

An Interview with Heiko Kampa, Braille Librarian at the German Center for Accessible Reading

NLS has been exchanging library materials with libraries in other countries through the Marrakesh Treaty. One such library is DZB lesen (or in English, German Center for Accessible Reading), located in Leipzig, Germany. I exchange emails a few times a year with their braille librarian, Heiko Kampa, and I recently asked him tell us about his library and about his work.

Tell us about yourself: how long you've worked at DZB lesen, how you came to work there, and what you find most satisfying about your job.



Greetings! I was born in Leipzig. My wife Roswitha and I have two grown sons and two granddaughters. After finishing my Abitur (high school) and completing my studies, I worked at the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (German National Library) for several years. In May 1989, I stumbled upon a DZB lesen job advertisement in the newspaper and applied for the position. It's been over 30 years now, and I have been working DZB lesen for half of my life, and I've never regretted that decision!

Heiko sitting in his office
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My love for books and everything related to them has shaped my entire life. Working at DZB lesen allowed me to combine this passion with a social aspect, as I could fulfill my desire to help other people, especially those with disabilities. I find great satisfaction in my work in braille and braille music lending. This includes tasks such as collection management, research, and particularly maintaining contact with readers through our service department.

Furthermore, I am very pleased with the ongoing exchanges with other libraries with similar profiles, both in Germany and other countries. It brings me joy and significant enrichment for our readers!

Tell us about the history of your library: when it was founded, how the program changed over the years, and how it's funded etc.

The DZB lesen combines tradition and modernity. Founded on November 12, 1894, and known as the Deutsche Zentralbücherei für Blinde (German Central Library for the Blind or DZB lesen), the institution has been serving as a library for blind and visually impaired people for over 125 years, making it the oldest specialized library of its kind in Germany. Throughout its history, this non-profit organization has had to face various challenges time and time again.

The DZB lesen produces and provides access to educational, informational, and leisure reading for individuals who cannot read or use conventional printed material. It offers a diverse selection of literature for borrowing and purchasing to people with blindness, visual impairment, and reading disabilities.

To make these materials accessible, DZB lesen specializes in converting printed publications into braille and large print for texts, sheet music into braille music scores, providing tactile representations of images, and producing audio books. The center includes a sound studio, printing facility, and a book bindery.

Additionally, the center provides barrier-free information and communication to institutions, associations, and businesses.

I read that the building that DZB lesen is housed in has a special history rooted in the Jewish community in Leipzig. Tell us about that.

Since 1954, DZB lesen has been located at Gustav-Adolf-Straße 7 in Leipzig, in the building of the former Höhere Israelitische Schule (Higher Israelite School). In 1956, the audiobook library was inaugurated, and in 1963, two more sections were added.

The Higher Israelite School was founded in 1912 by Leipzig's Rabbi Dr. Ephraim Carlebach. In the same year, classes began in two provisional buildings before the current school building, which still stands today, was inaugurated in 1913.

During the thirty years of its existence (1912–1942), the Jewish private school developed into a comprehensive educational institution with varying names. In addition to the main location at Gustav-Adolf-Straße 7, the school also occupied various rented rooms in other schools in the city due to the increasing number of students. In 1935, the Jewish Realschule was given the honorary name Ephraim-Carlebach Schule.

In November 1938, all Jewish schools in Germany were closed, and Jewish children were excluded from attending public schools. According to legislation passed in December, Jewish children were allowed to receive education only at Jewish schools by Jewish teachers. In January 1939, the Jewish elementary school resumed classes in the school building at Gustav-Adolf-Straße 7 until all Jewish schools in Germany were closed again in June 1942.

What kind of services does DZB lesen provide? Do you offer any other services besides book circulation for your patrons?

The DZB lesen is not just a special library. First and foremost, it is a production center for braille books, audiobooks, magazines, reliefs, and sheet music, as well as large print and children's books. In the future, it will also produce accessible e-books. Here are the different teams and initiatives:

Da Capo — Sheet Music and Music: At DZB lesen, you can borrow and purchase braille scores, collected works, and libretti. The DaCapo team takes care of transcribing the print music into braille scores, offering advice, and providing services for professional and amateur musicians with blindness and visual impairment.

Team LOUIS — Technical Consulting: Team LOUIS, short for "Leipziger Online-Unterstützungs- und Informationsservice" (Leipzig Online Support and Information Service), provides tech support to library users. They provide personalized and comprehensive guidance on using various assistive devices that facilitate barrier-free reading in everyday life and work. This service is available via phone, email, and by letter, including braille. In-person consultations can be arranged by appointment.

