

ARCHIVES

Nashville Jewish Archives

Richard W. Marcus
Spertus College
Chicago, IL

As increasing numbers of Jewish communities discover their past, efforts are being made to collect and preserve their photographs and written records. National collecting agencies and the archival profession recognize the benefits of maintaining these records in the communities that they describe rather than bringing them to central repositories hundreds or thousands of miles away, so long as the material is properly cared for. The community has direct access to the material for a myriad of purposes, among them local histories, genealogy, and photo research.

This column will periodically run descriptions of local archival repositories and their activities. News and descriptions should be sent to Richard W. Marcus, Asher Library, Spertus College of Judaica, 618 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60605.

Richard W. Marcus is Administrator of the Chicago Jewish Archives and Director of the Norman and Helen Asher Library of Spertus College of Judaica, Chicago.

In the fall of 1977, the then-executive director of the Jewish Federation of Nashville, Martin Kraar, encouraged Annette Levy, the Federation's director of libraries, to develop a grant proposal for starting a local Jewish archives. Nashville's Jewish community of some 4,000 has a long history dating back to the 1850s but, except for a small collection of manuscripts and archives assembled by historian Fedora Frank and housed at The Temple, no previous effort had been made to systematically collect and preserve the community's records. A successful application to the National Historic Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) would provide the impetus and support necessary to a professional archives operation.

The Nashville experience is a case study of a small local effort that has pulled itself up by the bootstraps to become a functioning archives. Ms. Levy had had no prior archival experience when she submitted her proposal in June of 1978, so she found the assistance of the Tennessee State Coordinator for the NHPRC, Cleo Hughes, most helpful in putting together her application. Nevertheless, her lack of experience was evident in her submission, and it was returned by the Commission because "it sounded as if a librarian had written it." NHPRC staff recommended that Levy attend the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) Basic Archival Workshop. Her revised application, which incorporated information she acquired at the workshop, was accepted, and resulted in a one-year grant award of \$19,523 "to locate, arrange, describe, and microfilm the records of the Nashville Jewish community. . . to establish a Jewish archives which will include organizational and individual records, and which will be available to historians interested in the unique southern Jewish community of Nashville."

As part of the archival program, a lay committee, composed of representatives of local Jewish organizations, was formed to work with the archives staff. Levy stresses the importance of this committee in developing a broad base of communal support. The role of the committee was four-fold: 1) to publicize the archives and its functions; 2) to collect current organizational records; 3) to recruit volunteers; and 4) to encourage community support to replace the grant funds when they expire.

At the conclusion of the grant period, a renewal for a second year was requested but denied because of NHPRC's financial difficulties. The Board of the Jewish Federation voted to provide support, but only enough to keep the operation going with part-time staff. The full-time archivist was terminated, and was replaced by a half-time archivist. Levy is Director, the archive is accessible to patrons daily, and has accumulated some important material.

In addition to paper records, the Archives administers the Oral History Project of the Nashville Section of the National Council of Jewish Women. This project is conducting interviews with local Jewish personages who can provide insight into the history and development of the Nashville Jewish community. The Archives also administers the Jewish Federation's Holocaust Oral History Project.

Use of the material is growing. Photographs from the collections have been used for several exhibits and as illustrations in a number of publications. In May of 1983, the Federation received a grant from the Tennessee Committee for the Humanities for Levy to prepare a slide-tape presentation on the history of the Nashville Jewish community, drawing material from the Archives.

The birth and growth of the Archives of the Jewish Federation of Nashville holds several lessons for other prospective archives projects. Never begin an archival operation without at least one experienced staff person; the lack of experience can result in chaos. In the case of Nashville, the project director sought help early on and was able to apply her knowledge to her situation. The Nashville experience also points up the importance of the SAA workshops and how they fill the need for on-the-job training in situations where formal academic studies would be ineffective. A painful lesson is that granting agencies cannot be depended upon to provide more than start-up support; once this support expires, it is rarely renewed. Alternative funding sources should be lined up beforehand or the project tailored to run only for the duration of the original grant period. Strong support from dedicated laymen will ensure the commitment of the community, an essential factor in the acceptance of any project.