

Veröffentlichungen der Archivschule Marburg

Institut für Archivwissenschaft

Nr. 45

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Jüdisches Archivwesen

Beiträge zum Kolloquium aus Anlass des 100. Jahrestags der
Gründung des Gesamtarchivs der deutschen Juden

zugleich 10. Archivwissenschaftliches Kolloquium der Archivschule
Marburg, 13.-15. September 2005

The Jewish Women's Archive – Rethinking the Archive of the 21st Century

von Gail Twersky Reimer

A little over a year ago, a brief essay by Dr. Mel Scult, renowned biographer of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan and editor of Kaplan's journals, appeared in a promotional publication of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) titled *Leadership Newsletter* (Spring 2004). Dr. Scult, who as editor of the Kaplan diaries had spent considerable time in the library at the Seminary where Mordecai Kaplan taught, was asked to write about how the JTS Library had contributed to his many scholarly publications. More than likely, those who solicited the essay assumed that he would focus on the treasures he found in the Kaplan diaries – twenty five volumes – housed at the Library. But while he duly noted this important collection, Scult chose to highlight a very different collection that he accidentally came across while working on Kaplan. He recalled a day in the Library's archives spent looking at the letters of Solomon Schechter. In search of correspondence from Mordecai Kaplan, he asked for the "M" box, containing all letters to Solomon Schechter from correspondents beginning with the letter 'M'. By mistake he was given the Miscellaneous box. That box, as it turned out, contained the private papers of Solomon Schechter's wife Mathilde. And there were 13 more boxes like it. A gifted writer and translator, and a powerful intellectual force of her own, Mathilde Schechter was the founder of the Women's League for Conservative Judaism which is today 150,000 women strong. Yet when she died, her papers were "dumped into a

group of boxes, put into her husband's archive and then listed as "miscellaneous." Technically speaking, her papers were preserved. But as Scult wryly remarks in his essay, "no one ever goes into an archive and asks for the miscellaneous box." Scult's miscellaneous discovery sparked years of engaged research and writing on Mathilde and her family. The cataloguing system which filed Mathilde's papers under her husband's name and then labeled them "miscellaneous" reflects a tradition of collection development, at the Seminary and elsewhere (both inside and outside the Jewish community), which – until very recently – placed the documentation of women's lives and experiences at a low priority. Most women's records never made it into repositories at all, and too often, those that did (like Mathilde's) were rendered invisible and inaccessible.

A decade after the boxes containing Mathilde Schechter's papers were dumped into her husband's archive, two feminist activists, one European and one American, concerned with the "paucity of accessible documents pertaining to women" and the indifference of existing collecting institutions to preserving these documents, conceived a unique and grandly ambitious project. The germ of the idea originated with Hungarian born pacifist Rosika Schwimmer, who sought to preserve documentation of women's role in the peace movement by establishing a woman's archive. Inspired by Schwimmer's proposal, American historian Mary Ritter Beard immediately set to work developing a more expansive vision for a center that would collect, classify and preserve the "documentary evidence of women's thought, influence and activities." She outlined the following goals for the center:

- To make a systematic search for undeposited source materials dealing with women's lives and activities, interests and ideas, as members of society everywhere.
- To reproduce important materials, already deposited elsewhere, by means of microfilming and other modern processes.
- To become a clearing house of information with respect to the location and character of source materials on women in other libraries and institutions.
- To encourage recognition of women as co-makers of history.¹

The World Center for Women's Archives (WCWA) had its first organizational meeting on September 10, 1935. Following a second larger meeting on October 15, 1935, Beard led the enterprise as it organized, solicited funds, and began gathering papers. Two years later, the WCWA was launched to a broad public audience, with Beard as Director of Archives, on December 15, 1937. Though it lasted for only five years, folding for lack of funds, it paved the way for the creation of the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College in 1942 and the Women's Archive at Radcliffe College (later renamed the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America) in 1943. Over the past 60 years, these two women's archives have acquired and preserved thousands of individual and organizational collections and papers documenting women's lives and activities in the United States. When the rise of the women's movement in the

¹ Anne J. Lane, ed. *Mary Ritter Beard: A Sourcebook* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 210–214.

