

**Book Review: Jason Lustig, *A Time to Gather: Archives and the Control of Jewish Culture*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. ix, 265 p. ISBN: 9780197563526**

**Amalia S. Levi**

Archives are not merely collections of materials, nor are they simply the buildings that house them, but are also the multiple people and communities that coalesce around them at the conceptual and the material level at different points along the records continuum (Evans et al. 2017). Archival records gain new meaning as creators, users, and archivists leave fingerprints with each new “interaction, intervention, interrogation, and interpretation” (Ketelaar 2001). Such processes, often invisible, entail power relationships and result in silences (Trouillot 1995). To understand how these practices affect historical knowledge, historians and archivists have reconceptualized archives as subjects of study, rather than simply as repositories of information (Nesmith 2015).

Part of the Oxford Series on History and Archives, Jason Lustig’s *A Time to Gather: Archives and the Control of Jewish Culture* reflects this trend and centers Jewish archives as the analytical lens for understanding the multiple activities that shape what we know about the Jewish past. Through a close reading of available records, Lustig sheds light on the actors, processes, and struggles that made Jewish archives a quintessentially twentieth-century battleground, resulting in the recombination, relocation, and reorganization of fragmented Jewish materials based on visions of “total archives.” He explores how those struggles reflected the ways in which concepts of Jewish identity, authenticity, and ownership were debated and negotiated because of—and despite—destruction, genocide, shifting borders, and changing perceptions of belonging.

The book’s emphasis is on the notion of total archives, exemplified by monumental Jewish repositories that embodied the tension between center and periphery, the geographical dispersion of material, the aspirations of the actors involved, and the ramifications of such processes for Jewish history. Those repositories are the Gesamtarchiv der deutschen Juden in Berlin, the Jewish Historical General Archives in Jerusalem, and the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. Other initiatives are also discussed.

The introduction lays out the case for the book’s premise, that the seemingly innocent and mundane process of creating archives reflects struggles for cultural hegemony—and the telling of the past—among “Israel’s claims to be a successor to European Jewry, the reality of American Jewry’s rising prominence, and the question of the viability of Jewish life in Germany after 1945” (2). Lustig provides an overview of archive-making in Jewish history stretching from *genizot* to communal record-keeping to documenting citizenship to nationalist historical memory. He argues that Jewish archives are community archives meant to serve as sites of Jewish memory

when memory is the only thing left of destroyed communities. He also offers an extensive description of the “archival turn,” i.e., the shift from a belief in archives’ objectivity to “an appreciation of archives’ constructed nature” (16).

Chapter one tells the story of the *Gesamtarchiv der deutschen Juden* in Berlin, conceived in 1903 as a total, comprehensive archives of “all” material from “all” German Jewish communities. Lustig discusses the *Gesamtarchiv* as a product of its time, reflecting a nationalistic understanding of archives as a centralized, standardized, and consistent repository of Jewish culture based on the latest modern, “scientific” archival methods (23), in line with the holistic approaches of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars to studying Jewish history. The *Gesamtarchiv* was born at a time when historic violent circumstances—unforeseen but foretold—and the involvement of new actors resulted in oppositional and centrifugal forces that made aspirational dreams of “centrality” difficult to achieve. The *Gesamtarchiv* was not created organically based on an existing collection but was the outcome of a programmatic collecting strategy that sought to conceive a constructed community of German Jewry, against a backdrop of contradictory approaches existing “along the spectrum of comprehensiveness, inclusive togetherness, and coercive totality” (28). Based on evolving, and often contentious, trends in fin-de-siècle archival practices and theories that regarded archives as an organic and complete reflection of the activities of a group or organization (34), this totality ended up as a liability when it became a tool for the destruction of Jewish life in the hands of the Nazi authorities. Created as a separate institution to emphasize the integration of Jews into German society and history, the *Gesamtarchiv* was ironically co-opted by the Nazis and dissolved in 1943 by the Gestapo, its files confiscated and carried off to the *Geheimes Staatsarchiv* in Berlin. Ultimately, the *Gesamtarchiv*’s misguided goal of providing a complete and accurate picture of the past became a self-fulfilling prophecy of “archiving” German Jewry.