Inclusive Publishing: In accordance with the Barrier-Free Accessibility Strengthening Act, the publishing industry must ensure barrier-free access to e-books, reading devices, and online shops by June 2025. DZB lesen and its partners offer assistance to the publishing industry in achieving this goal. The German Publishers and Booksellers Association (Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels) and the DZB lesen have been collaborating since October 2020, aiming to raise awareness and promote accessibility in the publishing world. Under the umbrella of the association, a think tank is being established to create ideas and a vision, implement concrete support for the industry, and work together to achieve the accessibility goal by 2025.

Promoting Reading: Reading broadens horizons and opens doors to new knowledge. Therefore, the promotion of literacy and reading plays a significant role at the DZB lesen. The center provides barrier-free media for blind, visually impaired, and reading impaired children, and actively supports schools and parents with a variety of projects to promote reading. Their inclusive children's books, as well as LEGO's braille bricks, are essential parts of this endeavor.

Chance Inclusion — Library Initiative: Libraries are for everyone. Through the cooperative initiative Chance Inclusion, public libraries offer a special service to their users with diminishing eyesight. These libraries provide basic counseling on barrier-free media and valuable guidance on the resources available from the DZB lesen. Additionally, a selection of barrier-free media from the DZB lesen is made available on-site.

Advocating for Accessibility: Breaking down barriers, conveying information and cultural offerings in a barrier-free way, and creating inclusive museums—the services provided by the DZB lesen for clients are diverse and enable barrier-free communication as the basis for inclusion. Whether it's about accessible websites, transcribing texts and music into braille, audio productions, tactile maps, or museum guides—the DZB lesen offers practical advice and fulfills requests with in-house expertise. In short, they assist customers with their projects.

What different formats of books do you offer your patrons and approximately how many books in each format does DZB lesen have? What format is most used by your patrons?

We offer the following formats:

- 19,589 Braille (for loan or purchase) — includes maps, etc.
- 7,197 Braille music (lending and sale)
- 60,653 DAISY audiobooks and 2,089 soundtracks, including audio-described movies.
- 374 Large-print books

The audiobook format is the most heavily borrowed, followed by braille, braille notes, and large print books.

How many library staff work at DZB lesen and what are their roles?

A total of eighty-eight employees work at the DZB lesen in various departments. In the Braille, Large Print, E-Book department, there are twenty colleagues, eighteen of whom are part of the publishing team. We also have the library department, printing and bookbinding sections, IT department, communication and marketing department, administration, studio, and shipping. We also have four staff in leadership positions.

What are the eligibility requirements for your service and how many patrons do you currently serve?

People who cannot use conventional print or digital works to the extent required or desired due to blindness, visual impairment, or reading and physical disabilities are eligible for our service. In 2022, we served nearly 6,000 library users.

Besides books in German, do you offer books in other languages? How has joining the Marrakesh Treaty impacted your library?

In addition to our extensive collection in German, we also have a small braille collection in Spanish, French, Latin, and Russian. These books in other languages are primarily donations from readers and other libraries in their respective countries! Our accession to the Marrakesh Treaty allows us to maintain a good connection with NLS, as well as with RNIB in London/Peterborough! We have many individuals who are interested in reading braille literature in English, and with your help, we can fulfill their book requests, including the latest literature. Our readers are immensely grateful for this opportunity!

I would also be delighted to hear if you have readers who would like to read books in the German language, so that in turn, we can also give something back!

DZB lesen is well known for its braille music collection. Tell us about how your music library develops its collection and what other materials and/or services are available from the music library.

I am delighted and deeply honored that our extensive braille music collection is already well-known in the USA! In total, we have approximately 7,000 titles in our collection, mainly consisting of braille sheet music, complemented by a substantial collection of music theory works and librettos. A significant portion of these materials is considered "old stock" and is available in printed or even braille produced by hand. However, for over twenty years, we have been producing digital braille books, including braille sheet music. These digital versions are also available upon request, and recently we have expanded our services to include sheet music in large-print format:



"A nationally unique service: The DaCapo team at DZB lesen transcribes sheet music into braille and large print for professional and amateur musicians both in Germany and abroad, with the option to have them printed."

Quoted from www.dzbleesen.de/auftraege/noten#bibliothek [↗](#).

The collection primarily focuses on classical music. Thanks to our collaboration with NLS, we have been able to supplement our lending offerings with additional titles from this genre, as well as numerous titles from the rock/pop category.

I would be equally thrilled if international musicians were interested in utilizing this sheet music service from our library!