

# SECURING OUR INHERITANCE

*The Fate and State of  
Jewish Documentary  
Heritage in Europe*



DAVID E FISHMAN



## **SECURING OUR INHERITANCE:** THE FATE AND STATE OF JEWISH DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE IN EUROPE

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**Inaugural Lecture of Yerusha: Jewish Archives in Europe**  
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Yerusha is an initiative of the Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe to virtually unite Jewish documentary heritage from across Europe. Literally translated as inheritance, Yerusha aims to restore these key touchstones of European Jewish historical identity to coherence and to unity. The project is built upon archival collection descriptions, which will be brought together onto a single, searchable online platform hosted by the National Library of Israel.

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## FOREWORD

Archives are a gift from one generation to another; a treasure trove of documents, revealing the complexity and challenges of people's lives. Creating an archive demonstrates foresight and confidence – a vision that the papers of a popular writer, a significant politician or a major community will be important for scholars and researchers in the future. European Jewish archives – both those created and managed by Jewish communities and the State Archives containing records about Jews – are pivotal to understanding the social, economic and political lives of Jews across Europe.

However, access to these archives is hampered by factors including a lack of visibility, inadequate cataloguing, poor storage conditions and scant information about their location. Further, as Professor David E Fishman highlights in his erudite paper, vast amounts of Jewish documentary legacy were destroyed during World War 2, much of it in planned, intentional operations. As he poignantly notes,

'The fate of the surviving archival collections after the War varied. Many of them suffered further travails: the Jewish archives that eluded the Germans, and remained in situ – typically the records of smaller communities – were now ownerless and heirless. Most such archives were destroyed or discarded by local authorities or inhabitants after the War. In some cases, archival documents were stolen from the abandoned building of a Jewish institution, and their pages were used as wrapping paper or heating material.'

Thus the imperative to locate, identify and record remaining Jewish archival material is clear, and therefore I am very pleased that the Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe has initiated, and continues to lead Yerusha, a project

that will describe all archival collections in a consistent format and create an easily searchable web-portal that will provide a single, searchable reference point for all these descriptions. Yerusha does not only focus on specifically Jewish collections, but it is also interested in any groups of records holding Jewish-related materials. To date, Yerusha is funding 16 projects involving over 100 researchers, working in close to 350 archival repositories and libraries, in 13 countries.

I would like to thank and acknowledge the hard work of Ms Robin Nobel, who conceived the Yerusha project, and Dr Gábor Kádár, the Director of Yerusha, who has brought it to life.

Further, I am particularly delighted that Yerusha will become integrated into the National Library of Israel via the Israel Archive Network. Yad Hanadiv, the philanthropic arm of the Rothschild family in Israel, in cooperation with the Government of Israel, has made a commitment to assist in the construction of a new National Library of Israel. The Library will have the responsibility of nothing less than preserving and illuminating the history of Jewish civilisation. It cannot rely solely on books – archival material is the perfect complement, and the work of Yerusha will only enhance and enrich the Library's collection.



Lord Rothschild

## SECURING OUR INHERITANCE: THE FATE AND STATE OF JEWISH DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE IN EUROPE

DAVID E FISHMAN

It is an honour and a pleasure to launch 'Yerusha: Jewish Archives in Europe'. The goal of the Yerusha project is to describe archival collections related to Jewish history and culture in Europe, and publish the descriptions on an easily searchable web-portal. This portal is now live ([www.yerusha.eu](http://www.yerusha.eu)), and is rapidly becoming the main hub for information on Europe's Jewish archival heritage. In these remarks, Yerusha (Hebrew for 'inheritance') will be placed into its historical context, reflecting on the fate and the current condition of Jewish archives in Europe. By doing so, the importance and significance of this project to Jewish scholarship should be self-evident.

Europe was the demographic, cultural and religious centre of world Jewry for close to a millennium. Seen from a broad historical perspective, today's main Jewish centres, the State of Israel and the United States, are new, young offshoots that were largely built by immigrants from Europe.

