

## Jewish Archives in the United States: Cooperation and Coordination\*

**Nathan M. Kaganoff**

*American Jewish Historical Society  
Waltham, MA*

### Surveys and Directories

The first major historical survey of Jewish archives in the United States was made in 1957 by the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, when it sponsored a National Jewish Cultural Study which included a detailed history of Jewish libraries, archives, and general scholarship in America. The findings and recommendations of the survey were published in vol. 61 of the *American Jewish Year Book* ("National Jewish Cultural Study," 1960). The section on archives included a brief survey of the collections and other programs of three agencies: The American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS), established in 1892, The American Jewish Archives, established in 1947, and the American Jewish History Center of the Jewish Theological Seminary, which had just recently come to being. The latter institution's major purpose was to encourage the preparation of local Jewish community histories, and an effort was underway to establish a major archive which would provide the data for this research.

In addition to these three major archives, the report noted other national institutions with archival functions. Among these was the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research which, while primarily concerned with East European archives, had collected significant American Jewish material as well. Many national organizations, such as the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds and the Jewish Welfare Board, while not strictly archival agencies, had also gathered important records over the years of their existence, which would be indispensable for the study of the history of the American Jewish community, especially

in the twentieth century. The report also mentioned other agencies of a similar importance, such as the American Association for Jewish Education, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League, the Herzl Foundation, and the United HIAS Service. Brief note was also made of the importance of non-Jewish agencies, including the Library of Congress, the National Archives, The New York Public Library, and Judaica departments of many universities, all of which contained relevant material ("National Jewish Cultural Study," 1960, p. 151-153).

The cultural survey also offered recommendations for improving archival collecting and preservation. According to the authors, too much emphasis was placed by the existing institutions on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century material. In reality, they argued, twentieth-century records were probably of greater significance for the understanding of the history of the American Jewish community. Not enough material was cataloged, and many important records were being destroyed. They also saw a need for greater communication among the archival agencies, so that each would be aware of the other's programs and work. In conclusion, it was recommended that a central body be established, which would coordinate the work of the various archival institutions, develop a training program for personnel, help interpret the importance of archives for the community, work out some exchange arrangement among participating agencies, and examine the advantages of specialization in order to avoid duplication of activities.

Partly as a result of this survey, a new coordinating body was established in 1960, whose purpose was to help resolve some of the problems already noted. As a first step, it was decided to compile and publish a directory of Jewish archival institutions in the United

States. This directory, which appeared in 1975, presented the first comprehensive description of eight major Jewish archives in the United States. For each agency, the directory included its location, the names of staff members, the hours when open, and the services provided, followed by a general description of the scope of the repository, and a detailed listing of its major collections (Mason, 1975). The agencies listed are the American Jewish Archives, the American Jewish Historical Society, the Leo Baeck Institute, the Bund Archives of the Jewish Labor Movement, Dropsie University, The Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Manuscript Library, the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

This directory differs in many ways from the earlier listing in the *American Jewish Year Book*. It is not limited to repositories that contain material about the American Jewish community, but includes all major Jewish archival institutions. The directory provides only very broad descriptions of repository holdings and is therefore of limited value to serious scholars and researchers, serving primarily to make these individuals aware of the types of collections that can be found in each agency. One must not minimize the importance of this listing, however, since it represents the first major description of the archival treasures found in the American Jewish community. This directory also lists guides, both published and in-house, that were prepared by some of the agencies for their collections. Such guides are, of course, of great value to serious researchers looking for specific material.

The next archival listing appeared in the *Guide to Jewish Archives*, edited by Aryeh Segall and published by the World Council on Jewish Archives in 1981. Many of the archives described in Segall's guide are located in the United

---

\*Revised version of a paper presented at the First International Conference of Judaica and Israeli Librarians, Jerusalem, July 1990.

States. The two directories differ in one major respect. The earlier publication by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture was prepared after personal on-site visits by the editor; the latter guide seems to have relied on responses to questionnaires provided by the agencies themselves.

## The 1980s: Dramatic Growth of Jewish Archives

It can be stated without exaggeration that the last decade has witnessed more developments and greater advances in Jewish archives in America than in the previous two hundred years of Jewish life in the United States. In part, the progress was merely a reflection of advances in the overall field of archival recording and preservation. But the communal and general academic institutions containing Jewish resources made singular strides as well. Still, and perhaps because of these many advances, the Jewish archival profession faces several difficulties which have yet to be resolved.

