Adri 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, Japanese, 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 (1908-1990), 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 (1908-1985). 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.

Adri Offenberg enjoying a glass of Greek beer.  
*Private collection*
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 1644-1648, 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 what was to become his life’s work: the preservation, analysis and documentation of the Hebrew printed word.

Offenberg entered the Rosenthaliana in October 1965, somewhat perplexed by the “Barukh haba” with which Fuks welcomed him. Their mutual trepidation must have been palpable. For this battered yet resolute bastion of Jewish learning Offenberg’s arrival signalled a new departure. His was not a fascination for the intricacies of rabbinic argument, but for the minutiae of their printed form; what one sage said to another at Bnei Berak was less essential to him than how successive printers had rendered this in type. Fuks, on the other hand, had maintained the library as a Jewish institution, a focal point of Jewish scholarship in the Netherlands and abroad. Indeed it was the largest Jewish library to have survived in Europe. Regular visitors to the reading room included the likes of Jozeph Melkman, Henriëtte Boas and Max Gans, as well as Jacques Presser and Chief Rabbi Aron Schuster and Meir Just, the teacher Isaac Mundzuk, bibliographer Jacob Coppenhagen and Abraham Horodisch, Max and Nico Israel and Simon Emmering.

But the cosy prewar atmosphere that Fuks had fostered was about to change: the University Library on Amsterdam’s Koningsplein had been transformed in the fashion of the day into a modern, efficient edifice, although not without a certain labyrinthine charm. Fuks and Librarian H. de la Fontaine Verwey had saved the library’s independence within the university, but it would still have to adapt to new circumstances: Jewish Amsterdam was a mere shadow of what it had been before the war. Now emigration, intermarriage and a falling birth-rate were taking an additional toll: the Dutch Jewish community perceived itself to be in decline. The remnant was gradually moving south, to the suburbs, leaving the city centre and its Jewish heritage to the historians and museologists. Maintaining an institution like the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana as a vibrant centre of Jewish culture and scholarship would be a labour of Sisyphus.

In this respect, one of the enduring achievements of Fuks and Offenberg’s collaboration was Studia Rosenthaliana, a pioneering publication in the Dutch library world. A series of separate monograph volumes issued by the library in the early 1960s led in 1967 to the launch of this twice-yearly journal about Jewish history and culture in the Netherlands,
published and distributed by Van Gorcum of Assen. Over the years, articles appeared in Studia by all the major authors involved in the study of Dutch Jewish history and culture, and not least by Fuks and Offenberg themselves. With the establishment of the Commissie voor de Geschiedenis en de Cultuur van de Joden in Nederland and its regular conferences in Amsterdam and Jerusalem, Studia Rosenthaliana provided the natural forum in which to publish its proceedings, reinforcing the library’s pivotal role in Jewish cultural and academic life.

Throughout his years at the library Offenberg rarely missed an opportunity to contribute to Studia, starting with his reworking of a chapter from Levie Hirschel’s unpublished dissertation on ‘Johannes Leusden als Hebraïst’ in the very first issue. He began to focus on early Hebrew printing relatively soon after his arrival at the library. In 1971 and 1973 he published a series of articles containing his groundbreaking catalogue of the Hebrew incunabula at the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, including full analytical bibliographical descriptions of the library’s Rome, Mantua, Soncino and Naples holdings. It is impossible to read the introduction to the first of these contributions without sensing the thrill of a young man on a mission. With the confidence of youth he lambastes the lethargic state into which the study of Hebrew incunabula had descended. With astonishing erudition and eloquence he then proceeds to show how it should be done. His precocious comment in his introduction that ‘it is even more surprising that in the parts of the Catalogue of Books printed in the 15th Century now in the British Museum that have been published so far [...] the Hebrew books are completely omitted’ was an audacious challenge that would bear fruit later.

What Offenberg brought to the study of early Hebrew book printing was above all the expertise that he had acquired under Hellinga. Few at that time approached the subject with the same thoroughness, except perhaps Alexander and Moses Marx, or Israel Adler of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. In the 1980s the level of Jewish bibliography was further raised with the advent of scholars such as Avraham Rosenthal and Malachi Beit-Arié in Jerusalem and Shimon Jakerson in St Petersburg, not to mention Brad Sabin Hill in Ottawa, London, Oxford and New York.

When Fuks was compelled to retire as librarian due to ill health in 1971, he was able to leave the library in the care of Adri Offenberg. Likewise, while he remained closely involved in the editorial work for Studia Rosenthaliana until the mid-1980s, together with his wife Rena Fuks-Mansfeld, Fuks was subsequently able to hand over the reins to Offenberg, assisted by the young Emile Schrijver. The dedication with which Offenberg continued the regular publication of Studia Rosenthaliana ensured that the library remained a hub of Jewish scholarship, while his acquisitions meant that it continued to serve as a vital and growing centre of learning.
In 1974, Alfonso Cassuto’s collection of Sephardica was purchased for the library, one of the most significant additions to the Rosenthaliana in the postwar period. Other acquisitions made by Offenberg include the Sassoon copy of Mordecai Finzi’s *Liwhot* (astronomical tables), only the second known copy in existence, printed in Mantua by Abraham ben Solomon Conat in 1475; a practically complete copy of the Constantinople Turim of 1493; many Hebrew, Yiddish and Spanish editions from the presses of Amsterdam’s printers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, among them Menasseh ben Israel; as well as editions of Jacob ben Judah Leon’s works on the Temple, including a splendid hand-coloured broadsheet accompanying his model. But perhaps the most spectacular acquisition was the 1290 manuscript of the Esslingen Mahzor which Offenberg managed to acquire in 1975 and which is now the oldest dated manuscript in the collection.

