

*Soetaert, Hans P.: The Scattered Library. The Various Fates of the Remnants of Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute of Sexual Science Collection in France and Czechoslovakia, 1932-1942.*

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Hans P. Soetaert's monograph constitutes an exceptionally expansive and heuristically ambitious reconstruction of the fate of the Berlin Institute for Sexual Science after its destruction in May 1933. Focusing primarily on the years from 1932 to 1942, the study traces the movement of surviving fragments of the Institute's library, archival holdings, and personal papers across France and Czechoslovakia. The resulting volume, which extends to more than eight hundred pages, is explicitly conceived as a detailed investigative report.

The empirical foundations of the book are immediately striking. Soetaert conducted research in dozens of archives across seventeen countries, and the bibliography alone occupies fourteen densely printed large-format pages in two columns. The study is clearly the product of more than a decade of systematic inquiry, undertaken largely outside the institutional framework of a university department. This circumstance is visible not only in the sheer density of documentation but also in the author's sustained commitment to pursuing even the most elusive traces of a dispersed collection.

The monograph's principal contributions operate on several interconnected levels. First, it provides a coherent and detailed account of Hirschfeld's final years after his return from the world tour, with particular analytical emphasis on his connections to Czechoslovakia. The chapter devoted to the World League for Sexual Reform congress in Brno in September 1932 offers the most comprehensive reconstruction of this event currently available. Soetaert convincingly demonstrates that Brno was not merely an episodic stop on an exile trajectory, but rather a significant node within the international network of sexual reform activism.

Second, the book presents the first extensive biographical treatment of Karl Giese and Karl Fein. Both figures have generally appeared in the historiography as marginal actors associated with the late phase of Hirschfeld's life. Soetaert, by contrast, places them at the center of his narrative. Through meticulous genealogical reconstruction, close analysis of social ties, and sustained attention to decision making under intensifying Nazi repression, the author significantly expands our understanding of transnational queer networks in Central Europe during the 1930s. Fein's trajectory, situated in the context of Protectorate-era Brno and culminating in deportation and death in 1942, constitutes an important contribution not only to the history of homosexuality but also to the social history of Jewish persecution.

Third, Soetaert challenges the simplifying assumption that Hirschfeld's library was entirely destroyed during the Berlin book burning of 10 May 1933. He demonstrates that substantial portions of the collection were dispersed, in part repurchased, and transported among Berlin, Brno, and Paris. Only later, most plausibly in 1942 in occupied Brno, were the remaining materials destroyed. By reconstructing this longer trajectory, the book shifts attention away from the symbolic spectacle of the book burning and toward the protracted processes of fragmentation, circulation, and gradual elimination that characterized the afterlife of the Institute's holdings.

The volume's structure follows three broad thematic arcs. The opening sections examine Hirschfeld's return to Europe after the world tour and his activities in Czechoslovakia and France, culminating in the Brno congress as a key moment of international mobilization. The second part analyzes exile efforts to reconstitute an institutional presence in France and traces the material afterlives of books and archival materials through transport routes, negotiations over reacquisition, and the complex property issues that emerged following Hirschfeld's death in Nice in 1935. The third major section focuses on Brno in the late 1930s and early Protectorate period, where Giese and Fein appear as central intermediaries linking local homosexual milieus, Jewish networks, and the remnants of Hirschfeld's archive. In this context, the histories of sexuality and the Holocaust emerge as deeply intertwined rather than analytically separable domains.

Particularly noteworthy is Soetaert's attempt to reconstruct the circumstances under which the remaining materials were likely destroyed in Brno around 1942. He advances several carefully argued scenarios that connect the fate of the collection to milieus surrounding the periodical *Kamarád*, to the Jewish hospital in Brno, and to identifiable individuals who may have played a role in discarding or salvaging portions of the archive. These chapters take the form of detailed investigative reconstructions that immerse the reader in a complex web of personal ties, fear, improvisation, and strategies of survival under occupation.

The book's greatest strength is simultaneously its most consequential weakness. Soetaert declares that his aim is to determine as precisely as possible what occurred, and he subordinates the entire architecture of the work to that investigative objective. The exposition is extraordinarily detailed and at times almost excessively so. The reader encounters a proliferation of secondary trajectories, episodic encounters, anecdotal fragments, and genealogical digressions. In some instances, a few lines of main text are accompanied by an extensive apparatus in which a parallel interpretive argument unfolds. The notes, therefore, occasionally exceed a purely documentary function and assume the character of an auxiliary narrative.

This exhaustive method has clear heuristic advantages. The study provides future researchers with an exceptionally rich reservoir of references, contextual clues, and archival pathways. At the same time, the density of detail sometimes weakens the clarity of the central argument. The guiding question about the collection's fate often recedes behind an accumulation of information whose relevance is not always fully articulated.

A related methodological concern involves the degree of speculative reconstruction. Soetaert is transparent about the loss of sources and the necessity of working

with hypotheses, an approach that is understandable and often unavoidable in queer history, where documentation is frequently fragmentary. In certain passages, however, the analysis moves from cautious probability toward relatively bold reconstructions of motivations and intentions without consistently delineating the boundary between documented fact and interpretive conjecture. As a result, a study grounded in an exceptionally broad documentary base can at times convey an impression of narrative overextension.

The sections devoted to the Czechoslovak context are among the most valuable components of the volume. By situating Brno within broader European circuits of activism and exile, Soetaert contributes to a more integrated understanding of how sexual reform intersected with local Jewish, legal, and medical networks. In this respect, the book opens important new perspectives for research on the history of sexuality in Central Europe, a field that has often been framed predominantly through German or Anglo-American historiographical lenses.

In sum, the book represents an admirable and in many respects foundational contribution that substantially enlarges our knowledge of Hirschfeld's final years and the afterlives of his institutional legacy. Its defining virtue lies in its uncompromising empiricism and its refusal to abandon even the faintest archival trace. That same quality, however, renders the book demanding and at times structurally diffuse. It requires patience and a willingness to follow intricate archival trajectories across borders, institutions, and personal networks. Nevertheless, it will serve as an indispensable reference point for future scholarship on sexuality, exile, and cultural loss in Central Europe.