



Otto Harrassowitz, Buchhandlung-Verlag-Antiquariat: The first century

Citation

Dorn, R. W. 1973. Otto Harrassowitz, Buchhandlung-Verlag-Antiquariat: The first century. Harvard Library Bulletin XXI (4), October 1973: 365-374.

Link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37364027>

Terms of use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material (LAA), as set forth at

<https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFIOWI2M2EwYTg>

Accessibility

<https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#)

Otto Harrassowitz,
Buchhandlung-Verlag-Antiquariat:
The First Century

Richard W. Dorn

ACENTENARY certainly justifies a backward glance, particularly when it ends a hundred years filled with noteworthy events and dizzying progress. The century 1872-1972 is rich in historical, political, social, and cultural changes, and these have had their effect on the professional work of librarians and book dealers. The author of this flash-back has been an eyewitness to more than one third of the hundred-year history of the firm of Otto Harrassowitz.

The founder of the business, Otto Harrassowitz, was born in La Guaira, Venezuela, on 18 December 1845. His father ran a large trading company, with his own plantations and fleet. At the age of ten, Otto was sent to Germany for further education. He had no difficulty in choosing a career upon completion of his secondary schooling: the family wanted to make a civil servant or professor out of him, but Otto had his own ideas and stuck to them. He wanted to be a book dealer, and, like all those wanting to be book dealers, had to serve an apprenticeship. In October 1864 he began his training with K. F. Koehler's second-hand book business in Leipzig, and during his four years there he was paid the sum of 4 Talers (about \$3.30) per month — quite a substantial sum in those days! In letters home, he described his thorough initiation into the trade. The first months were spent on such boring yet necessary tasks as copying book titles onto cards — not while seated comfortably at a table, but standing at a high desk. He described how, on one occasion, he had to climb about on the steps between shelves, a candle in one hand, steadying himself with the other, while between his teeth was the book which he had been sent to bring down — not exactly a white-collar job.

Following his apprenticeship he worked in Amsterdam, but re-

turned to Leipzig after three years and set up in business with a friend, Oscar Richter. Leipzig was then the center of world book trade. Almost all the printing offices of Germany were in or around Leipzig, as were most of the publishing houses. Publishers from all over the world, though not actually maintaining offices there, would keep stocks in Leipzig for distribution. It was quite common, therefore, for a dealer in Buenos Aires to order from Leipzig a book which had been published in Rio de Janeiro. Leipzig held this position up to the first World War and again through the inter-war period, but during and after World War II the importance of the city as a publishing center was destroyed.

The firm of Richter & Harrassowitz was founded on 1 July 1872. Initially it dealt with second-hand books only, but it soon began to engage in publishing. Otto proudly wrote to his father that his firm would be known throughout the world some day. The association with Richter was short-lived, and on 1 July 1875 Otto Harrassowitz became sole owner of the firm, which has indeed become known throughout the world. The business still bears the name of its founder, and his successors hope it will continue to do so for a long time to come.

During these early years Otto Harrassowitz faced the problem of building up the capital of his company. He had little financial backing and could not approach his once well-to-do father for assistance, as the latter had lost his whole fortune through revolution and state bankruptcy in Venezuela. Otto expanded his business cautiously, but never lost sight of his ambition to achieve a world-wide reputation.

Anyone who manages an Antiquariat must come into contact with new books sooner or later, whether by design or accident. The firm of Otto Harrassowitz now entered the world of publishing, although a little hesitantly. One of their very first publications was Heyd's *Histoire du commerce du Levant*, which is still of scholarly significance and, in fact, has been reprinted since World War II.

Through its catalogues, which were distinguished by unusual bibliographical precision, the firm won the confidence of German libraries. This resulted in the proposal, in 1884, that it publish the newly founded *Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen*, a real milestone in the history of the firm. Foreign trade was developed gradually, at first confined to Europe, but soon extending overseas.