At the latest count, there are well over a hundred Jewish local and national historical agencies, genealogical societies, and archival institutions in the United States and Canada. There is almost no state or province that does not have at least one such agency. Almost 90% have come into existence within the past decade. Many, especially the genealogical societies, can trace their founding to the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots*. The impact of that work on genealogical interest in America extended beyond the Black community, and reached the Jewish community as well. For example, fully one-fourth of the researchers at the American Jewish Historical Society are pursuing genealogical research. This interest has created greater demand for the preservation of historic documents, and has helped in the development of many institutions (*Directory of Jewish Historical Societies...*, 1988).

Although only a small percentage of these historical organizations actually possess archival collections, the general spirit of research encouraged by the societies has helped further the development of archival agencies greatly. To supplement the government documents and personal records that may often be found with families, genealogical researchers must make use of archival

repositories that collect the communal and institutional records containing the information that they are looking for. The agencies under Jewish auspices of greatest national importance include the American Jewish Historical Society, the American Jewish Archives, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the Leo Baeck Institute, Yeshiva University, and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Important local or regional repositories include the Jewish Historical Society of Maryland, the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington, the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association, the Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society (Denver), and the Western Jewish History Center of the Judah L. Magnes Museum (Berkeley).

## Recording Archival Collections

Great progress has been made during the past decade, and is still being made, in recording the collections found in many of these archives. Perhaps most notable for Jewish records is the work of the Historical Documents Inventory (HDI) which was conducted in New York State. Conducted by the New York Historical Resources Center at Cornell University, the HDI attempted to survey every archival collection found in the state. Since New York State, and especially New York City, has historically been home to the greatest concentration of American Jews, this inventory inevitably included a great deal of Jewish material. In some instances the Inventory described the material for the first time and encouraged the local agency to maintain its records in a better fashion. The collection-level descriptions provided by HDI were entered into the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN), which is maintained by the Research Libraries Group, a consortium of academic and special libraries. Thus, there is now a computerized description of many Jewish archival collections available to users of this system (Soyer, 1989).

For many years numerous Jewish archival agencies have submitted descriptions of their collections to the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC), and their holdings are included in many volumes that have appeared. Unfortunately, there are problems with NUCMC. Its publishers at the Library of Congress (1962- ) are

beholden to the agencies for the descriptions of their collections, so the descriptions are quite uneven. Also, the amount of material is so vast, and the Jewish component so small, that it is often very discouraging to use the 26 volumes that have already appeared. Indexes for these volumes appear every five years, and it is often necessary to search several index volumes to find what one is looking for.

A project to produce a new directory of *Jewish Archival Collections and Inventories* was undertaken by Steven W. Siegel and Roger S. Kohn, under the auspices of the Council on Archives and Research Libraries in Jewish Studies, of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. The original compilation of repositories extended for five pages, but I have been told that the final publication will not contain as many agencies and institutions as originally listed. This directory will not be limited to agencies under Jewish sponsorship, but will include any academic or archival institution that contains significant Jewish material.

## Coordination, Cooperation, and Competition

Special mention should be made of various cooperative efforts that have emerged in the field, which, one hopes, will help coordinate the work of the agencies and the professionals involved. The American Jewish Historical Society has launched a new publication, *Local Jewish Historical Society News*. The first issue (vol. 1, no. 1) appeared in the fall of 1987, and subsequent issues have appeared on a regular basis twice a year. Very ably edited by Dr. Jeanne Abrams of the Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society, this AJHS newsletter presents items of interest to local Jewish historical agencies, including technical articles to help them carry out their missions, and news from various local agencies.

The newsletter has been very well received and apparently provides a needed vehicle for local Jewish historical agencies and archives. The American Jewish Historical Society has also sponsored at least two programs that have brought together directors or staff of various local agencies to discuss issues of mutual interest and concern. One session at the 1988 Annual

National Conference of the Society, in Providence, RI was devoted to collection policies of local historical agencies; another session on "Mission" was held at the 1989 National Conference, held in Los Angeles. Both sessions generated quite heated discussions and extremely positive responses.

