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Return of the Prodigal Book

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Return of the Prodigal Book

Abstract
Short piece on the return of a 16th century book to the Penn Libraries, missing since the 1940s.

Keywords
Libraries, missing books

Disciplines
German Language and Literature | Library and Information Science

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In 2008 the Kislak Center acquired a little pamphlet for its collection on the Dreyfus Affair, one of many works that had belonged to Emile Zola and passed through his family. This pamphlet, concerning Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy, the true villain in the Dreyfus Affair, was mailed from Strassburg on January 13, 1898. It was simply folded and addressed to "Monsieur Emile Zolo, homme de lettres, Paris" and, after arriving in Paris the following day, was delivered to Zola's home. In this day and age it's hard to imagine a similarly addressed mailing arriving at its proper destination.

Yet, just such a thing happened the other day, much to the surprise of Darin Prey-Harbaugh, a Bibliographic Assistant in Serials, who was opening some of the onslaught of mail sent regularly to the Information Processing Center of the Penn Libraries. In the midst of the pile, he came across an envelope addressed "University of PA./Philadelphia, PA," with the word "Library" written in the bottom left corner of the envelope. The envelope is white and the writer looks to have used a ball point pen, both of which lead one to think it was recently addressed.
However, even more amazing than the address was the stamp, a three-cent stamp commemorating Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross. It has been a long time since first class postage was three cents; it turns out to have been the rate for first class letters up to one ounce between July 6, 1932 and July 31, 1958. The Barton stamp was first issued on September 7, 1948, making it nearly seventy years old. In addition, while the stamp was not cancelled, there is indication of some intervention by the United States Postal Service (USPS), in the form of a fluorescent orange bar code added by the Facer-Canceller machine that processes letters, making this mailing even more of a mystery.

When Darin opened the letter, he found a small volume inside. It looked old, really old, so he decided to visit his colleagues in the Kislak Center and see if
they were interested in this little volume.

From the binding and the markings, it had clearly belonged to the Penn Libraries, containing its accession number and its Dewey call number, though it would appear to have gone missing decades ago.

This little volume, consisting of four leaves or eight pages, is titled *Disz Lied Sagt von Lucretia* and is by Ludwig Binder, who wrote a number of songs about ancient heroes and tyrants that were popular at the time. It has a lovely little woodcut on its title page, showing men eating at a table.
There are no recorded copies of this edition in WorldCat, though there is a brief bibliographic record for what appears to be the same work. Liz Broadwell, who just cataloged this work, notes that there is supposedly one other copy, according to the GVK (Gemeinsamer Verbundkatalog or Union Catalog of libraries in Germany and Austria), and it is in the Rostock University Library. The Penn copy is thus an incredibly rare survival, not surprising given its size.

Before disappearing from the Library, this work was part of the Bechstein Germanic Library, comprising about 15,000 books and 3,000 pamphlets in German language and literature. According to the pamphlet published as part of the opening of the library at the University of Pennsylvania in 1896:

“The nucleus of the Bechstein collection consists of the library of the late Professor Reinhold Bechstein, of the University of Rostock [yes, Rostock, interestingly enough.] Professor Bechstein’s early associations with his father, Ludwig Bechstein, for many years the Librarian at Meiningen, gave him a peculiar schooling in the art of collecting books, and his library bears marks of this training.”

Dr. M.D. Learned, prior to leaving Johns Hopkins to take up the Chair of the Penn
German Department, had insisted that the University improve its holdings in his discipline, and was directly behind the purchase of this collection. The original collection had been supplemented with the acquisition of other important works relating to German by the time of the Bechstein Library’s official opening in 1896. This little work by Binder arrived at Penn three years later, in 1899, presumably as part of the ongoing acquisitions for the Library.

Did whoever took the book from the Penn Libraries feel guilty and seek to atone for their sins by returning it so many years later? Or has it sat in the USPS dead letter office for years, waiting to be delivered? Or was it found among an academic’s nachlass, which a relative or colleague came across as they were cleaning out the office or home of the deceased, and then put in the mail in such a way as to hide its origins? And why the three-cent stamp? With the little evidence as we have, we will never know for certain, but we are pleased that it is back at Penn, where it can now be accessed through our online catalog and will shortly join other books on the shelves housing the rare book collection of the Kislak Center.
THOUGHTS ON “RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL BOOK”

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June 9, 2016 at 5:05 pm

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