Higher education and research libraries developed rapidly in America during the second half of the nineteenth century. One of the most

important librarians of the period was Justin Winsor, who became the first President of the American Library Association when it was founded in 1876 and was Librarian of Harvard College from 1877 to 1897. A letter from Mr. Winsor dated 5 December 1882 is another significant milestone in the history of the firm of Otto Harrassowitz. This letter was an inquiry as to whether the firm would be willing to act as Harvard's agent for the publishing output of the German-speaking area. Otto composed his reply on 23 December 1882, accepting the proposal. Both letters, written by hand, are remarkably clear and neat. Harvard College, which became the firm's first library customer, has retained its importance as a customer ever since. It would be hard to say how many thousands of volumes Otto Harrassowitz has added to the shelves of Widener and other Harvard libraries during the past ninety years; the figure would certainly be very high and the task of counting or even making an accurate estimate would be extremely difficult.¹

Requests similar to Harvard's were subsequently made by library after library, and by the time the firm had celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1897 the number of libraries for which it was official German agent had risen to forty. By the outbreak of World War I, this figure had trebled. The increase has continued; today a North American research library that does not regularly order books from Otto Harrassowitz may be described as an exception that proves the rule.

These library customers wanted to obtain through Harrassowitz Central European publications of all kinds, including periodicals and other continuations. As librarians and scholars are well aware, there is nothing more annoying than irregular or slow delivery of these last two types of publication. Throughout his life, therefore, Otto Harrassowitz devoted special attention to the organization of an efficiently functioning service for subscriptions and continuation orders. Even

¹In 1912 an estimate was made by Otto Harrassowitz, who wrote to Archibald Cary Coolidge, Director of the Harvard University Library: "Allow me to draw your attention to the fact that it is now almost 30 years since we received the first orders from the Harvard Library. Your order numbers during this long space of time have run from 1 — 10,000 and again from 1 — 30,000, and I think that an estimated figure of 150,000 volumes supplied to your Library is not too high, including all serials and continuations and periodicals." — quoted in William Bentinck-Smith, "Archibald Cary Coolidge and the Harvard Library," *HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN*, XXI:3 (July 1973), 237.

today, this can be taken as a measure of the capability of an agent. We must cope with a far greater number of periodicals than were being issued in his day, and the treatment of subscriptions must be adapted to changing circumstances. It is almost impossible to use the same methods that were applied at the turn of the century, and it has not yet been conclusively proven that the computer is the best solution. Nevertheless, we have now computerized our periodical department, and other departments will follow suit after further experience has been acquired.

The term "library agency" can be traced back to the period around the turn of the century, when libraries entrusted Harrassowitz with responsibility for providing what they needed from the whole publishing output of Central Europe. We still use this term when dealing with English-speaking countries, although there is no direct equivalent in German. Otto ran his business in such a way that the American library world had complete confidence in him. It is my ardent desire that future historians will be able to say the same of his successors. Fairness and integrity were two of Otto Harrassowitz's guiding principles. He was proud to be a member of a trade which "took first place above all other branches of trade, for a book is a man's best friend, and the distributor of books, his greatest benefactor."

In 1905 he wrote the following to a librarian in the western part of the United States:

As I understand it, I am, as your agent, merely an employee of your library, and as such, duty-bound to devote my whole effort to the execution of the tasks entrusted me. I have no right to aim at personal gain, but must in the first place represent the interests of your library, and content myself with the normal corresponding trade profit as my salary, so to speak. However, I can only do this if I have your absolute trust. A permanent and worthwhile association can only exist on the basis of mutual confidence.

It was at a meeting of the American Library Association at the turn of the century that the phrase "the honest book-seller" of Europe was coined for him. It is this sort of trust which all we book dealers need to be able to fulfill our obligations. Without it, we can really do nothing.