Another effort at coordination and cooperation was the establishment of a local Jewish archival network, which came into being in 1987 in the New York City area. Approximately forty institutions were represented at its meetings. Attended by professional archivists, meetings were informal, although papers on topics of general interest were presented. This group provided an opportunity for archivists working with Jewish material to exchange thoughts and views on procedures and common problems. Unfortunately, the group met for only one year and has not reconvened since then.

These accounts of success and achievement must, however, be tempered by reports of problems that persist in the Jewish archival field in the United States. There is no visible prospect of a solution to many of these problems, some of which are generated by the nature of Jewish life in America, by the competitiveness of Jewish institutions, or by the overlapping interests and programs of several institutions.

The first issue is: What is an American Jew? Many American Jews are fully integrated into American life and are, therefore, as much American as Jewish. Should the papers of the late Senator Javits of New York City be placed in a Jewish institution or in a general academic repository? A similar question might be asked regarding Senator Abraham Ribicoff or Supreme Court Justices Arthur Goldberg, Louis Brandeis, and Benjamin Cardozo. Should their papers be divided, with those items bearing on Jewish life placed in a Jewish agency, and those relating to their involvement in general American life in a government or university archive? Very often, the work of these individuals was so intertwined in both the general and Jewish communities that it would be very difficult to identify specifically what goes into which repository. In general, most archivists frown on splitting up an individual's papers and dividing them among many agencies.

This problem has other ramifications as well. The Jewish community in America is very conscientious in preserving its history, especially those elements of its history that reveal the contributions of the Jewish community to American society. Jews also have the reputation of contributing generously to educational institutions. There are, therefore, many curators eager to obtain the records or archives of prominent local American Jews who were especially active in the general community. They hope that by securing these papers their institutions will attract gifts from the Jewish community. We are aware of many instances in which a local university has expressed eagerness to acquire the papers of a prominent local rabbi. Promises are made, but in many instances the records remain inaccessible to researchers twenty, thirty, and even forty years after the material was transferred.

Larger issues of ethnicity in America also enter into the equation. The whole question of ethnic groups and their contributions to American culture is very much on the forefront of American society today. Almost every local library or historical society is now eager to collect material on the various ethnic groups that comprise the local community, including material relating to Jews. It is, therefore, very difficult to know where a specific group of records will eventually wind up. The decision is generally based on the desires of the generator of the records or his family, and their decisions are frequently quite strange. Very often, it is difficult to ascertain if the papers of a given individual have survived, or whether they have been placed in an agency that seems quite unlikely to be their host.\*

In addition to competition for material between Jewish and non-Jewish agencies, Jewish agencies compete for collections among themselves. Areas of interest for the major national Jewish

agencies with archival collections are not clearly differentiated. For example, the American Jewish Historical Society is the oldest Jewish archival agency in the United States, soon to celebrate its 100th anniversary. It happens also to be the oldest surviving ethnic historical society in America. Its main area of interest is American Jewry in the broadest sense. The collecting policy of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati is, however, not much different, nor is that of YIVO, which, though it specializes primarily in Eastern European and Yiddish material, also collects material pertaining to American Jewish history. Similarly, the Leo Baeck Institute collects material pertaining to German Jewish immigrants.

There are many other national agencies that collect material. Almost every national Jewish social welfare or defense agency has a large collection of archival records, reflecting primarily its own programs. But many of the defense agencies, such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the American Jewish Committee, and the American Jewish Congress, also accept collections from individuals. In some cases, these are active members of the organization or officers who in their private lives were involved in activities similar to those that the agency sponsors. For example, ADL has in its archives a very interesting collection relating to Jewish communal work and Black/Jewish relations in Florida, which was compiled by a very active political figure in Miami who happened to be a member of ADL. Similarly, a very unusual collection of antisemitic material was gathered by a member and later presented to the same agency. It is possible that the staff of that agency is aware of these collections. It is doubtful, however, that anyone at ADL is fully aware of the contents of these collections, since they have never been adequately described or cataloged. It is certainly true that few people outside of that agency have any idea of what these collections contain.

