

The Association of Jewish Libraries in its Cultural Milieu

Maxwell Whiteman
Philadelphia, PA

Postwar American Jewry: Collections Go Astray

In the years following the unsuccessful attempt to erase world Jewry, the cultural life of American Jews underwent great changes. While Jews in displaced persons camps were releasing introspective documents of the horrors they had endured in Europe, their American counterparts, not unmindful of these experiences, entered upon a course far removed from the world of the Holocaust, a word that had not yet entered the international vocabulary.

The war that decimated European Jews had economically elevated Americans. In major American cities, attractive housing programs invited Jews who still lived in their first or second areas of settlement to move away from old neighborhoods, which they no longer considered acceptable. Jewish institutions, both religious and secular, were declining and also deserting their original settlements.

The select libraries of the Orthodox synagogues founded by East Europeans had fallen into disuse as successive generations shifted their interest from classical texts to modern Hebrew. Bent on their shelves—as once their users had bent over them—folios of the Talmud were left behind. Some volumes found new homes in the seminaries—although these institutions sometimes complained that they had no need for duplicate rabbinic materials.

Archival treasures of Zionist groups, radical societies, and secular fraternities fared no better. Seminaries did not seek out any of their materials, which are crucial to understanding the social history of American Jewry. Charters of numerous institutions found their way into curio shops. The radical libraries in Yiddish and Russian ended up in waste paper mills.

In today's climate of collecting and re-examining the mid-twentieth century American Jewish past, this insensitivity to the written and printed record of Jewish ideas and deeds would be described as a national calamity. But against the background of book-burning Germany and the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction's vast undertaking, with the assistance of the United States military, to recover several hundred thousand books, manuscripts, Torah scrolls, and an extensive collection of liturgical artifacts in Europe, such wanton abandonment was ineffable.

In New York, Chaim Lieberman, formerly librarian of the Lubavitcher Hasidim, and Isaac Rivkind of the Jewish Theological Seminary, told their intimate visitors lamentable tales of books and documents overlooked, undervalued, or lost. In Richmond, in 1955 a private collection of the Daughters of the Confederacy papers that included valuable information about the organization's Jewish members was junked. In Baltimore, the old Hebrew Literature Society—its holdings consisting primarily of Yiddish materials—faded through indifference. A portion of its library found its way to Philadelphia.

And in Philadelphia, in 1953 a counterpart of the same name after sixty-five years was unable to make satisfactory arrangements for its 18,000-volume library. Its outstanding collection of Russian Judaica, as well as Yiddish, Hebrew, and German periodicals, suffered a complex fate of abandonment and distribution.

When the Philadelphia office of the *Forward* closed in 1954, its editor had trouble finding a local collector to take the only complete set of the Philadelphia edition.

The 6,000-volume Margolin collection of multilingual socialist and radical materials was removed in 1950 from the old Musical Fund Society Building as part of a cleaning operation, and sold to Maxwell Whiteman for \$25. In 1951, when Gratz College held a \$1 sale of "duplicates" and other unwanted books, one of its abandoned prizes, the High Holy Days prayerbook of 1761—America's first—went for the sum of \$1 after sitting on Gratz's for-sale racks for almost two weeks. A copy recently sold for \$20,000 at Sotheby's.

But the greatest tragedy of the period took place two years later at the former Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, now the Annenberg Institute. At that time the presidential secretary, eager to clean out the boiler room of cartons of paper that were considered a fire hazard, sent the following materials to the nearest junk shop: a portrait in oil of Sabato Morais; a folio scrapbook of Morais; a complete collection of the pamphlet and circular literature of Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel, including much material on Rebecca Gratz; approximately 160 letters of Cyrus Adler and a similar number of Judge Mayer Sulzberger, the grand bibliophile; and seven known genizah fragments, including the unique Egyptian Haggadah. (Later salvaged, the Haggadah was returned to Dropsie College, and was subsequently reproduced in facsimile by Daniel Goldschmidt and published by Mosad Bialik.) The most unfortunate outcome of this blind divestiture was the dispersal of letters of Isaac Leeser.

One can argue that these occurrences are as common in the wide world of books and manuscripts as they are in the Jewish-American setting. This is undeniable. Proof may be offered in the case of the Irving Fineman library. It consisted of novels

and poetry by him, special authors' bindings, and literature of the mid-twentieth century. Fineman taught at Bennington College in Vermont, and his library went to Bennington, along with his personal correspondence, which reveals his differences with Eli Ginzberg over the life of Henrietta Szold. The gift to Bennington was transferred to Southern Vermont College, where it was disposed of at 20 to 50 cents a volume.

Jewish booksellers faced similar patterns of indifference. But for the efforts of individual librarians and institutions, massive collections might have been scrapped or scattered to the winds.