But, ironically, the available documentary legacy of European Jewry (its records, papers, manuscripts) is not commensurate – in terms of absolute volume – with its historical significance. We have access to many more documents about the history of the Jews in Israel and the United States than we do about, for instance, France or Ukraine. The field of European Jewish history is vast, but the source-base for that history is fragmentary and scattered. Any modern scholar of Jewish history can tell you about topics he or she has studied, where the most important primary sources are missing, ‘lost’, and the subject must be reconstructed based on secondary records, or printed materials.

*The field of European Jewish history is vast, but the source-base for that history is fragmentary and scattered*

To cite just one example: There are several first-rate books on the history of the Zionist movement in Tsarist Russia and inter-War Poland. These countries were, in terms of the number of shekel-paying members, and the number of immigrants to Palestine/the Land of Israel, the most significant centres of Zionism in the diaspora before the Holocaust. However, only fragments of the records of the Russian and Polish Zionist organizations are in existence. Yosef Goldshtein, Ezra Mendelsohn and others did remarkable work based on very meagre archival resources.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Yosef Goldshtein, *Bein tziyonut medinit le-tziyonut ma'asit: Ha-tenu'ah ha-tziyonit be-rusiyah be-reshita* [Between Political Zionism and Practical Zionism: the Zionist Movement in Russia in Its Early Years (Hebrew)], Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1991; Ezra Mendelsohn, *Zionism in Poland: The Formative Years: 1915–1926*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1981.



*Reading room of the Yiddish Scientific Institute – YIVO, in Vilna, Poland. Seated in the front row from the right: Moyshe Lerer, a staff member of the YIVO archives, and Zelig Kalmanovitch, a scholar and co-director of YIVO. Both perished in Nazi labor camps.*

*Courtesy of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York*

There are many reasons for this problem, but two are particularly noteworthy:

First, Jews were rather late in developing an archival culture, an awareness of the importance of collecting and maintaining documents and records. While Jews traditionally revered the book, they did not revere correspondence or administrative records. There is a basic distinction between books and archives. Books are typically published in hundreds or thousands of copies. On the other hand, archival documents – correspondence, memoranda, administrative and financial records – are usually produced in a single unique copy, or in a very limited number of copies. When an archival document is disposed of as trash or destroyed, its contents are lost to scholarship forever.

Unlike kingdoms and modern states, Jews had no mechanism to require the mandatory accumulation and preservation of documents. The fathers of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Zunz, Frankel, Graetz) investigated mainly rabbinic literature and intellectual history, and exhibited no

interest in archives. The 1904 *Jewish Encyclopedia* did not even have an entry under ‘archives’.<sup>2</sup>

Creating Jewish archives required historical consciousness, commitment, and resources on the part of communal leaders. The first major archive under Jewish auspices, the Gesamtarchiv der deutschen Juden, was established in 1905, and the archive of the Yiddish Scientific Institute - YIVO, dedicated to the Jews of Eastern Europe, was founded in 1925.<sup>3</sup> But by those late dates, much Jewish documentation was already lost because it had not been collected or preserved.

The second and larger reason for the paucity of documentation on European Jewish life is the devastation wrought by the Second World War and the Holocaust. Much of the Jewish documentary legacy was destroyed in the natural course of the War – in bombardments, demolitions of buildings, and fires – especially on the Eastern Front. And much of it was destroyed in planned, intentional operations. The Germans systematically annihilated not only most of Europe’s Jews, but also, along with them, most of the Jews’ documentary legacy.

<sup>2</sup> Instead, the encyclopedia referred the reader to the entries ‘Memorbuch’ and ‘Pinkas’.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Welker, ‘Das Gesamtarchiv der deutschen Juden – Zentralisierungsbemühungen in Einem Föderalen Staat’, in *Jüdisches Archivwesen*, ed. Frank M. Bischoff and Peter Honigmann, Marburg, 2007, pp. 39–73, and Tobias Metzler, ‘Collecting Community: the Berlin Jewish Museum as Narrator Between Past and Present, 1906–1939’ in *Visualizing and Exhibiting Jewish Space and History* (Studies in Contemporary Jewry vol. 26), edited by Richard I. Cohen, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 55–79; Marek Web, ‘Tsu der geshikhthe funem yivo-arkhiv’, *YIVO-bleter*, vol. 46 (1980), pp. 168–191; Cecile Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, passim.