1970's turned scholarly attention to the recovery of women's historical experience, these collections provided the basis for an ever growing body of feminist historical scholarship which, in turn, fostered a more complex and holistic understanding of American history.²

As the women's history movement in the United States grew, a new generation of Jewish historians, many of whom were women, began to develop the subfield of Jewish women's history. But, like Mary Ritter Beard some fifty years earlier, they found a paucity of accessible resources to support their work. Whether they turned to Jewish repositories, to general repositories, or to women's repositories, locating source materials dealing with Jewish women's lives remained a problem, or a series of problems. One problem, identified in my opening story about the Mathilde Schechter papers at the Jewish Theological Seminary, was invisibility. Archival filing and cataloging systems often made it difficult to locate, access and recover the records of Jewish women. Women's records that found their way into Jewish archives often failed to fit within those archive's cataloguing priorities. Buried in collections catalogued under the names of their fathers or husbands and lost in boxes labeled miscellaneous, these documentary sources were virtually inaccessible. In a similar vein, Jewish women's records that found their way into women's archives were often filed without reference to their ethnicity. Buried in collections catalogued under the settlement house, activist group, social service organization or social reform

² Nancy F. Cott, *A Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard Through Her Letters* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

group to which countless Jewish women devoted their energies, these documentary sources were only slightly more accessible than Mathilde Schechter's papers.

Collecting priorities accounted for other problems – foremost among them the relative scarcity of materials documenting Jewish women's lives. Jewish archives were not especially interested in women's papers and women's archives were not particularly interested in collecting Jewish records. While some substantial collections of women's records found their way into both Jewish and women's archives, the number was relatively small. And at times single collections were dispersed among several different repositories.

Many a collection disappeared with individuals or groups who did not understand the value of their own records or plan for their long term management, just as many stories lay buried in the memories of women who, convinced of the relative unimportance of their own lives, saw no reason to create any written record.

The Jewish Women's Archive (JWA),³ founded in November 1995, grew out of the recognition that neither the historical record preserved in the U.S.' Jewish archives nor that preserved in its women's archives accurately or adequately represented the complexity of Jewish women's lives and experiences over the three centuries in which they had been making history in the United States.

By the time of its incorporation as a nonprofit educational organization, several critical decisions had been made: (1) that at least for the time being, its geographical scope would be limited to the United

³ <<http://www.jwa.org>>.

States and Canada; (2) that the focus of major collecting projects would be the 20th century; (3) that JWA would document Jewish women from all walks of life and reach out to the general public as well as to scholars.

The most critical decision, however, was yet to be made. Initially, we imagined the JWA as a more specialized Schlesinger Library, a repository of records documenting Jewish women's lives in the United States. But before long we were discussing the different circumstances in which the JWA was being created – most significant among them (1) the decentralized nature of contemporary society and its records, (2) the multiple worlds inhabited by contemporary Jewish women, and (3) emerging new technologies and their impact on how people were and, more importantly would be, accessing information in the future.

Many challenges were posed to us during the fifteen months in which we explored the feasibility of establishing a Jewish women's archive. Ultimately, they led us to fashion an entirely new kind of archive. The idea of a virtual archive was first proposed by Helen W. Samuels, a recognized leader in the archival field and, at the time, head of Special Collections at MIT and a member of JWA's newly formed academic advisory council. Samuel's proposal to decouple the plan for an archives from a plan for a building or physical repository was partially motivated by financial considerations – the extensive resources needed to build and maintain buildings, and to assemble, process and grant access to collections. But the central appeal of the vision for a virtual archive outlined by Samuels was its marshalling of new technologies to address many of the challenges that

had been posed to us over the 15 months in which we had explored the feasibility of establishing a Jewish women's archive.

Most people I talked with were excited by the prospect of establishing a Jewish women's archive. Every once in a while someone asked whether there were also plans in the works for a Jewish men's archive. But most recognized that America's Jewish archives were predominantly men's archives and that a concentrated effort to gather documentation about Jewish women's lives and make it available to a wide range of researchers was long overdue. Many of the women I spoke with also understood the political and educational value of collecting these materials. Scholars might mine this documentation to write dissertations, articles and books, while others might mine this material in search of models of Jewish women's leadership or Jewish women's organizational development.