The *Gesamtarchiv* gave birth to a network of influential Jewish archivists and scholars, who would emigrate and export the model of the total archive to new contexts. In chapter two, Lustig examines how in 1947 this model was adapted to the “cultural Zionist vision” (55) to produce the Jewish Historical General Archives (JHGA) in Jerusalem, reorganized in 1969 as the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP). Through the rhetoric of “ingathering of the exiles of the past,” the JHGA aimed to solidify the vision of Israel as the authentic successor to European Jewry and steward of Jewish culture and history and to signify its “centrality as a Jewish state, as opposed to just a state for the Jews” (53). By 1957, in the context of postwar reconstruction and restitution, and through combined collecting efforts, negotiations, inventorying, or microfilming, the JHGA boasted over eight hundred Central European archives, among them more than a third of the *Gesamtarchiv*’s prewar collections and files from hundreds of communities that were never part of the *Gesamtarchiv* (64, 79). Promoting the ability of the new state to safeguard material and its archivists’ professionalism, the aim was to establish a total archive and promote the role of Palestine as a center for the dissemination of a new Jewish culture (55). In the end, the CAHJP building was never constructed due to budgetary and political complications (81).

The CAHJP in Jerusalem was not the only institution with ambitions to redefine the world of Jewish culture through total archives. In Cincinnati, also known as the “Jerusalem of Ohio,” Jacob Rader Marcus established the American Jewish Archives at the Hebrew Union College, aiming to shift the center of gravity for the study of Jewish culture by centering American Jewry’s “hemispheric hegemony” (86)—not only in North America, but also in the Caribbean and Latin America. Where Israelis emphasized Jerusalem as the site for the “in-gathering” of the Jews and their original records, Marcus celebrated the diaspora and exalted the virtue of dispersion as the secret to the survival of Jews across time and space. He was not interested in the cult of original documents, but in the information contained within them. He invested in a photoduplication laboratory and pushed aggressively for a total archive made of decentralized, networked archival centers across America, housing photocopies of material (92). He did not wish to dwell on a now-destroyed European past, but to focus instead on American Jews, whom he saw as the future, and the greatest Jewry. His tendency was to copy and collect anything he could and the lack of a coherent collecting policy resulted in an often idiosyncratic “archive of information,” which privileged the needs of historians for information over their wish to view original documents (103). Ironically, by the 1980s, the duplicates he had amassed were themselves deteriorating due to lack of space and disrepair (107). Preservation concerns and debates about the value of originals vs. copies “prefigured debates about digitization” (115). Lustig expands upon these debates further in chapter five, where he assesses how contradictions inherent in total archives, such as provenance, archival ownership, access, and the very nature of collections, are carried over, and magnified, in the digital realm.

Chapter four discusses several case studies of Jewish archives in postwar Germany—including the archives of Worms, or “the little Jerusalem of the West,” and the archives of Hamburg—and examines visions for a new central archives. Through these case studies, Lustig evaluates the difficulty of applying the principle of provenance for materials of communities that had been destroyed, the subtleties of representativeness of collections, particularly of copies, and the complications arising from restitution efforts. Against the backdrop of a postwar Europe, German Jewish archives were seen as tools for authenticating and legitimizing by both the Germans and the Israelis. For the Germans, extant archives of Jewish communities defined the nature and possibilities of Jewish life in Germany after the Holocaust. In the Israeli context, acquiring those collections meant reinforcing historical connections between the documents and the newly established Jewish state, severing local German ties, and remaking Jewish diasporic history according to a “Palestinocentric telos,” thus discounting the possibility of a future Jewish life in Germany (133). Lustig sees the eventual restitution of the Worms archives to the JHGA in Jerusalem, the partial transfer of the Hamburg archives to JHGA, and the failure to create a new central Jewish archives in Germany as a reflection of the dominance of the Israelis in the struggle for the control of the Jewish past (140). By the 1980s, priorities had shifted: Jewish life in Germany was slowly taking root again, and the German government promoted the development of Jewish institutions there rather than abroad (142).