## I. EINSATZSTAB REICHSLEITER ROSENBERG (ERR) AND THE DESTRUCTION OF JEWISH ARCHIVES

The Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg is well-known as the major German agency charged with looting Jewish books, manuscripts, and documentation all across Europe. Less known is the fact that it defined its mission as the performance of two tasks: ‘the collection of material’ and ‘the destruction of material’.<sup>4</sup>



A 1943 map showing the geographic extension of the ERR's robbery

Credit: Yad Vashem, Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives

The ERR collected the holdings of Jewish institutions in Amsterdam and Paris, Salonika and Rome, Vilna and Minsk, and forwarded them to the Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage (Institute for Investigation of the Jewish Question) in Frankfurt. The Institute’s library and archive were to house ‘an arsenal of material that will serve as the

scientific foundation for the spiritual struggle against our enemies’.<sup>5</sup> The materials were to serve as research tools for Nazi Judenforschung, the budding field of antisemitic Jewish studies, whose purpose was to legitimise in scientific terms the policies of ghettoization, persecution, and ultimately extermination. The slogan of the Frankfurt Institute was ‘Judenforschung ohne Juden’ – study of the Jews without Jews. Its librarian was Dr Johannes Pohl, a Nazi party member who was fluent in Hebrew and Yiddish, and who had studied in Jerusalem between 1932 and 1934, taking courses at the Hebrew University.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> ‘Aufgabenstellung des Einsatzstab des Reichsleiter Rosenberg’, policy statement issued April 27, 1942, cited in Maria Kühn-Ludewig, *Johannes Pohl (1904–1960): Judaist und Bibliothekar im Dienste Rosenbergs*, Laurentius, Hannover, 2000, p. 184.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> See Alein Steinweis, *Studying the Jew: Scholarly Anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany*, Harvard University Press, 2006.



Yiddish poet Szymeke Kaczerginski sorting books as a slave labourer for the ERR

Courtesy of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

Whatever the ERR deemed unsuitable for the Institute, because it was not needed by Judenforschung, was to be destroyed. The agency was responsible for 'stimulating and guiding' the destruction process. Guidelines issued by the ERR Main Working Group in Riga (responsible for its work in Belorussia and the Baltic states),

were clear cut: 'Hebrew and Yiddish writings should be completely destroyed, if they do not qualify for shipment to the Frankfurt Jews' Institute'.<sup>7</sup>

In Vilna, 'the Jerusalem of Lithuania', there were three major repositories of Jewish manuscripts and documents prior to the War: YIVO – the Yiddish Scientific Institute, the Strashun Library (which belonged to the Vilna Jewish Community), and the An-ski Museum of the Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Society. The ERR established a large group of Jewish slave laborers, nick-named The Paper Brigade, to process the materials in these collections. They were forced to 'select' which materials would be sent to Germany and which would be destroyed. The Germans set a quota: no more than 30% of the materials were to be transferred to Germany, and at least 70% were to be destroyed, sent to paper mills, where they were pulped and recycled. After watching the dumping of the thousands of books and documents as trash, the head of the slave labor group, the librarian Herman Kruk, wrote in his diary: 'YIVO is dying; its mass grave is the paper mill'.<sup>8</sup>

The members of the Paper Brigade undertook to rescue select treasures from both deportation and destruction,

7 Memo by Dr. Gerhard Wunder on 'Generisches Schrifttum', Riga, May 27, 1942, Central State Archive of Supreme Bodies of Power and Government of Ukraine, (TsDAVO), f. 3676, op. 1, delo 233, pp. 276–278. On-line at <http://err.tsdavo.gov.ua/>

8 Herman Kruk, *Togbukh fun vilner geto*, New York, YIVO, 1961, p. 300.

and smuggled them out of the ERR work-site into the Vilna ghetto, where they hid them in bunkers and hiding-places.<sup>9</sup>

In other cities, ERR teams made life easier for themselves. Instead of constructing a complicated, time-consuming and costly selection system, with slave-labor and supervisory personnel, they simply destroyed the major collections of Jewish material they encountered.