During the fifth decade of the firm's history, the outbreak of World War I disrupted international trade. Perhaps it was fortunate, during this difficult period, that no one could foresee even worse times only

twenty-five short years later. At the outset, even though nothing could be shipped, Otto Harrassowitz decided to continue subscriptions to periodicals and series for overseas customers, and to store the publications for them. Hence, when the war finally ended, the company was able to supply its regular customers at least with the issues needed to complete their files. This was a very far-sighted decision, and one which doubtless earned the lasting gratitude of many American libraries.

On 24 June 1920, a week before the firm's forty-eighth birthday, Otto Harrassowitz died; his life had been active and successful, and he is remembered with pride by those who carry on his work.

His son, Hans Harrassowitz, born in Leipzig on 7 December 1885, had taken charge of the firm in 1914. Intercontinental travel, in those days, was not a matter of sitting on a plane for a few hours, and Otto Harrassowitz never had an opportunity to see the United States for himself. Hans, however, wanted to know the country with which his firm was so closely associated, and in 1909 began a visit that lasted almost two years, during which he worked in the Harvard College Library and in the Library of Congress and visited most of the other major research libraries. In 1923 he made another trip to America in an effort to repair the contacts which had, to some extent, been damaged by the war. Learning, stronger than national or racial hostilities, knows no frontiers, so the work could be resumed, even though severely hampered by inflation and political uncertainties.

There will always be a gap in the history of the firm from 1920 to 1948. All the documents from this period were destroyed in World War II, and there are now no survivors able to supply information.

I joined the firm in 1936 and, looking back, would say that those were black days — much blacker than we dared admit at the time. It was as though now-historic events were evolving behind thick panes of frosted glass, through which we were unable to see clearly.

From 1936 onwards, I worked in the department which supplied the then aspiring universities of China. The Tsing-Hua University in Peking, the Nankai University in Tientsin, the University of Hangchow, and the National Library in Nanking were important names to us, but these connections were lost when the Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937. Soon after that, events gathered momentum to precipitate the outbreak of World War II, and once again the firm, dependent

upon international trade, was paralyzed. I remember how stunned we were, and how at first we refused to believe what was to prove to be hard reality for the next five years.

So long as it was possible, our shipments to the United States were sent via Genoa in Italian vessels, and via Lisbon in Portuguese carriers. Most of the shipments were seized and taken to the Bermudas, where they eventually disappeared. We also tried having consignments re-packed in neutral countries and then re-dispatched. But these were only emergency measures, and the day came when we could do no more. Again instructions were circulated, this time by Hans Harrassowitz, that subscriptions to periodicals and serials for major customers should be continued until the war was over, so that they could be delivered complete when trade was resumed. We hope that the time will never come when we have to resort to this again.

My real role in the history of the firm began in the autumn of 1947, when I strongly recommended to Mr. Harrassowitz that a branch be opened in West Germany in the zone occupied by American troops. I am qualified to write the history of the firm from this point onwards, and, if I live long enough to do so, I certainly shall. Such an undertaking would give me an opportunity to honor the memory of my former chief as it indeed deserves to be honored. Here let me say only that this sorely-trying man was able not only to preserve and consolidate what he had inherited, but to expand the firm during the period between the two wars. I say "sorely-trying" because, toward the end of his business life, fate struck him two cruel blows: his only son fell in the battle of Stalingrad, and the firm of Harrassowitz was razed to the ground during the night of 3 December 1943 by an air raid on Leipzig.

It is painful to recall such tragedies and perhaps impossible fully to comprehend their effect, but it gives me great joy that Hans Harrassowitz did at least live to see the revival of the firm in Wiesbaden. During the last years of his life, he was confined to his home by acute illness, and he died in April 1964. I had made the reconstruction of the firm my task since 1947, concentrating in particular on the renewal of overseas contacts, and it was his wish that I should become a partner. (Technically, the firm is an *Offene Handelsgesellschaft* or "unlimited mercantile partnership." It is now directed by three families, the Beckers, the Dorns, and the Weigels; Mrs. Harrassowitz is also a partner. The Dorns direct the Export Department.)

