

1. The Circumstances Surrounding the Refaiya Library Acquisition

The acquisition of the *Refaiya* and its transfer to the Leipzig University Library is the result of an interaction amongst three 19th century figures: the buyer, J.G. Wetzstein (the Prussian consul in Damascus), the Arabist H.L. Fleischer, notable for his work in Leipzig (he taught from 1836 until 1888) as well as the Saxon Secretary of Education (in 1853) J.P. Freiherr von Falkenstein. Falkenstein, was a graduate and later an honorary doctor of the University of Leipzig. As a representative of his government, Falkenstein had considerable leverage in the purchase and acquisition proceedings – and for this reason in the subsequent success of the *Refaiya* acquisition – as well as taking on the responsibility for its transfer into the possession of the University of Leipzig's library.

The bill of sale and other accompanying purchase and transport letters, and official documents are retained in the Central State Archives Dresden, as well as the University of Leipzig library. In 1788 (1188 *hijrah*) the Refaiya had been declared to a family endowment (*waqf dhurri* and *waqf ahli*), namely the manuscript library held the status of non-salable property of the Damascene family Rifāī.



Damas. Salon du consulat d'Allemagne
(Dimitri Tarazi & Fils,
Beyrouth, Damas, Jerusalem, No. 429).
By courtesy of Dr. W.-D. Lemke

The circumstances surrounding the eventual sale of the manuscript collection is a reflection of the political, economic, and socio-cultural conditions during the Ottoman rule of Damascus in the 19th century, in which the destruction, looting, and the sale of the city's once illustrious mosque and madrasa libraries were a daily occurrence. In addition to the formative Tanzimat era, destabilizing political and economic factors, which were effectual locally and nationwide, there is another visible and important reason for the downfall of the traditional knowledge and scholarly culture resulting in the depreciation of handwritten books; namely the mechanical printing press, which entered into the Arabic eastern regions in the third decade of the 19th century and there, just as before in Egypt, brought about a monumental change; notably, the rise of a new reading public and the emergence of new cultural institutions.

Shortly after its arrival in Leipzig in December of 1853, the *Refaiya* library was catalogued by H.L. Fleischer according to subject, authors, and title. The catalogue of all the Oriental manuscripts at the University of Leipzig Library's collection – including the Refaiya – was compiled in 1906 by Karl Vollers. Voller's normally brief descriptions provide numerous, notable valuable literary-historical data, which is based on a presently obsolete level of knowledge and moreover could not accommodate, with respect to the completeness and systematics, the indexing of modern library and codicological standards. Considering that the manuscripts have been sorted into the university library's thematic arrangement of Oriental manuscripts, the *Refaiya* as a historical unit is no longer distinguishable within the library's catalogue.