In the fifth and final chapter, Lustig explores how digitization intensified the desire for total archives and the impulse to collect, while at the same time it magnified epistemological and

ontological disputes about the meaning and locus of control of Jewish archives. The chapter focuses on three initiatives that spanned the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: the Center for Jewish History, YIVO's the Vilna Collections Project, and the various projects related to the Cairo Genizah. Those initiatives showed what is possible through digitization under the right conditions—collaboration, funding, and institutional support—and the benefits of digitization for research with previously dispersed materials. At the same time, those initiatives also made apparent “the tension between a dream of reconstructing the past and the reality that they are creating something fundamentally and entirely novel” (159), complicating the concept of provenance. Nevertheless, digitization does not mitigate issues of ephemerality, but magnifies them, because archivists now must consider digital preservation alongside other technical, legal, and institutional processes underpinning digitization. Lustig correctly points out that digitizing dispersed collections to reconstruct them based on an imaginary common provenance, such as the Cairo Genizah materials, masks their coloniality and archival history, and belies the fact that they were extracted from their communities to Western institutions (169).

Lustig's book offers a breathtaking overview of intricate processes that resulted in the creation of Jewish archives, mainly in the twentieth century. More than that, it is a story of people. To trace the processes and the actors involved, Lustig has extensively mined institutional collections. The type of collections he examined predetermined the kind of evidence he presents and the stories about archives end up being histories of “great men” with big personalities—men whose activities and struggles were deemed important and of enduring value, and thus found their way into archives and were preserved in them. Indeed, the concept of Jewish archives usually denotes congregational or organizational archives, though records of Jewish life reflect trajectories of people living precarious lives, seemingly at the margins of empires or nation-states, but practically entangled in local and global processes. Communal records have been preserved at a rate higher than that of other types of Jewish records in archives. The reason is understandable: as evidence of the interactions of a Jewish community or organization with the state, they delineate inclusion in or exclusion from the community, solidify property rights, substantiate vital records of community members, document regulations that circumscribe community life, and ultimately legitimize and authenticate both the community and its individual members. Congregational and organizational archives, though, reflect and preserve normative and elite voices. By foregrounding and elevating elite voices, Jewish archives form part of the silencing process in history (Trouillot 1995). Apart from Hannah Arendt, whose elite voice was preserved with those of the great men, thanks to her role in the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Inc., women's contributions are scarcely noted. Women in archives and libraries were relegated to auxiliary, non-leadership positions in the decades under study. It is not so much that women were not there, but that their role was devalued, and their contributions dismissed and unrecorded. We do get fleeting glimpses of female figures such as Ina Rae Levy, wife of Rabbi Theodor S. Levy, who during the West Indies expedition with Rabbi Marcus “provided ‘technical assistance’ (that is to say, she did the bulk of the actual work)” (100) and whose 1962 trip had to be funded by her parents so that she could accompany Marcus and Levy for their expedition in Europe (101). The silence of non-elite actors would have been a fertile area of inquiry for the author.

The evidentiary predominance of great men and the total archives initiatives described belie the concept of community archives, which Lustig uses to characterize the institutions contained in the book. As used in archival science literature, the concept of community archives implies grassroots, fiscally precarious, spontaneous, non-professionalized, volunteer-led, often inherently radical efforts by marginalized people, who see themselves absent from mainstream institutions, and who embrace social, political, and cultural activism either at the local or the communal micro-level to disrupt processes that privilege dominant understandings and representations of the past (see, for example, Gilliland et al. 2016; Flinn 2011; Caswell 2014). What the book exposes are not community archives, but rather mainstream institutions that strove to increase their geographical scope to obtain communal material that would ensure their power to control the Jewish past. These institutions were grandiose in their conception, intense in their application, and admittedly battlegrounds for the control of memory. They were large, centripetal organizations, deliberately conceived and created, carefully planned, and professionally managed since their inception—in fact professionalism was a prerequisite and a marketing tool, so to speak, for their establishment. These were not organizations that embraced activism and broad participation to collect non-elite, non-traditional materials that would reveal the multiplicity of voices and identities (Caswell 2014). In fact, the filiopietistic view of an “authoritative” Jewish past offered by such collections excluded diverse voices (Kaplan 2000). Furthermore, these total archives were not bottom-up community platforms that interrogated hegemonic narratives (Flinn 2011), but robust systems that relied on and replicated existing infrastructures and approaches to arrangement and description of records. To legitimize and validate initiatives for Jewish total archives, they imposed the *wissenschaftliche* (academic or scientific) approach of Jewish history onto Jewish archives and exalted European professional archival standards, rather than reject them, thus failing to challenge dominant Eurocentric worldviews.

