholarly chore of assembling and classifying these works, most of which are in excellent condition.

There are books from Warsaw, Prague, Frankfurt-au-Main, Odessa, and from what, in the days of the Czars, was the great city of St. Petersburg. In all of these places, Jewish books at one time or another suffered a sort of auto-da-fe. They were burned or destroyed by other means; yet the insatiable curiosity of Jewish scholars never, except when persecution brought death, was thoroughly quenched. Over the centuries, Jewish culture and learning have been transmitted to newer generations by the courage of Jewish authors and the conviction and intrepidity of printers who have published their works.

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ONE OF THE INTERESTING BOOKS, THE men who have collected them say, is a commentary in Hebrew on a couple of the apocrypha, which, of course, failed to "make" the Bible when Hebrew scholars, around the 8th Century, finally got down to cases and decided what should and should not be included in the Old Testament.

There is a biography of a famous 19th Century Jewish sculptor, Mordecai Antokolski, with cuts showing examples of his work, but this is of a relatively recent date, St. Petersburg, 1897.

All of the Jewish books in the Uthe shop have not been brought to Rochester, but Rabbi Karp hopes that the entire collection will soon be paid for and removed from Canadice.

"These books should be the cultural treasure of the Rochester Jewish Community," he said. "They should be brought to this community for safe-keeping or presented by the community to some institution of Jewish learning here or in Israel."

The transfer of many of the books from a country antique shop to the Jewish Community is particularly apropos at this time. December is Jewish Book Month.