The destruction of the firm on that night in December 1943 spared nothing — neither the equipment nor the enormous stock of a quarter of a million volumes. The firm's reputation alone survived the bombing, and it was on the strength of this good name that we were able to build up again from scratch. First of all, we attempted an entirely new start in Leipzig. But, if any business needs political freedom and freedom of thought, of speech, and of the press in order to operate, then surely it is the book trade. The attempt in Leipzig was doomed to failure; the rebuilding of the firm could only be achieved in the free part of Germany. We had no choice but to leave Leipzig. After the inevitable formalities, which in the post-war period were even more complicated than they are today, business in Wiesbaden officially commenced on 1 April 1948.

This was my first experience in running a one-man business. I did everything myself, holding all positions from director to packer. At night I would type out letters to American libraries, announcing the opening of the branch in Wiesbaden. I carried the first packages to the post office in bags; later I was able to "graduate" to a handcart. Today, Volkswagen buses make several trips daily to collect and deposit mail.

From the United States in particular I received an enormous response to the letters I had written. Framed and hanging on the wall of my office is a letter from the New York Public Library, dated 29 January 1948 and signed by John Fall, who was then Head of Acquisitions. It reads:

Word has reached us that you have now opened an office in Wiesbaden. If that is true, will you please let us know, and tell us whether all our orders and correspondence may be sent to the Wiesbaden address?

The letter found me, even though neither the firm nor I was registered anywhere, and even though the address stopped short at "Wiesbaden," giving no street or number; obviously the postal authorities were still resourceful at that time. This letter is precious to me still.

The infant Wiesbaden branch was soon to become the headquarters of the firm, following the seizure of its Leipzig offices by the Communist authorities. My suggestion that we establish a base in the American zone had come just in time.

One of the first visitors I had during that early stage of development was Keyes D. Metcalf, Director of the Harvard University Library. In the summer of 1950 he came to renew the friendship which had

always existed between Harvard and its old dealer; he came also, as representative of the Association of Research Libraries, to make arrangements for our firm to become the Farmington Plan agent for Germany. (Under this voluntary specialization agreement in which more than sixty American research libraries participated for more than twenty years, we undertook to obtain a copy of each new German publication coming within the scope of the plan, to classify it by subject, and to send it to the library that had accepted responsibility for that subject.) Mr. Metcalf's visit was indeed a memorable event for the then already growing post-War firm.

There have been great changes since the days of Otto Harrassowitz and his son Hans. Travel and communications generally have been revolutionized since the beginning of the century, and letters are not enough in the age of the aeroplane. Convinced that only personal contacts can really produce the right sort of association, I made my first trip to the United States and Canada in the autumn of 1953. It was a great success, and the cultivation of personal contacts has become an integral part of our business. This "personal touch" is not one-sided; every year — particularly during the summer — numerous librarians go to Europe and find time to include Wiesbaden in their itineraries. Their visits are a great source of pleasure to us.

Since World War II, the firm of Harrassowitz has won back its former position in the international book trade, and its range of activities has been consolidated, even broadened. No one, of course, is indispensable in this world, but, as things stand at present, we can perhaps fairly claim to be filling an essential role for libraries, especially in the English-speaking countries, as the distribution center for publications of the German-language countries.

We engage in all aspects of the book trade, including publishing, and we supply both current and antiquarian books. Our largest international department is the one for the export of books in print, serials, and periodicals. Librarians may find it interesting to know the subsections into which this export Department is divided:

The *Monographs Department* supplies monographic publications from German-speaking countries regardless of subject. It deals with "one shot" orders — i.e., with complete individual business transactions which do not need to be entered in our continuation lists.

The *Continuation Department* handles all orders for works published by

volume or fascicle, all series, all yearbooks, etc. that need special control and recording in the continuation lists.

The *Subscription Department* is responsible for subscriptions to periodicals — i.e., publications with a definite number of issues per year, most of which are sold at a fixed annual subscription price. The computer was introduced here to handle some of the routine chores, and the Subscription Department has now been completely computerized. The other departments will follow by and by.