But even as they voiced support for the vision, they raised concerns:

1. Some prominent Jewish women whose papers already had been donated to existing repositories worried that without their papers, a central Jewish Women's Archive would start out with glaring gaps.
2. Some prominent Jewish women felt strongly that their records, created in the course of their life's work or as part of their work for an institution, would lose much of their meaning were they to be dissociated from related records.
3. For similar reasons, archivists at local historical societies, particularly outside the East Coast questioned the wisdom of removing records from the locale in which they were created.

4. And, finally, archivists at the major Jewish archives and women's archives worried about competition over securing marquee materials.

The problem of gaps produced by collections which – for historical, institutional, geographical or financial reasons – were (or would be) dispersed throughout many repositories ceased to be a challenge once we located our vision for a centralized archive in virtual space rather than in physical space. A central virtue of a virtual archive is its ability to bring together dispersed collections in a single "space."

The decision to create a virtual archive also reflected a growing awareness that the inadequacies of the record notwithstanding, a wealth of collected documents by and about Jewish women did exist though few knew where to find them. Creating access to these documents, which could immediately serve the needs of scholars and educators for primary sources dealing with women's experience, quickly surfaced as a priority. Rather than building a physical house to which scholars would have to travel to peruse documents, we would become a clearing house – a database of information on the location and contents of collections of archival materials related to Jewish women in repositories across the United States and Canada. JWA would be a natural first stop for students and scholars planning new research projects, offering directions to hard to find resources. And rather than locking fragile documents in vaults and filing important records in boxes, we would create digital surrogates of this material which could be perused or downloaded at any time of day, from any location with internet access.

While at the time we were able to imagine the internet as a unique mechanism of delivery, one that could provide unprecedented access to documents, we did not imagine the degree to which the internet would be generating a new and abundant array of fragile records, digital data that often (think, for example, about e-mail) is here today and gone tomorrow. Nor at that time, were we thinking very much about what capturing this record would entail. Our decision to "go virtual" and become an "archive for the 21st century" was almost entirely focused on access and only in the most limited of ways on preservation.

While ensuring that the many records in repositories could be readily discovered and easily used became a top priority, promoting adequate documentation of Jewish women's experience in the 20th century remained a central concern. To move that agenda forward, JWA brought together a group of prominent historians, archivists, librarians and foundation directors to work out a strategy for identifying, preserving and where necessary supplementing the record of 20th century Jewish women in the U.S. and Canada.⁴ They met at Brown University for three days in June 1997 to define the landscape of 20th century Jewish women's experience, and which records needed to be collected to adequately document these experiences.

The necessity of realigning collecting priorities regarding women's records became poignantly clear when Helen Samuels reported on her

⁴ Helen Willa Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Colleges and Universities* (Metuchen, NJ and London: The Society of American Archivists and The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992).

preliminary search for Jewish Women in RLIN.⁵ Her quick examination of the first half of the entries on Jewish women revealed that 90% were testimonies of Holocaust survivors. While no one questioned the need to preserve this tragic chapter of Jewish history, all recognized the implications for future scholars and their reconstructions and interpretations of our time, if this chapter were all of Jewish women's experience that was collected and preserved.

Over the course of three days participants met in small groups, according to their areas of expertise and interest, to flesh out seven domains of inquiry: art and popular culture; community; education; family life; paid labor; politics; and religion. We all acknowledged that these categories were neither exhaustive nor definitive. Rather, they represented areas in which Jewish women are known to have participated in great numbers in the U.S. and Canada throughout the century.

We emerged from the conference with a rich blueprint for what ought to be collected and circulated a document outlining the collecting recommendations of the conference to national, regional and local archives. Evidence exists that the document, in good feminist fashion, raised consciousness that led to increased attention to women-related collecting in a number of archives. But given both politics and the often shaky finances of Jewish archival institutions (both large and small), a coordinated cooperative effort among repositories that would ensure the archival retention of a representa-

⁵ RLIN, an acronym for Research Library Information Network, is an online information system that unites catalogs of the major research and academic libraries, museums and archives in the United States.

tive documentary record of Jewish women's experience in the twentieth century may forever remain a utopian ideal.