I was once invited to examine a very large collection of antisemitica presented to a defense agency by a collector. This collection contains complete runs of notorious antisemitic publications, which may not be found in any library. The latest and most detailed annotated bibliography on American antisemitica, prepared by Robert Singerman (1982),

---

\*Some examples are the *Papers of Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein, of Rochester, NY, which have been deposited at the University of Rochester, and the Records of the National Council of Jewish Women, Pittsburgh Section, which have been deposited in the Archives of Industrial Society, at the University of Pittsburgh.*

does not note the existence of these items in any one library.

### Archives Face the Scarcity of Space and Funds

One additional element should be noted. Every president or director of a Jewish agency in America would like to add a certain amount of luster to his administration. Archives are now in vogue, as are records of agencies, and the addition of an archival component or attracting archival collections from individuals – which are often accompanied by extensive donations – adds to an agency's reputation. Archival collecting comes with problems as well. Almost all communal or national Jewish organizations in America are run by lay leadership. Very rarely does this leadership fully appreciate the problems involved or the resources required in maintaining a repository in an efficient and professional manner.

Most of these national agencies are located in New York, in quarters that have become very crowded. Since space in New York City is very expensive, it would be better if records that are not used on a daily basis were removed to other locations. Jewish archival repositories are also running out of space, however. It is very simple to transfer boxes of records, but if they are not cataloged or placed in some form whereby they are retrievable, these records have no value whatsoever. The archival repositories have no funds to process this material. The agencies generating the material often do not realize that, in addition to transferring records, funds must be provided to fully catalog this material and make it usable.

Eventually, the Jewish community will have to pay the bill for maintaining these records, but at the moment the cost and responsibility are being shifted from one agency to another, and nothing is actually accomplished. The generating

agency transfers the material in order to relieve its space problems and maintenance costs. The archival repositories frequently accept material without adequate staff to care for it properly. Very often, this material is placed in boxes and removed from the generating agency to the archival repository, but is not unpacked for years. (One hopes that these records will not eventually suffer the tragedies of their compatriots of generations before, where a new executive officer in an agency decided to discard its records without any attempt at their preservation.) Eventually, space will have to be provided and staff hired to catalog the material.

Most of the cost will ultimately be borne by the Jewish community, but at the moment nothing is being done on a regular basis to either gather the material or, more importantly, to make it available. Government agencies might also be persuaded to provide funds to catalog the material; there have been instances of such generosity in the past. The quantity of material being generated, and the resulting amount of work that needs to be done, are so overwhelming that it is now beyond the ability of the American Jewish community to provide sufficient funds for this purpose.

In sum, during the last decade we have seen tremendous growth in the number of Jewish archival and historical agencies. There have been many attempts at cooperation, and certainly these should not be denigrated. At the same time there are still no adequately defined criteria for deciding when an American Jew is American or Jewish, and where his or her papers belong. Competition between Jewish and non-Jewish agencies, and among Jewish agencies themselves, also remains a problem, as does the provision of sufficient funding to carry out the necessary work of historical preservation.

### References

*Directory of Jewish Historical Societies and Related Agencies of North America.* Waltham, MA: American Jewish Historical Society, 1988.

Library of Congress. *The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections.* Ann Arbor, MI: 1962- (vol. 1: 1959-1961).

*Local Jewish Historical Society News.* Vol. 1, no. 1- (Fall 1987- ). Waltham, MA: American Jewish Historical Society.

Mason, Philip P., ed. *Directory of Jewish Archival Institutions.* Detroit: National Foundation for Jewish Culture, 1975.

"National Jewish Cultural Study," *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 61 (1960), p. 149-164.

Segall, Aryeh. *Guide to Jewish Archives.* Jerusalem: World Council on Jewish Archives, 1981.

Singerman, Robert. *Antisemitic Propaganda: An Annotated Bibliography and Research Guide.* New York: Garland, 1982.

Soyer, Daniel. Correspondence with the author, July 17, 1989. New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

---

*Dr. Nathan M. Kaganoff, President of the Association of Jewish Libraries, 1970-71, and for many years the Librarian of the American Jewish Historical Society, passed away on February 4, 1992. His manuscript was edited for publication by Daniel Soyer, an archivist and Ph.D. candidate in American history at New York University, specializing in Jewish immigration to the United States.*