BERTHOLD’S 1924
HEBREW
TYPE CATALOGUE

RENAISSANCE
BEFORE THE FALL
BY STEVEN HELLER
EBRUE WAS prohibited in Russia after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, effectively curtailing a rich tradition of Jewish publishing. As a result, those scholars and authors who could, emigrated to England, France, and the United States, while, a particularly large number also resisted. Such was the case with Berthold, responsible for providing Jewish publishers and cultural organizations with a well-stocked library of fine types.

With this critical mass of Jewish cultural enterprise during the post-Russian Revolution and post-World War I years, it made sense that one of Germany’s most venerable and largest typefoundries, H Berthold AG, (founded in Berlin in 1858, with outlets in Leipzig, Stuttgart, Vienna, and Riga), would vigorously develop, produce, and market a relatively wide selection of Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic, and Persian design both for secular and religious applications. By the late 1910s Berthold had already adopted standard fonts used for text and display and secured an imitator of the American publisher, Pantheon Books.

1 Cover of the Berthold Hebrew catalogue, reading from left to right. This cover features ornamental letters typical of a biblical text. Design: unknown.

2 Title page of the Berthold catalogue in German, reading from left to right. The Jewish star on this book, when opened this way, is a reminder prefiguring of things to come.

3 Title page of the Berthold catalogue in Hebrew, reading from right to left. Although the catalogue includes Hebrew, the latter was the more influenced language.

4 Cover of the Berthold Hebrew catalogue with Berthold in Hebrew letters. The legend of this catalogue allowed for the fundamental letter samples when opened this way, and the applications were shown when opened to reverse.

1 Title page of the Berthold catalogue in Hebrew letters, reading from left to right. Although the catalogue included Hebrew as well as Hebrew, the latter was the more influenced language.

With its creation, Joseph Tscherkassky, was the Manager of the Oriental Department of H Berthold AG. The department was founded to cater to the growing printing market in Europe and abroad. Born in the Ukraine in 1879, Tscherkassky was the proprietor of his own self-named foundry in Kiev, where他 created Hebrew fonts for secular use. Yet little is known about his early life, the success or failure of his foundry, or when, in fact, he immigrated to Germany – although his reasons must have been tied to the fortunes (or misfortunes) of the Revolution. Type historian Stephen Lubell, author of Joseph Tscherkassky: Orientalist and Typefounder, published in Gutenberg-Jahrbuch in 1996, writes that Tscherkassky was interested in the traditions of both Hebrew and Arabic types. This interest and research resulted later on in an equally exquisite Berthold companion catalogue dedicated to Arabic faces.

Tscherkassky attempted to give the type specimens a very oriental character, combined with his visions of the new Hebrew typography, writes Lubell about the man who might arguably be called the Jan Tschichold of Jewish type. How many typefaces he commissioned, designed, or whether he even designed the complete type catalogue is not categorically known. But it is certain that Tscherkassky was the leader of Berthold’s directors Dr. Oskar Julles and Erwin Graumann, was responsible for providing Jewish publishers and cultural organizations with a well-stocked library of fine types.

At the time of what some have called the ‘Hebrew Renaissance’ in Germany, which took hold throughout Central and Eastern Europe, the catalogue was nothing less than a joyous celebration of Hebrew and Yiddish culture. The specimens were vibrantly rendered in the dominant Art Nouveau and Art Moderne (Deco) graphic miasmas used by European printers for all kinds of commercial purposes. Yet, these graphics also evoked a decidedly Jewish style. The man responsible for the catalogue’s creation, Joseph Tscherkassky, was the Director of the Oriental Department of H Berthold AG. The director was founded to cater to the growing printing market in Europe and abroad. Born in the Ukraine in 1879, Tschheksassy was the proprietor of his own self-named foundry in Kiev, where he created Hebrew fonts for secular use. Yet little is known about his early life, the success or failure of his foundry, or when, in fact, he immigrated to Germany – although his reasons must have been tied to the fortunes (or misfortunes) of the Revolution. Type historian Stephen Lubell, author of Joseph Tschereksassy: Orientalist and Typefounder, published in Gutenberg-Jahrbuch in 1996, writes that Tschereksassy was interested in the traditions of both Hebrew and Arabic types. This interest and research resulted later on in an equally exquisite Berthold companion catalogue dedicated to Arabic faces.

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5 A type sample using orientalist decorative borders and bright ‘mid-eastern’ colors. Some of the samples herein were for restaurants and businesses, others for biblical excerpts.

6 ‘Ramsis Series’ of ornaments based on Egyptian motifs: Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles borrowed heavily from these ancient forms, making them more modern by simplifying the lines. Berthold used these motifs in their German catalogues as well.

7 These type compositions were used for admonishing people to emigrate to the State of Israel (top) and as an ad for a travel and automobile agent.

Much of the Hebrew type, whether used for Yiddish or Hebrew applications, had functional, non-decorative purposes.