But if the blueprint produced by the conference was over ambitious, the unique partnership between scholars, archivists and women in the larger community that was forged over the three days of the conference laid the foundation for the following decade of JWA's work to uncover material about Jewish women's lives and to make it available both to the academic world and the larger public. Important components of the first decade's work have been:

1. The design and development of JWA's "Virtual Archive,"⁶ a unique resource that provides several points of access (people, organizations, repositories, collections, resources) to information and resources on Jewish women scattered in archives and other repositories across the United States and Canada. The Virtual Archive currently contains information on close to 1700 women and 737 archival collections in 178 different archival repositories. The initial building block for the Virtual Archive was a bibliography of archival resources on American Jewish Women compiled by Phyllis Holman Weisbard of the University of Wisconsin Library.⁷ Subsequent additions have been made by graduate students hired by JWA to search specific archives to identify relevant collections and records. Project work is currently focused on refining user access to information contained in the Virtual

⁶ <<http://www.jwa.org/archive/jsp/search.jsp>>.

⁷ Phyllis Holman Weisbard, *Annotated Bibliography and Guide to Archival Resources on the History of Jewish Women in America*, <<http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/jewwom/jwmain.htm>> (March 24, 2006).

Archive, updating existing information and creating a data input interface that will be clear and user friendly enough to allow repositories to enter information about their collections into the Virtual Archive on their own.

2. The Virtual Archive sits on a content rich website which provides access to more than 1,000 documents through on-line exhibits and educational modules focused on primary sources. Some of these on-line resources have print analogues in the form of lesson plans, curricula and posters.
3. A pilot documentation project which engaged hundreds of Jewish women as active partners in the collection of materials and resources which document their own experiences and those of other women in their community. Oral history interviews conducted with some 90 women in three major American cities have been transcribed, indexed, deposited in local repositories and will soon be available on-line. These interviews have also generated a range of local programs and well attended exhibitions focused on Jewish women's historical experience.
4. The placement of several unique and important collections in major archives. The Jewish Women's Archive has worked with a number of individuals to identify the most appropriate archives for their significant personal papers. In her consultation with JWA, author and psychotherapist Kim Chernin, whose work has focused on eating disorders, Jewish identity, memory and storytelling, and women's sexuality, decided that the best venue for her papers was among the strong Second Wave Feminism collection held by Harvard University's Schlesinger Library. Similarly,

Orthodox Jewish feminist pioneer Blu Greenberg, who felt uncomfortable with the idea of placing her papers in an archive identified with any particular Jewish denomination, decided she wanted her work placed in the context of modern American feminism and also chose the Schlesinger Library as the best setting for her records. Philip Angel's great grandmother, Hannah Greenebaum Solomon, had been the chief founder and first president of the National Council of Jewish Women in 1893. Some years ago, Angel had donated the bulk of his great grandmother's papers to the Library of Congress. He had, however, held onto an extensive cross-generational correspondence between his great grandmother, grandmother and mother. Concerned about what would become of these papers, Angel contacted JWA when he saw the JWA's Woman of Valor poster that featured his grandmother. JWA's historian connected Angel with two different archives, one that would preserve these papers in an American women's history context and one that would preserve them in an American Jewish history context. After extensive discussions with the two archives and continuing consultation with JWA, Angel decided that the best home for the papers of his maternal relatives was where they would be accessed by American Jewish historians at the American Jewish Archives.