In the late 1970s Offenberg undertook a number of projects at the library with one of the leading scholars of Dutch Jewish history, Dr Jaap Meijer, including a major exhibition in 1980 on Hebraica and Judaica in the Netherlands under the German occupation, accompanied by a catalogue entitled *Al Tehomot: Op de Rand van de Afgrond*.

**Groundbreaking Publications**

New acquisitions and ongoing library affairs were a regular topic of Offenberg’s contributions to *Studia Rosenthaliana*. Among his other publications, he wrote several articles about his predecessors at the library and co-edited the Rosenthaliana’s famous and well-received *Treasures of Jewish Booklore*, which appeared in 1994. However, Offenberg’s work on Hebrew incunabula remained the constant factor in his scholarly production and culminated in three groundbreaking publications. In 1990 he published his *Hebrew Incunabula in Public Collections: A First International Census*, describing some 2,000 copies of 138 editions (coupled with the subsequent *Short-Title Catalogue of Hebrew Books Printed in the Fifteenth Century Now in the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana* of the same year). This was followed in 1991, at the urging of Professor Ernst Braches, by a PhD in the form of a compilation of previously published essays, which appeared as *A Choice of Corals: Facets of Fifteenth-Century Hebrew Printing* in 1992. That provided the opportunity for his *magnum opus*: his work on the Hebrew incunabula at the British Library whose lamentable neglect he had previously deplored. For twelve years Offenberg commuted to London to study and write. Funding for this project was raised almost entirely by private subscription by Dr Lotte Hellinga, widow of Offenberg’s former professor and a member of the British Library staff. When he began this awesome project the library was still at the British Museum, its facilities barely improved on those that had served since the nineteenth century;
on one occasion Offenberg was caught by a security guard trying to run an electric cable from one room to another which had no socket of its own. By the time he concluded his inventory, the library had already outgrown its new premises at Kings Cross and was relocating books to depositories elsewhere in the country. Offenberg’s *Catalogue of Books Printed in the xvth Century Now in the British Library* finally appeared in 2004 and is generally recognised as a truly remarkable achievement and a work of genuine scholarship.

Meanwhile, Offenberg also made a major impact with his research on books and printing among the Sephardim of seventeenth-century Amsterdam. His numerous articles on bibliographical, biographical and art-historical aspects of Jacob Judah Leon’s famous model of the Temple appeared in a range of publications, while in collaboration with Jelle Kingma he produced an important bibliography of all the works of Baruch Spinoza until 1800. An edition accompanied by a translation and commentary of a previously unknown letter by Spinoza written in 1663 and purchased by Amsterdam University Library in 1974 may also be counted among his achievements. His bibliographical studies on the activities of Amsterdam’s Portuguese Jewish printers include many new additions to our knowledge about Menasseh ben Israel, both in a biographical sketch published in Dutch in 2000 and in a number of articles and many lectures. Although not the first to raise the question, it was Offenberg who showed that Rembrandt’s famous portrait etching of Menasseh ben Israel was probably not the great rabbi, printer and diplomat after all.8

**Changing Times**

During the four decades Offenberg served at the Rosenthaliana, Jewish Amsterdam changed significantly. While that once august body, the Genootschap voor de Joodse Wetenschap in Nederland continued to defy the demographic tide, a new generation of Jews without religion, children of Jewish fathers with half a religion, and non-Jews with a predilection for Jews and Judaism emerged in search of opportunities to explore what it was that fascinated them. As the core orthodox community consolidated behind a wall of *halakhah*, the void this left was inevitably filled by something that would have astonished previous generations. New organisations were launched: the Commissie voor de Geschiedenis en de Cultuur van de Joden in Nederland assumed a coordinating role in centralising research and cultural projects, organising symposiums, publications, academic appointments; the Menasseh ben Israel Institute sponsored and organised a range of activities (all Hebrew cataloguing at the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, for example, is financed by funds raised by this institute); the Juda Palache Institute expanded to meet the growing demand for Hebrew, Yiddish and other Jewish subjects at Amsterdam University.
Offenberg was able to play an active part in all these developments because the black-and-white world of Jew and non-Jew was now surrounded by a vast grey area in which an interest in Jewish culture and history was the sole criterion. Institutions such as the Anne Frank House and the Jewish Historical Museum, while retaining their Jewish links, found a niche in Amsterdam’s tourist centre as secular venues of cultural entertainment; by the same token, the Municipal Archive (gaa) and the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD), two non-Jewish bodies, were able to assume a prominent position in the world of Jewish academic research. Amid this ever-changing constellation the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana remained as constant as the northern star, an invaluable resource and a centre of scholarship. As new funds became available, this world of secular Jewish activity was able to flourish: an array of projects attracted new participants with a whole range of interests, including the transfer of the library’s catalogues onto computer and pioneering Internet projects such as the posting of the complete works of Menasseh ben Israel on the University Library website. What Leeser Rosenthal would have made of all this is difficult to tell, but Offenberg’s legacy is of a different order: he leaves a library that stands as a monument to Jewish printing in early modern Amsterdam and a bulwark of modern Jewish scholarship.


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