

The American Jewish Historical Society as an Archival Agency*

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History of the Society

The American Jewish Historical Society was established in 1892, and is thus approaching its 100th anniversary. For many years, it was a private organization—almost like a private club—that met in the homes of its members who were primarily interested in the history of the American Jewish community.

In 1903, the Society was invited by the Jewish Theological Seminary to move into its quarters and was thus able to begin collecting original documents and other material reflecting on the history of the American Jewish community. The Society remained at the Seminary until 1960 when it obtained substantial funding as a result of a generous bequest by one of its presidents. It remained in New York in rented quarters until 1968, when it moved to its own headquarters in a building located on the campus of Brandeis University, where it resides to this day.

Scope of the Collection

The Society has in its collections approximately 8 to 10 million pages of manuscripts, about 80,000 books and pamphlets, and hundreds of thousands of periodical issues, institutional reports, etc. The Society has the largest collection of original material pertaining to the history of the American Jewish community.

In our current usage, we generally define archives and manuscripts as original documents, in most cases, handwritten, but also possibly typed. Generally, the term *manuscript* is used for papers of individuals and *archives* for the products of institutions. The terms are, however, often interchanged and really refer to the original writing or typing

of a letter, document, etc., which is the official record of an organization.

By its very nature, an archival item or manuscript can only be found in one place. It is, therefore, not possible for any institution to have all the material pertaining to its area of interest in its facility. As a general rule, we do not collect photocopies or reproductions of original documentation. Our policy has been that if we are aware that original documentation pertaining to our subject exists, recording the fact that it is available in other repositories is sufficient, and we need not preserve it in our own location.

All the collections of the American Jewish Historical Society relate in some manner to American Jewish history. Whether they are the products of institutional activity or the work of an individual—or in some cases, the collections of individuals—the person, the subject, or the institution is part of the American Jewish community. We would not normally accept in our repository any material that did not have a significant Jewish component. If it had a relatively minor element, we would, in all probability, only retain that section of the collection which had that part. The remainder of the material would probably be returned to the donor or disposed of.

Do I believe that material of Jewish interest should only be deposited in a Jewish institution rather than in a general repository or archives? That depends. I believe, as I will shortly show, that a Jewish institution is generally a more appropriate repository for various reasons; however, the quality and nature of the organization is of greater consequence than its auspices. Generally, we recommend that material of purely local interest be preserved in that community. Although the Society is a national organization, we will often accept material of a purely local nature when no local agency for its preservation is in existence.

The Jewish Element

How important is the Jewish element in archives work? In most instances, it is very important. I can illustrate the point by an event that just occurred.

A woman from a suburban community in Boston phoned to tell me that she had in her possession a letter from a famous Hasidic rabbi, Rabbi Dovid Talner, and was interested in determining what its value was. I am aware that one of the genealogical studies of the Chernoboler dynasty includes photocopies or photostats of letters of members of that Hasidic family, and I asked the woman if she had an original letter or was it merely taken from the book. She responded that she could not tell, but she was quite confident that this was an original letter because it had been left to her by her father. This woman is now in her eighties; her father had traveled widely and over the years had accumulated many unusual documents. Then she continued, "In fact, I know that somewhere over the years he had gotten something which we can no longer locate, but we are quite certain that it was still in the house and that was Rabenu Tam's tefillin." I was a little surprised and asked her if she did not mean the second pair of tefillin that many Jews, especially Hasidim, don because of the medieval controversy between Rashi and his grandson, Rabenu Tam, regarding the order of the four prayers. "No," she said, her father was a very unusual man and had found very unusual items, and somewhere in his travels, he had run across the tefillin that Rabenu Tam had actually worn! The point of the story is that for someone not knowledgeable regarding Judaism and Jewish tradition, the product of archival work may, in some instances, be almost ludicrous.

A second example of taking things at face value is a reference to a standard textbook used in the study of American Jewish history, by the well-known American Jewish historian, Henry Feingold. Entitled *Zion in America*, his is strictly a book on the history of the Jewish community in America. The title was selected to indicate that for many Jews, America became Zion, the Holy Land. A competent bibliographer listed this as a classic study of the Zionist movement in America. Thus I feel that Judaic knowledge is crucial in libraries or archives, whether one is working in a reference capacity, or even more so in a cataloging capacity.