The community archives concept that Lustig ascribes to his examples does not reflect the essence of the case studies in the book, which might be better understood through the lens of ethnic archiving (Wurl 2005; Daniel 2010). In fact, sometimes the use of the concept feels rather forced, when for example the author discusses how the State of Israel used the community archives model “not just against state power but also in its service,” or when the term is used anachronistically to state that “Jewish archives throughout the twentieth century illustrate community-based archives prior to their official invention” (11). The term as used in archival science literature appeared in the late 1990s and gained force in the early 2000s (see extensive discussion in Flinn 2011 and Flinn et al. 2009).

A discussion about processes behind the scenes would also have contributed to a deeper understanding of how the goal to control Jewish culture was achieved. Studying the levels of arrangement and description of materials in the institutions examined, as well as access tools used to facilitate retrieval, might have enhanced the discussion about control of the Jewish past by showing how seemingly abstract efforts for control resulted in concrete knowledge organization systems that ultimately affect what users can find and access—or not. Such an approach would have also provided the opportunity to discuss the multiple processes of silencing that result in gaps in our knowledge, or in the illusion of being able to grasp an “authentic” Jewish past.

Overall, the book is an excellent and novel contribution to the literature on Jewish archives. It provides a comprehensive overview of archives-building in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. By focusing on those who guided the creation of Jewish archives and their activities, the author reveals how they contributed to “fact” creation and to the epistemological underpinnings of knowledge production (see, for example, Stoler 2002). Lustig elucidates the dynamic nature of Jewish archives and the ways in which their creation is entangled with events and developments in Jewish history. He critically focuses on the archivists and scholars who shaped the past into history and does not shy away from describing the power such actors wielded in transforming the ways we study Jewish history.

## SOURCES

- Caswell, Michelle. 2014. “Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation.” *The Public Historian* 36 (4): 26–37. <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2014.36.4.26>.
- Daniel, Dominique. 2010. “Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience in American Archives.” *The American Archivist* 73 (1): 82–104.
- Evans, Joanne, Sue McKemmish, and Greg Rolan, 2017. “Critical Archiving and Recordkeeping Research and Practice in the Continuum.” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (June 22, 2017). <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.35>.
- Flinn, Andrew. 2011. “Archival Activism: Independent and Community-Led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions.” *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 7 (2). <https://doi.org/10.5070/D472000699>.
- Flinn, Andrew, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd. 2009. “Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream.” *Archival Science* 9 (1): 71. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-009-9105-2>.
- Gilliland, Anne J., Sue McKemmish, and Andrew J. Lau. 2016. *Research in the Archival Multiverse*. Monash University Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.26530/open\\_628143](https://doi.org/10.26530/open_628143).
- Kaplan, Elisabeth. 2000. “We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity.” *The American Archivist* 63 (1): 126–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40283823>.
- Ketelaar, Eric. 2001. “Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives.” *Archival Science* 1 (2): 131–41. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435644>.
- Nesmith, Tom. 2015. “Toward the Archival Stage in the History of Knowledge.” *Archivaria*, November, 119–45. <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13546>.

Stoler, Ann Laura. 2002. “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance.” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 87–109. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435632>.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press.

Wurl, Joel. 2005. “Ethnicity as Provenance: In Search of Values and Principles for Documenting the Immigrant Experience.” *Archival Issues* 29 (1): 65–76.