Important Private Libraries Rescued

One instance is the remarkable tale of the library of Louis Sabbati Ullman, the first known collector of American Judaica, who began collecting in the 1840s. Ullman amassed an unusual collection, which was stored away in Albany, N.Y. There it lay dormant until it was acquired by Herman Gold, who traded from Brooklyn under the name of the Aldine Book Company. Gold, an immigrant antiquarian with a strong penchant for Americana, was a Yiddishist, an author and publisher, and an eccentric bookseller who disliked selling his books. He died virtually buried amid several tons of them. The collection was acquired by the Swann Auction Galleries auction house only after the nuggets of general Americana were plucked from the massive disarray in Gold's Brooklyn home.

Gold had managed to issue one catalogue, devoted to what he described as Americana-Judaica-Hebraica, comprising the Ullman collection and numerous supplementary items. The catalogue met with total failure. Whatever its bibliographical weaknesses, Gold's catalogue was a pioneer effort that has not been duplicated by anyone since its appearance in the early 1950s.

The Jewish material in Gold's collection was offered in bulk by Swann to the Hebrew Union College Library, in lieu of selling it at public auction. New York Jewish institutions had turned away from it. Herbert C. Zafren, HUC's Director of Libraries, acquired the Gold collection at a price that a handful of items would fetch today. Ultimately, this acquisition enabled the Cincinnati library to boast (which it does not do) the finest collection of American Judaica in the United States.

Itche Biderman's bookstore, one of the very last specializing in Yiddish, sought a successor in 1957. Biderman had a fine reputation on the Second Avenue Jewish rialto and among its literary *kibitzarnyas*. Following Biderman's death, his widow, clinging to a belief in a golden future for Yiddish, was certain that a buyer to perpetuate the prominent, well-stocked, store would quickly be found. None appeared.

But for the efforts of individual librarians and institutions, massive collections might have been scrapped or scattered to the winds.

Once more, Herbert Zafren acquired the collection of Soviet Yiddish books, sheet music published in the United States, and a mass of South and Central American Yiddica for Hebrew Union College.

The Hebrew Union College Library was not the only exception to the general apathy. The Jewish Division of the New York Public Library, during the tenure of Abraham Berger, gathered whatever it could from defunct institutions and libraries. Lawrence Marwick, of the Hebraic Section of the Library of Congress, who had a particular affinity for American Yiddish and Ladino, lent his energies to acquiring as much Judaica as he was able to.

A New Era in Jewish Booklore

In 1945, a major work on American Jewish history appeared: Hyman Grinstein's *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York*. It presaged the beginning of a new era in American Jewish historical writing.

The Jewish Book Council was formed shortly before the United States entered World War II, and by 1945 was firmly established. Twenty years after Fanny Goldstein had urged the acceptance of a

program then known as Jewish Book Week—a local Boston event that went unnoticed nationally, the Jewish Book Council turned the celebration into a significant national event. It is the one cultural activity that was unlinked to events that dominated world Jewry.

Jacob R. Marcus, who had been considering the establishment of an archives embracing all aspects of American Jewish life, finally launched the American Jewish Archives in 1947, motivated by his reaction to the European scene, his determination to introduce American Jewish history as a college subject, and his frustration with the American Jewish Historical Society for its failure to actively collect materials pertinent to the Jewish record in the United States.

Within the same year, 1946–47, a group of librarians in the New York City area organized informally as the Jewish Librarians Association to discuss problems with which their institutions had been contending for decades. Joshua Bloch of the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library, Jacob Dienstag of Yeshiva University, Alexander Marx of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and I. Edward Kiev of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion were joined by Philip Goodman of the Jewish Book Council and Isidor S. Meyer of the American Jewish Historical Society and a few others.

These men were bookmen in the great tradition. None of their talents rested on library degrees or a knowledge of technical services, although they were concerned with the peculiar problems of classification. (A special scheme for the classification of Judaica was introduced by Abraham S. Freidus, pioneer head of the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library.) This group of men, scholars, bibliographers, and acquirers planted the first seeds for the present Association of Jewish Libraries.

In retrospect, 1947 was a banner year. The Jewish Book Council formulated criteria and standards for Jewish libraries in synagogues and Jewish centers. It also issued a series of citations to libraries from Lynn, MA to Tulsa, OK (*Jewish Book Annual* vol. 7, 5709 (1948/49), pp. 112–113). The Jewish Museum proudly opened the doors to its new site on Fifth Avenue, and the American Jewish Archives made public its new undertaking.

