

Jewish Archives in New York: An Overview*

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One of the most striking things about the seventeen archives under Jewish auspices in New York City,¹ is the extent to which they mirror the structure and range of the Jewish community itself.² They divide not only along the numerous lines which split Jewish society philosophically and ethnically, illustrating the kinds of institutions which serve the city's Jewish population, but also in terms of functional distinctions made by archivists.

Functionally, there are *institutional archives* (that is, repositories which care primarily for the records of their sponsoring organizations), such as the archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), Agudath Israel of America, Hadassah, the 92nd Street YM-YWHA, Congregation Shearith Israel, and Congregation Rodeph Shalom; and there are *manuscript repositories* which collect the papers of individuals and records of organizations other than their own, generally relating to a specific area of interest. These include the two large Jewish academic institutions in New York, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) and Yeshiva University, as well as such independent research institutes as the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the Leo Baeck Institute, and the Center for Holocaust Studies, Documentation and Research.

Religious and political philosophy, as well as what may be termed "sub-ethnic" differences, also divide Jewish archives. Repositories split, as does the community, along philosophical lines into Orthodox (Yeshiva, Agudath Israel, and Shearith Israel), Conservative (JTS), and Reform (Rodeph Shalom), as well as Zionist (Hadassah and the Zionist Archives and Library) and non-Zionist (Bund Archives of the Jewish Labor Movement) categories. Differences in the "old-country" origins of the various sectors of the Jewish population are also perpetuated in the historical collections. There are, for example, Sephardic archives at Shearith Israel and at the Sephardic Archives in

Brooklyn, German-Jewish repositories such as the Leo Baeck Institute and the much smaller Research Foundation for Jewish Immigration, and Eastern European collections, at YIVO and the Bund.³

At the same time, Jewish archival collections in New York City demonstrate the interrelationships between the various sectors of the community. The subject matter of the material each collects overlaps quite a bit with that of the others. While each repository has its own focus, each also holds material which might seem to relate more to another archives' specialty than its own. More importantly, collections which certainly do belong quite logically where they are, could just as logically be housed somewhere else.

The brief descriptions of the repositories which follow discuss both the unique aspects of each archives' collections, and the ways in which they contribute to the general picture of Jewish life in conjunction with all the other institutions housing original documents.

The archives of the **American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)** emphasize one of the major themes which emerge from an examination of New York's Jewish repositories: relief and rehabilitation work by American Jewry on behalf of Jews in other parts of the world. The JDC archives contain that organization's records, including minutes, correspondence, reports, financial records, photographs, and other materials which fully document the role played by the JDC since its founding in 1914 for the purpose of distributing among war-torn European Jewry funds raised from various constituencies in this country. Because of the JDC's role as a bridge between the Jews of the United States and those of other lands, the archives are a rich source of information on the history not only of American Jewry and its organizational and social priorities, but also of Jewish communities in the Soviet Union, Poland, Germany, and other areas in Europe and around the world in which the JDC was active. The JDC records also reflect the organization's attempts to rescue European Jewry from Nazi persecution, and to resettle and rehabilitate the survivors.

Unlike the JDC archives, which contain the records of their sponsoring organization exclusively, the **Yeshiva University** archives document not only the history of their parent institution, but also the Orthodox trend in Judaism of which it is a part, and much more as well. Among the areas touched upon in the Yeshiva archives, are such subjects as Jewish scholarship, Yiddish and Hebrew literature, and French and Egyptian Jewish history. One area of strength is, as in the JDC archives, the documentation of relief work for Jews overseas. Yeshiva's collections include the records of the Central Relief Committee—the Orthodox arm of the original JDC—as well as the records of the Jewish Central Orthodox Committee, Rescue Children, Inc., and the Vaad Hatzala, all of which were involved in relief and resettlement work around the time of World War II.

The Orthodox Jewish Archives of **Agudath Israel of America** is another archives that documents the history of the Orthodox wing of American Jewry. The records of the Agudah itself—and the papers of its leaders—shed light on the movement's development, its ties with Agudah groups in other countries, relations with other Jewish and non-Jewish organizations and movements, work with Jewish youth, social service and political activities, and other areas. Additional Agudah holdings include records of individual Orthodox congregations and papers of Orthodox rabbis and communal activists. Finally, a number of Agudah collections touch on Orthodox relief and rescue operations during and after the second World War, in particular the work of the Vaad Hatzala and Rescue Children, Inc.

The archives of **Hadassah**, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, include the papers of founder Henrietta Szold, as well as of the organization's subsequent presidents and other officers, and reflect the history of the largest of American Zionist movements. In addition to the papers of individuals, the records of Youth Aliyah, the Hadassah Medical Organization, and Hadassah Vocational Education attest to Hadassah's centrality in Jewish affairs and its importance in the building of the State of Israel. The Zionist Political History Collection touches on such areas as partition, refugee relief, Israel's war for independence, United States aid to Israel, Arab-Jewish re-

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lations, as well as on domestic American political issues such as civil rights.

The archives of **Congregation Shearith Israel**—The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue clearly reflect the synagogue's dual personality as the oldest Jewish congregation in North America and the country's pre-eminent Sephardic community. Founded in 1654 by the first group of Jews to arrive in New Amsterdam, Shearith Israel was the Jewish community until the early nineteenth century. Papers of the synagogue's rabbis (including Jacques J. Lyons, H. Pereira Mendes, and David De Sola Pool), officers, and other congregants, and records of congregational clubs and societies cover Shearith Israel's own history from the early days to the present time. Special mention should be made of the records of the Sisterhood, which include quite a bit of material concerning social work among Sephardic immigrants on the Lower East Side at the beginning of this century. These and other records illustrate the role Shearith Israel played as "uptown" Jews to the new, so-called "oriental" Sephardic immigrants downtown at the time the same drama was being played out in the much larger Ashkenazic community. Records of a number of Sephardic groups, including the Sephardic Refugee Committee, illustrate the synagogue's involvement in Sephardic affairs.