5. The digitization of *The American Jewess*, a monthly periodical which appeared between 1895 and 1899. The digital reproduction of the full run of this important magazine founded and edited by Rosa Sonnenschein was assembled from the collections of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Klau Li-

brary, Brandeis University Libraries, the Library of Congress, and the Jewish Women's Archive. Given the general limited access that most students have to nineteenth-century American Jewish primary sources and the very small number of resources that contain any written expression by nineteenth-century American Jewish women, the availability of the full text of *The American Jewess* in one place grants unprecedented access to a rich source on nineteenth-century Jewish women to a broad audience. Collaboration with the University of Michigan's Digital Library made it possible for the American Jewess content to be hosted on a site that offers the most up-to-date functionality for affording searchable access to a many-paged text like the American Jewess. Thus, JWA is able to take advantage of an on-line technology that it would make little sense for us to have developed for ourselves. Because of this collaboration, *The American Jewess*, in addition to being accessible directly from the JWA website, is also included within a broad digitized collection of nineteenth-century periodicals. Inclusion among the University of Michigan's Making of America collection of digitized texts and periodicals means that *The American Jewess* is now available to a scholarly audience that is much broader than those that would come to the JWA site in search of American Jewish women's history.

6. A new on-line exhibit exploring the reciprocal relationship between Jewish women's history and the Second Wave of American feminism dating from the late 1960's-1970's. The exhibit, which features artifacts drawn from the personal collections of 74 activists who participated in the movement, represents a sig-

nificant stage in the evolution of JWA as a *virtual* archive. It marks the start of our gathering of (digitized) artifacts and stories from the people who were at the epicenter of this important chapter in Jewish women's history. Objects include historic photographs, art photographs, and images of artwork; newspaper and magazine articles; historic magazine covers; programs, flyers, and brochures from historic conferences and seminars; political posters; letters; audio of lectures and radio news reports; video clips from documentaries; historic film footage; excerpts from books, and book jackets; an original cartoon; t-shirts; and the outfit one woman wore to her gubernatorial inauguration!

As the next step, we plan to enable site visitors to post their own objects and stories about the feminist movement.⁸ Thus, we will begin to transform our Archive into a more interactive tool that will catalyze the recording and exchange of new information, of important stories and histories that might otherwise be lost to us all. Our long-term goal is to engage not just those involved in the feminist movement, but a broad public as active partners in the collection of materials and resources that document their experiences as well as those of their sisters, mothers, grandmothers, neighbors, colleagues, and friends.

As our two most recent projects suggest, JWA is beginning to think more expansively about virtual collections and virtual collecting.

⁸ For a discussion of online collecting see Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 160-165.

We have taken our first steps in the creation of collections of surrogates of privately owned, undeposited materials, materials that reside in people's attics and basements, file cabinets and desk drawers. In our times, individuals who are collectors of their own documents and memorabilia are less likely to give up personal artifacts to a physical space for collecting. And individuals who are not collectors have little sense of the interesting and significant documents and memorabilia they have thrown into boxes or stashed away in drawers. Given the opportunity to build the historical record without relinquishing these documents, collectors are likely to let their material be photographed and preserved digitally for use by current and future generations; and with adequate assistance non-collectors can be encouraged to recognize how they too are likely to have something to contribute to the historical record and to future understanding of Jewish women's lives and experience. These sorts of virtual collections would expand the universe of immediately accessible primary sources while buying historians and archivists' time to determine which of this material or collections should be preserved in more traditional forms.

In thinking about virtual collecting, we have also begun to think beyond the translation of paper documents into digital ones. A crucial challenge for all of us is the preservation of documents and data that originate in digital form. Fifty years from now, a scholar researching almost any aspect of the American Jewish community in the first decade of the twenty first century will want to have access to the plethora of today's websites, on-line discussion groups, blogs, e-letters and e-mails.

From its inception, the Jewish Women's Archive has been pushing the boundaries of archival practice. In building our archive on the internet, our intention was to open the gates to archival material related to Jewish women to all who wished to see them, be they curious students or certified scholars. Access would be available to all, at all times of day. As we sought to expand the all too small universe of users of archives, we also had as our mission to expand the universe of who and, in turn, what, was considered archivally important and "worth" collecting. In our first decade, this part of our mission was mostly pursued off-line, through community based oral history projects and an assortment of public programs focused on the lives and achievements of contemporary Jewish women activists. In the coming decade, it will substantially define our work on-line, as we give anyone with access to the internet the opportunity to contribute to a variety of on-line collections documenting the experiences of Jewish women in North America. These collection efforts are not without their challenges, technical as well as legal and ethical. I look forward to reporting on how JWA meets these challenges at a future symposium dedicated to Jewish Archives across the globe.