



Revisionism and professional ethics

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Abstract :

Should a library specialised in Jewish history and Jewish Studies tolerate the presence of a notorious so called "revisionist" in its reading room? At the end of last Spring an active Holocaust denier came to our library to make research on "The Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion" and other Anti-Semitic texts that we possess. His ideological identity was rapidly revealed (he was not trying to hide his name publicly known). The fact of knowing who he was introduced immediately great confusion within our team. Should we authorize him consultation in our library or not? Should we permit him the access to our rare documents or not? We are a private library depending on the institution of the Alliance israélite universelle in Paris, a library which is usually a very welcoming place. Different opinions diverged among the staff members until the moment when the presence of this individual turned to be unbearable for the librarians. They have expressed their feelings to the managers who finally took the decision to forbid him the access to the library. Letters exchanges between the Holocaust denier and the institution have followed this decision.

My presentation is going to be articulated around the following themes;

- Presentation of the library of the Alliance Israelite Universelle
- The library during World War II
- Presentation of the study case
- Conflict between professional ethic and morality

Let me describe to you, as an introduction, the library of the Alliance israelite universelle and its particularity: it is a private library depending on the institution which carries the same name. Initially the library was supposed to provide material for the schoolteachers who worked in the important network of schools established by the association in order to improve

Jews' position and education in Oriental communities from Morocco to Iran including Jews in Ottoman Empire. The Alliance was created in 1860 and the library too. Its collections were acquired partly by knowledgeable books donations and by acquisitions. The type of the library is not religious but rather studies on Judaism and Jewish history developed by modern new disciplines that resulted from the European Enlightenment period in Germany, Britain and France.

The Alliance's library reflects Jewish emancipation and intellectual mentalities in Western Europe.

By the time World War II broke up the library of the Alliance was one of the most well-known libraries for its Judaica and Hebraica collections. In 1937 the library moved from Western Paris to a more central place in the 9th arrondissement where it is still now. When the Nazis invaded Paris in 1940, they immediately invested the Alliance library, looted its funds and deported them to Germany. The Nazis moved nearly 700 cases of books, manuscripts periodicals and archives to Germany.

All the books and the main part of the archives were taken to the Nazi institute for the study of the Jewish Question [IEJ (Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage)] in Frankfurt am Main and to the library of the [Hohe Schule des NSDAP], the Nazi party university in Berlin and later in Austria. Part of the collections had started to be treated by the Nazi administration; hundreds of the books were marked by the Frankfurt Institute. Today, the stamps are still visible on the books like a sealed Nazi tattoo.

During the war the Alliance building was not only emptied from all its contents but it was also used by the Nazis as a conservation and storing place where they gathered masses of books, music instruments and art objects stolen from individuals apartments and from French institutions.

In spring 1945, after the war ended the Alliance library's collections were found by the American Army partly in Hungen where they had been evacuated from Frankfurt under the allied bombings. Later they were stored and in a deposit in Offenbach by the American troops from where they came back to Paris. The collections were not destroyed by the Nazis and were carefully gathered together and so it was easy to identify them. The restitution started in 1946 and it took years and a lot of effort to re-establish the library collections and its catalogues.

The situation

Last year around June a person who came to the library for the first time asked to consult an old edition of "The protocols of the Wise men of Zion", an anti-Semitic forgery text which aim was to unfold the existence of international Jewish conspiracies bent on world power. An hour later the man came to the desk asking to produce an entire copy of this pamphlet that was one of the first translations into French from the Russian. I happened to be at the desk at that moment and told him it was impossible to reproduce it for the simple reason it was old and in a bad shape. He insisted so I asked for what purpose he needed the reproduction; he said it was for a reprint project. I asked for the name of the publisher; he said he intended to

publish it in a journal and gave me its name informing me he was the chief editor. The publication name had a meaning that worried me.

How and what did I Find out ?

The man kept insisting for making the entire reproduction of these one hundred and fifty three pages of the pamphlet, revealing stubbornness and refusal to hear what I had to say on library instructions. At that point I felt something was wrong. I was intrigued and annoyed and I had to know more about his identity so I googled his name, which he never hid from us, and got the whole picture. I was submerged by information concerning revisionism and anti-Semitism. His holocaust denier identity was quickly revealed with the help of World Wide Web and I was very rapidly informed that he had been condemned and spent time in prison for having spread anti-Semitic materials. He was not only expressing his ideas on his web site, but I also found he was actually defined as a revisionist by the French law and condemned as such by the justice.

