

## Stolen Manuscript: Lessons Learnt

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### **Abstract**

In 2000, the 13th-century Hebrew Bible, known as *Hebrew 52*, was discovered missing at the National Library of France. Investigations led to the arrest of the National Library of France's chief curator of Hebrew Collection Michel Garel in 2004. In response to this event the National Library of France has implemented a security plan which includes four main fields: spaces and access controls, preservation and control of collections, measures applied to library staff and readers, and national and international cooperation.

**Key Words:** Hebrew 52; Michel Garel; library security

### **The Story**

In 2000, the 13th-century Hebrew Bible, known as *Hebrew 52*, was discovered missing at the National Library of France. In 2003 an anonymous letter revealed that the manuscript had been sold by Christie's in 2000, and denounced the chief curator of the French library's Hebrew collection: the internationally esteemed specialist, Michel Garel. Garel sold *Hebrew 52* in 1998 to an English collector who showed the manuscript to a specialist in Jerusalem. The scholar, in spite of the changes made to the manuscript (removed stamps, missing pages and cut borders) recognised it as a library collection item and warned the National Library of France. Garel was arrested in 2004 and convicted in March 2006 of stealing and damaging the manuscript.

The book has been recovered by the National Library of France in January 2007 after negotiations with Christie's and the antiques dealer who had bought the book from the auction house in 2000.

## **Lessons Learnt**

The National Library of France has learnt from the theft of this very valuable manuscript. Under the leadership of an internal steering committee, a security plan was launched concerning four action fields:

- spaces and access controls;
- preservation and control of collections;
- measures applied to library staff and readers;
- national and international cooperation.

## **Spaces and Access Controls**

A general access control system and video surveillance system has been implemented at the National Library of France François Mitterrand site. Security devices were installed in storage areas and an organisation charter for organising keys (*digikeys*) has been created. Security measures also include managing the collections transfers between all the National Library of France sites and to external associations. A new administrative procedure is now required for staff recruitment.

## **Preservation and Control of the Collections**

Stamping and systematic marking has been implemented for current flow and older collections (for example, 54,104 documents from the audiovisual department were marked in 2007). Electronic tracking of the documents flow has been expanded to include access to legal deposit storage. Use of surrogates, copies, microform and digitised forms, has increased in order to protect the original from use and to create an accurate picture of the object

for facsimile(s). Preservation of the increasing rare and precious collections has been re-evaluated and deposits outside the National Library of France are regulated and controlled.

A three-year stock-taking programme has been established and is defined by three stages: 1) inspection of book stacks: counting volumes, pieces, sheets, etc., 2) investigation into missing documents, and 3) analysis of these actions. The priorities of this programme are to target the rare and precious collections, documents issued after 1994 and problems detected in storage, catalogue and document delivery. The programme ran from 2003 until 2006 with 500,000 documents on average inspected, and an annual rate of 0.6% for missing documents. The 2007–2009 programme is in progress with 489,667 documents inspected and 0.4% missing documents.

## **Measures Applied to Library Staff and Readers**

Library staff and service providers in contact with collections are subject to updating of library rules, stacks regulations, workshops and accreditations, security training for newcomers, staff lending regulations, and police record certification in the case of acquiring new responsibility for patrimonial collections.

Readers are subject to new requirements for registration which include providing identity papers and proof of address. Readers' ID photos and consultation data are stored electronically. There are regulations for public areas and bespoke fittings of reading rooms.

## **National and International Cooperation**

The National Library of France systematically lodges an examination in the event of a missing item(s). The National Library of France also collaborates with national and international police services (OCBC, BRB, INTERPOL, etc.) and international associations (such as LIBER and the International Council of Museums).