Impact of the Tercentenary

Nothing had a greater impact on elevating interest in the American Jewish past than the 1954 Tercentenary of Jews on American soil. Celebrating 300 years of the history and growth of the Jewish community in the United States led to the publication of a series of local and national histories. Exhibitions of books, manuscripts, documents, and artifacts in local non-Jewish libraries and historical societies, as well as in synagogues and ad hoc sites, instilled a hitherto unknown historical confidence in American Jewry. The silent impact of the Holocaust—never mentioned in the celebration—was greater than any of the participants realized.

The Tercentenary gave a stimulus to a Jewish historiography that was previously nonexistent. A flow of instructional booklets on writing local histories and using research facilities appeared. It became apparent that most Jewish-sponsored libraries had amassed a wealth of Jewish books and manuscripts, in spite of areas of neglect, and that patronage of arts of Jewish interest was greater than thought.

The new awareness of available resources, and increasing sensitivity to Jewish librarianship, combined with the excitement generated by the Tercentenary to inspire the founding of local Jewish historical societies and independent archives, and to launch a movement to establish Jewish-sponsored museums on a modern basis throughout the country. Note the chronology of growth: the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association was founded in 1954, the Southern Jewish Historical Society four years later, and in 1959, the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan. Each of these infant societies courageously launched a journal of its own, on either a local or regional basis. The largest and most active of these journals was *Western States Jewish Studies*, launched in 1968. (The journal is now called *Western States Jewish History*.)

Two years after the Tercentenary, a new project was introduced on the campus of Hebrew Union College by Jacob R. Marcus. Its stated purpose was "to microfilm all Jewish newspapers and periodicals up to 1925" that had been published in the United States. The idea was first proposed by Joshua Bloch of the New York Public Library, who had previously pioneered the microfilming of the *Jewish Daily Forward* and other newspapers and periodicals. Ini-

tially managed by Maxwell Whiteman and Herbert Zafren, this project made available scarce and uncommon serials through interlibrary loan. Many newspapers were rescued from deterioration, and research was enhanced. The first catalogue of the American Jewish Periodical Center was published in 1957.

At about the same time, the National Foundation for Jewish Culture was launched. It initially funded individual research projects in creative arts and letters as well as the restoration of genizah fragments, and subsequently provided support for the Council of Archives and Research Libraries in Jewish Studies, the Association of Jewish Libraries, and the Council of American Jewish Museums.

The Museum of American Jewish History

Philadelphia, once the leader in such cultural endeavors, was laggard. A proposal had been made in 1959 by Whiteman to launch a combined museum, archives, and library of general Judaica, with emphasis on American Jewish history. The American Jewish Historical Society and the Spanish-Portuguese Congregation Mikveh Israel would have been the basis of this new venture. The proposal was rejected, however, and the Society moved from New York to the campus of Brandeis University in 1968.

In 1961 a separate proposal was made for a local Jewish archives in Philadelphia. The proposal went unheeded for a decade, until the local Federation of Jewish Agencies accepted the idea and became its major supporter.

While the debate continued over the need for and legitimacy of an archives, another debate persisted about sponsoring a museum under the auspices of Congregation Mikveh Israel. The museum was founded in the Independence Hall neighborhood, a major American historic area, and designated as the Museum of American Jewish History, an independent institution. No other museum had yet entertained the concept of graphically presenting the history of Jews in the United States.

A New American Jewish Culture

In the two decades of change and transformation following World War II, most of the synagogues with fine rabbinic libraries had disappeared from their original locations. They were rapidly replaced by modern structures and library facilities in new

neighborhoods. Whatever the differences in the practice and observance of Judaism, these synagogues shared one common factor, libraries. It was this factor that stimulated the organization of the Jewish Library Association.

Among the third, fourth, and fifth generations of Jews of East and Central European descent, there was a powerful urge to find something to believe in at a time when the nation was distraught; to save the records of their American past and to gather the voluminous Jewish publications that were appearing with greater frequency in the United States than ever before.

The new American Jewish culture nourished historical consciousness and provided the milieu and sustenance for libraries, museums, archives, and rising or revitalized organizations. The indifferent and haphazard yielded to purposefulness, formality, professionalism, and cooperation. The Jewish Librarians Association, founded in 1946, finally merged with the Jewish Library Association, which had been founded in 1962, to create the Association of Jewish Libraries in 1965, and thus Jewish librarianship entered a new era.

Maxwell Whiteman, archivist, bibliophile, and historian, is the author of twelve books on American-Jewish and general American history. He was Librarian and Lecturer at Dropsie College from 1958–1962. From 1961–1987, he served as archivist and historian at the Union League of Philadelphia. Mr. Whiteman is now retired.



**Dr. Nathan M. Kaganoff,
Librarian, American
Jewish Historical
Society and
AJL President,
1970–71.**