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Cataloging Policy

When cataloging collections, either institutional or personal, the policy we follow is to describe collections in general terms. We only list or describe elements that are unique or that are not normally associated with the individual or the institution that we are working with. We also index the names of prominent non-Jews who are represented in a collection. Thus, we would automatically list any correspondence with a president of the United States, but not necessarily with the rabbi of a synagogue.

As a general rule, we work with what we call a "sophisticated reader." We assume that individuals who are just looking for general information can obtain the data that they are looking for in a public or university library. If they visit us, we are more than happy to help them, but the level of our descriptions and the arrangement of the work are geared for serious scholars who already have a very good acquaintance with the subject of interest to them.

We assume that the catalog we are preparing and the descriptions we are writing are presented from a Jewish point of view. We do not use the heading "Jews" in our catalog; every item we have, book, manuscript, pamphlet, etc. could all be entered under that term. We also do not use the subject heading *Orthodox Judaism*; we simply use the heading *Judaism*.

We have cataloged our material from an American Jewish perspective, and we assume that researchers or readers will be sufficiently acquainted with the subject so that they can share our perspective. I am confident that if the same collection were given to another institution—whether it be Jewish with other interests, or an archival agency of a secular or government body—the descriptions in their catalog would be quite different from ours.

When we get material in languages that members of the staff cannot handle, such as Russian, Polish, Old German script, etc., we contact the appropriate department in the university on our campus or in the Boston area. There has not been a single instance where the people consulted did not feel honored to examine the material and tell us what it is about; we then integrate it into our regular cataloging procedure.

Financial Support

Unfortunately, almost every Jewish archival agency suffers from financial problems. We at the Society have a healthy backlog and have had to cut back on staff. In addition, the building into which we moved not quite 20 years ago has now reached its limits, so that we will either have to cut back on accessions or find additional space. We have, in theory, instituted a policy that when archives—especially a large quantity of archives—are presented to us, the agency must provide us with funds for the cataloging of the material, but very often we are in a quandary. A collection has great value. There are many institutions that will accept the material if we don't. In many instances, therefore, we do accept archives without funds, hoping that we will eventually find the necessary means of cataloging it.

Cooperation With Other Agencies

In some areas, Jewish archives work together in an informal manner. For example, Yeshiva University Archives is now in the process of preparing a large number of guides to their collections. They send copies to us, and we retain them and utilize them fully, that is, we know where such material is found and can direct researchers. The same is true of other Jewish agencies.

We at the Society have only prepared a limited number of guides. We have cataloged over 1000 collections, but in a brief rather than a very detailed manner. We would prepare other guides, but funds are not available.

I believe the greatest area of cooperation would be if each archival institution would realize its strengths and only retain collections in those fields so that when we are presented with material related to the holdings of another agency, we would advise the donor to transfer this material to that agency or offer to do so on his behalf. It takes a lot of courage to do this because very often some available funds will not then be forthcoming and you might lose a potential gift. Otherwise, however, we wind up with a great deal of confusion which is already prevalent—that no one really knows where certain collections are found, and there is often no relation between an agency, what it does, and what it has. This is unfortunately

symptomatic of American Jewish life in general: when you come to a community you have never visited before, you do not know where to look for information and help, but once you have found out, you discover that there are three agencies duplicating each other in that same effort.

National Bibliographic Tools

There is the potential for subject access to the holdings of Jewish archives through the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN). At present, the primary bibliographic tool is the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC).

The descriptions given in NUCMC are very, very brief. All you can basically learn by consulting this tool is where the material from a certain agency or by a certain individual can be found. NUCMC provides only broad subject access, e.g., Stephen S. Wise might be identified as a Zionist. The Society has approximately 100,000 pieces of paper in its Wise Collection, which covers almost every area of human activity. Thus the bibliographic tools mentioned do not really help, especially for the sophisticated reader or the serious scholar.

I would like to conclude with a general observation. When you are doing serious research, the suggestion has been made that the best way to find out what is in a library is not to go to the computer or to the catalog, but to find the oldest librarian who is still on the staff, and preferably a librarian who has recently retired but still functions and has all his faculties. By discussing your research problem with such individuals, you will find more information than can be found in catalogs or computers. I believe the same applies to archives as well. The best source for information is the staff itself, especially individuals who have been associated with the institution for many years. I also believe that bringing together professional librarians and professional archivists to exchange information is probably the best method of coordinating our work.

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