8 Type specimens displaying different border treatments for use in poetry (left) and liturgy (right) were common throughout the catalogue.

9 These are pages from a book about historical objects and locales using a classical styling wed to the Egyptian motifs shown above.

10 Common fluerons and border motifs are drawn from Middle Eastern architecture and applied to printing. Again, many of these elements were used in non-Hebrew Berthold catalogues.
N**OTHING WAS spared in the production of the catalogue, which opens both right to left (with text set in Roman) and left to right (with text set in Hebrew). In addition to its intricately embossed reddish-brown covers with hints of gold leaf printing (actually quite biblical in appearance), the endpapers are a cleverly repeating pattern of interlocking Stars of David with the Berthold logo in Hebrew. Inside the bountiful offerings include numerous examples of calligraphic text and display faces along with assortment, decorative initial capitals, dingbats, florons, and borders. The typefaces are mostly printed in black, yet the ornaments and a major section devoted to especially designed applications is saturated in vibrant colours. A few spreads of sample book title pages show the blend of classical and modern influences, while the majority of customized designed samples, included menus, theatre programs, and letter and billheads, are illuminated as though contemporary Medieval manuscripts. There is also a noticeable Arts and Crafts influence in some Pre-Raphaelite illuminated initials. But the over-arching stylistic trope is streamlined Egyptian borrowed from the Pharaoh's tombs. One of the specimens features a quotation from Martin Luther about the ancient Hebrew language, which Lubell correctly observes is “a curious and somewhat disconcerting quotation given Martin Luther’s other statements about Jews.”

“...This catalogue of Hebrew and Jewish Types,” writes Tscherkassky in his seven-language Preface (including Arabic), the first of its kind should redress a great deficiency hitherto existing in Hebrew printing matters. This correctly presumed great interest on the part of publishing houses and bibliographic societies to preserve and propagate the Hebrew alphabet and language. “During my long years as owner of the type-founding Joseph Tscherkassky in New [New] I had no chance of carrying out the long entertained idea of perfecting the Hebrew types,” he adds. “Only by assistance on the part of the firm H Berthold AG the largest type-founding in Germany I was able to realize my plans to this great extent.” He continues in a salutary tone, in book, “long years toilsome preparatory work to examine the Berthold stocks of Hebrew types with the aid of leading Jewish type experts and typographers and I hope I have found the best and most perfect as regards to form, shape and technical make.” He ends by dedicating the catalogue to Dr. Jolles on the celebration of his 25th jubilee as Director. Dr. Jolles, incidentally, though trained as an economist and banker, was an avid Jewish bibliophile, the force behind Berthold-Drucke private press monographs used for...
publishing work of Hebrew type designers and other type matters—and so the perfect advocate for Tscherkassky’s work.

The Berthold Hebrew catalogue was largely responsible for spreading the gospel of type throughout central Europe, but it was not the only vehicle. Also in 1924, Berthold produced a booklet of Hebrew types designed by Leopold Kurzrock and Anton Schmid, according to Lubell. And in 1925 Berthold also printed a limited edition of 10 verses from the ‘Book of Ecclesiasticus’. Still, Tscherkassky’s catalogue was the flagship for Hebrew lettering for many years. Although he was not able in 1924 to predict the campaign to rid Europe of Jewish culture (even though Hitler’s beer hall anti-Semitism was audible), he predicted a resurgence of Yiddish in everyday life, thus a growing market for books and other commercial printing. 1924 also marked the founding of The Soncino-Gesellschaft (the Society for the Friends of Jewish Book) in Germany, which according the Lubell was critical of the catalogue in its official newsletter. Although grateful to Berthold for making the effort, the society took issue with the nuances of its design. Yet once again one must add with regret, that the creation of a completely satisfactory, well-conceived and classical Hebrew type has not yet been achieved” wrote a reviewer. Similar sighs of classical angst were also heard when in 1925 Tschichold edited an issue of the magazine TH, devoted to radical modern ‘Elementare Typographie’. Tscherkassky was understandably disappointed by the response.

While Tscherkassky’s contribution was considerable, the market for commercial Hebrew type did not grow as rapidly as anticipated. This may have been one reason why in 1930 he moved to South America to manage a Berthold branch in Brazil. Lubell assumes he was demoted from his position in Berlin, but nonetheless the move saved his life. Three years later in 1933 he was fired in a move that prefigured the widespread dismissals of Jews from German professions. He started a new printing company, which became the largest packaging printer in South America. Although Joseph Tscherkassky seemed to have abandoned his overt interests in Hebrew types, Berthold’s 1924 Hebrew type catalogue—while rare today—is a crucial historical document in light of the fate that befell the Jews (and so-called Jewish lettering) in Europe.

16 This rate sheet for a business in whose Equipoise series, Art Deco styling is paired with screen, almost the crossword puzzle, a bold design with unique Hebrew style while conforming to international trends in design.