The *Approval Plan Department* has become more and more important in recent years. A large number of libraries have entrusted us with "approval" orders, permitting us to submit a preselection of current publications in certain subjects as specified by their instructions. The intricate procedures of book selection and technical handling have been described in a memorandum on the approval program, and Harrassowitz was represented at all three of the recent Seminars on Approval and Gathering Plans arranged by Mr. Spyers-Duran at Kalamazoo and West Palm Beach.

The *Import Department* handles orders for books, serials, and periodicals from all other (i.e., non-German-language) European countries, mostly for re-export to our customers in North America and Australia.

The *Bibliography Room* is equipped with all important bibliographical tools, supporting the work of all other departments that turn to our specialists for help in matters of bibliographical control and identification.

The *Music Department*, as its name implies, supplies scores from all parts of Europe to our overseas customers, and offers a comprehensive and well-received approval program for music scores.

The *LC Department* is responsible for the National Program for Acquisition and Cataloging of the Library of Congress and for related activities.

In addition, there are departments handling technical procedures such as billing, packing, and shipping.

In all, the firm now employs approximately 250 persons. Of these, some 175 work for the Export Department, providing foreign libraries, most of them overseas, with research materials. We have had many American, Australian, British, and Canadian employees, and have appreciated this personal liaison, which could almost be described as a cultural exchange. Most of these employees had already studied German in their home universities before coming to us, and some of them had even earned their first degrees in librarianship. They have been able to improve their knowledge of German while obtaining valuable professional experience here.

An executive must always think of the future, and this, in my case, means the continuing of the firm. To this end, both of my sons have already joined our staff. I considered it essential for them to gain first-hand experience of the requirements of American university libraries. One of them has worked in the Sterling Library at Yale, and the other in the Widener Library at Harvard. I can only hope that solid foundations have been laid to guarantee the firm of Harrassowitz a second century of service to libraries all over the world.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

WILLIAM BENTINCK-SMITH has edited the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* (1946-1954) and *The Harvard Book*, which was published by the Harvard University Press in 1953; he was Assistant to the President of Harvard University (1954-1971), and is now Publication Associate in the Development Office of the University and Honorary Curator of Type Specimens and Letter Design in the Harvard College Library.

RICHARD W. DORN is a partner in the firm of Otto Harrassowitz, Buchhandlung — Verlag — Antiquariat, with headquarters in Wiesbaden, Germany.

MARCEL FRANÇON, Associate Professor of French Literature, *Emeritus*, at Harvard, has edited the works of a number of sixteenth-century French authors; his published writings also include *Notes sur l'esthétique de la femme au XVI^e siècle*, which was published by the Harvard University Press in 1939.

ELEANOR M. GARVEY, Associate Curator of Printing and Graphic Arts in the Harvard College Library, has edited several exhibition catalogues, including *The Artist & the Book*, which was published jointly by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Harvard College Library in 1961; her article on "Art Nouveau and the French Book of the Eighteen-Nineties" appeared in the autumn 1958 issue of the HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN.

PATRICK MIEHE is Curatorial Associate in the Manuscript Department of the Houghton Library at Harvard.

FRANCIS JACQUES SYPHER, JR., Assistant Professor of English at the State University of New York at Albany, is the author of a Columbia University dissertation on Swinburne's poetry and of "A History of *Harpers' Latin Dictionary*," which appeared in the HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN for October 1972.

ELEANOR M. TILTON, Professor of English at Barnard College, is the author of a biography of Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Amiable Autocrat* (1947) and the editor of T. Franklin Currier's bibliography of Holmes; her articles include "Melville's 'Rammon': A Text and Commentary," in the winter 1959 issue of the HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN.

GILLIAN WORKMAN teaches at the University of Hong Kong; she is particularly engaged in research on the controversy relating to Governor Edward John Eyre and the rebellion of 1865-66 in Jamaica.