The **92nd Street YM-YWHA** is another major New York Jewish institution whose archives provide evidence of its centrality to Jewish life in the city. The records reach back to the founding of the men's group in 1874 and the women's association in 1903. The records of other predecessor organizations, such as the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls, which was founded in 1897 and merged with the Y in 1962, are also included. Minutes, correspondence, bulletins, and other material concerning governing bodies, officers, and various departments and programs show clearly the Y's role as a provider of needed social services to the city's Jewish community, and of high-quality cultural activity to the community as a whole.

The core of the collection of the **Center for Holocaust Studies** consists of well over 1,000 oral histories on all aspects of the Holocaust. The interviews were conducted not only with survivors, but also with American soldiers who helped liberate the concentration camps. Many of the respondents also gave the center photographs and other documents. Thus, the collections touch not only upon the Holocaust itself, but also on Jewish life in pre-war Europe, Jewish participation in the American armed forces, and the plight of displaced persons after the war.

The archival collections of the **Jewish Theological Seminary of America** reflect its centrality in American Jewish scholarship in this century. The documentation of the development of modern Jewish scholarship is, in fact, one of the strengths of the library's archival holdings. Collections include the papers of such 19th-century scholars as Moritz Steinschneider and Leopold Dukes, as well as of JTS-affiliated figures: Solomon Schechter, Boaz Cohen, Cyrus Adler, Alexander Marx, Louis Ginzburg, and others. The rise of the Conservative movement in Judaism is, of course, a major focus of the archives, but there is material concerning the Reform, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist wings as well. Other areas of concentration include Hebrew and Yiddish letters, communal affairs, and—interestingly enough, with the acquisition of the papers of Chief Rabbi Zadoc Kahn and a variety of collections of communal records—the history of the Jews of France.

The **YIVO Institute for Jewish Research** represents the Eastern European Jewish tradition of modern scholarship and study. Founded in Vilna (then Poland) in 1925, YIVO's center was shifted to New York at the onset of World War II. The largest of the repositories surveyed here, with about 1,200 collections and 10,000 linear feet of material, YIVO's strength remains the modern history of Yiddish-speaking Jewry in Eastern Europe, America, and elsewhere, though its collections are by no means limited linguistically or topically. The archives' holdings concern not only YIVO's own tradition of scholarly research, but Yiddish literature and theater, Jewish social and political movements, education, Jewish folkways, migration, and of course, the Holocaust. Following up on a theme developed for other repositories, YIVO possesses a number of collections concerning international relief and assistance in migration. Among the Institute's holdings are collections of records or papers of: the JDC itself; Joseph Rosen, head of Agro-Joint; HIAS; and Orthodox organizations such as the Ezras Torah Fund and the Vaad Haharedim, a French-Jewish rescue organization.

This mini-tour of Jewish archival institutions illustrates that there is a wide range of material of historical significance out there, and that the various institutions complement each other to a considerable degree. If YIVO is the major center for the study of Yiddish literature, JTS also has a number of collections on that subject (indeed they each have portions of the papers of N. Minkoff, the critic and editor of the monthly *Tsukunft*, as well as of the magazine itself). While the JDC archives is the primary repository for its own records, Yeshiva University has the

records of its Orthodox component, the Central Relief Committee. And so on.

Overlapping jurisdictions should not be a problem, but they do pose a challenge to Jewish archivists. Clearly, Jewish archivists in New York—and elsewhere—need to communicate and cooperate more, and to be more aware of the holdings of other repositories. This would not only help them understand their own collections better, it would help them serve researchers better as well.

Notes

1. This article is based on my experiences as a field archivist for the Historical Documents Inventory (HDI), a statewide survey of archival and manuscript repositories administered by the New York Historical Resources Center at Cornell University. Working in New York City between December 1984 and November 1986, I had the opportunity to visit many of the Jewish archives in the city. There were several, however, which did not cooperate with the project, or which were surveyed by others, and so are not discussed in this article. (The most egregious omission is the Leo Baeck Institute, a major center of research on German-speaking Jewry.)

2. Among the archives under Jewish auspices are: Agudath Israel of America; American Jewish Committee; American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee; Bund Archives of the Jewish Labor Movement; Center for Holocaust Studies, Documentation and Research; Congregation Rodeph Shalom; Congregation Shearith Israel—The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue; Hadassah Women's Zionist Organization of America; Jewish Theological Seminary of America; Leo Baeck Institute; Maimonides Medical Center; 92nd Street YM-YWHA; Research Foundation for Jewish Immigration; Sephardic Archives; Yeshiva University; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research; and the Zionist Archives and Library.

3. Mention should be made of archives not under Jewish auspices which contain a great deal of material concerning Jews. These include the Wagner Labor Archives at the Tamiment Library at New York University, a major repository of materials on labor and radical movements, in which Jews have played prominent roles, especially in New York City. (The excellent archives of the ILGWU have been closed, and their holdings seem to be headed out of the city.) The United Nations archives also contain the records of UNRRA, an agency which dealt with displaced persons following World War II.

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