Dilemma

I immediately went up to inform my superior that we were having a revisionist in our reading room. The library director knew straight away who this man was and hoped it would be his single visit to the library, but whether he was going to come back again or not the problem was already there and everybody in the team was bothered and made different assumptions about the resolution we were supposed to make. Most of the staff members thought we didn't have any legal right to prevent him from consulting documents in our library in spite of the fact we were a private library. In France every citizen has the right to enter public libraries and consult books... My position at that stage was in a way fatalist, I felt as if there was nothing we could do against his visits, and thought that democracy protected every user even the most problematic ones, but still we hoped he wouldn't show up again. We all felt it was an intrusion and a provocation to come to the library of the Alliance Israelite for documents one can find in other Parisian libraries such as French National library or the library of Oriental languages.

Three days later he showed up again and asked for some documents in the field of Jewish history. The first documents were given to him for consultation but after a while I felt that the cooperation between a librarian in such a library and a dynamic holocaust denier was very problematic. I decided, at that moment, to take a personal arbitrary attitude to limit him and the access we gave to our documents under the pretext they were not available or that they were being kept by the bookbinding service. My colleagues and superior approved my decision and backed me. It was necessary to make this man understand that we were not going to satisfy all his requests like automats.

But he persisted coming and appeared twice a week in our reading room.

At the same time I started questioning jurists and specialists who had dealt with the problem of Holocaust denial in libraries. I contacted various institutions for example; the Holocaust Memorial in Paris and was told that some years ago they had been confronted with a similar situation. Their library was a private one like ours and the solution they had chosen could be available for us.

From questioning to taking position

Meanwhile our holocaust denier, who was, by then, coming regularly to the library now, asked to see a book from the Zadok Kahn collection. Zadok Kahn was not only France's chief

Rabbi from 1889 to 1905 but was also a leading scholar in Jewish studies. His personal library rich of 2600 books was given as a donation to the Alliance's library after his death. This entire collection was deported by the Nazis and many of the books were stamped by the Frankfurt institute stamp.

When the book arrived to the desk that day, I immediately recognized its origin, and felt a strong unwillingness to provide this survivor book bearing the Nazi stamp to a person who denies the existence of the Shoah and the murder of six millions Jews.

In this particular situation I was in a conflict within the ethical field, a conflict between normative professional behaviour and moral responsibilities. The book I was holding in my hands acted like a witness from the war period, like a survivor giving its testimony on dramatic realities this revisionist was denying. It was a shock to be confronted with this tragic past throughout the mark of the stamp on the yellowish page of this old book. At that moment my consciousness crystallized and I was rebelled against the idea of providing documents to this person. I froze facing this Holocaust denying phenomena that is so unmoral and pervert. How could I provide a rescued book which had returned from the Nazis basements back to civilization to a person who admired and believed in this destructive universe instored by Nazism?

It was the implication of the French law we call "Droit de retrait", which means the right to retreat, in some cases, from one's professional obligations. For me it was unbearable and absurd to keep giving services to a person denying the existence of the Holocaust. The psychological crystallisation that led me to refusal and rejection of this unwelcomed person were probably the result of a maturation process within ethical parameters that I was experiencing.

From individual positions to institutional decision

I told him the book was not available, went up to the direction offices and declared I was no longer going to serve this man and that I did not accept his presence in our library. Thankfully the directors approved my position and it was agreed that the next time he'd come to the library we would tell him to leave the place and not to come back again.

The exclusion from the Alliance reading room took place a week later at closing time. The director of the library asked him to leave, signifying he forbid him to come again. The denier protested arguing we were a public library obliged to receive all publics. The director reminded him we were a private library that had the right to define the conditions for admission of our readers. The revisionist left the place without any violence but on his Web site he described the exclusion in insulting terms.

Then we had another chapter in this affaire. He sent a letter to the general director of the Alliance asking him for authorization to use the library.

Until he got his answer he kept calling our offices leaving many messages on the answering machine.

Finally the Alliance attorney sent him an official letter confirming the refusal to enter the library explaining that in consideration of his personal position and those expressed in his journal for which he was condemned for the violation of legal decision he was not authorized to come to the library.

The attorney quoted article n° 6 from the status of international military court annexed to the London agreement from August 1945 precisising that a person who contests by writing or by

speech ... “the existence of crimes against Humanity is to be condemned to prison with an fine of 45000 € Being specified that such crimes recover the deportation and extermination of European Jews in countries under Nazi occupation during the Second World War.”

As a conclusion I would like to quote the last part of this letter:

“You must understand”, wrote the attorney, “that the Alliance Israelite Universelle can not give in any case any kind of help for doubtful and illegal projects by welcoming you in its centre. More than that, the library of the Alliance which is entirely orientated toward history, education, and in particular the history of the Jewish people, cannot tolerate within its centre a person whose ideas and activities express the absolute denial of the values it stands for.”

This echoed my conviction that the unconditional obligation to provide documents to citizens in a democratic society wasn't fitting my moral responsibilities towards history.

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