Book from the library of historian Shimon Dubnov with a Nazi stamp on it

Courtesy of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York



A second agency that engaged in systematic looting and destruction of Jewish books and archives was the Reich Security Main Office, the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA), which amassed its bibliographic and archival booty in Berlin.<sup>10</sup>

The Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage accumulated 550,000 printed volumes and tens of thousands of documents by April 1943, but much of its collection of looted material did not survive the War intact. More than half of the Nazi Institute's holdings were destroyed in the allied bombing of Frankfurt on April 18, 1944. After that bombing, the Germans decided to move

their looted Judaica out of Frankfurt and placed it in castles and storage facilities in the German countryside, in Silesia, and in the Czech territories.

9 I am now working on a book-length study of this subject. For now, see 'Embers Plucked from the Fire: The Rescue of Jewish Cultural Treasures in Vilna' in David E. Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture*, Pittsburgh University Press, 2005, pp. 139–154.

10 See Dov Schidorsky, *Gevilim nisrafim ve-otiyot porhot* [The Parchment in Burnt, and the Letters Ascend], Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 2008; Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, 'Twice Plundered or "Twice Saved"? Identifying Russia's "Trophy" Archives and the Loot of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2001).

It is impossible to reconstruct the fate of every major collection of Jewish manuscripts and archives. But the losses incurred were severe. On the eve of the War, there were 1,134 Hebrew manuscripts in the Berlin and Breslau Rabbinical Seminaries and in the library of the Berlin Jewish community. It can be assumed that less than 20% of those manuscripts survived the War.<sup>11</sup>

*The Jewish archival records from Europe that we have today fall into two categories: those materials that ‘immigrated’ to the land of Israel and the United States before the War, and the ‘saving remnant’ (she’erit ha-pleitah) of Jewish documentation which in one way or another survived the Wartime devastation*

Thus, the fate of Jewish historical documentation parallels that of the Jewish people. The archival records on European Jewry that we have today fall into two categories: those materials that ‘immigrated’ to the land of Israel and the United States *before* the War, and the ‘saving remnant’ (*she’erit ha-pleitah*) of Jewish documentation, which in one way or another survived the Wartime devastation – usually held in captivity by the Germans.

Faced with this scarcity of records it is imperative that researchers maximize their use and analysis of the remaining documentation. The Yerusha project will make that possible.

11 See Schidorsky, Gevilin Nisrafin (note 10 above), pp. 155–156.

## II. THE POST-WAR FORTUNES OF GERMAN-LOOTED JEWISH ARCHIVES

The fate of the surviving archival collections after the War varied. Many of them suffered further travails: the Jewish archives that eluded the Germans, and remained *in situ* – typically the records of smaller communities – were now ownerless and heirless. Such archives were destroyed or discarded by local authorities or inhabitants after the War. In some cases, archival documents were stolen from the abandoned building of a Jewish institution, and their pages were used as wrapping paper or heating material.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the German-looted collections were discovered, seized, and displaced by the Red Army, which appropriated them as ‘Trophies of War’. The Soviets transported most of them to Moscow, where they were held in a newly established top-secret facility called ‘The Special Archive of the USSR’. (This facility was subsequently merged into the Russian State Military Archive in 1999.)

The Special Archive housed confiscated German state records, and twice-confiscated French and Dutch state records (seized first by the Germans, and then at end of the War, by the Soviets). It also housed more than 85 collections of Jewish provenance originally looted by the Germans including the records of the World Jewish Congress, the European Bureaus of the Joint Distribution Committee and Jewish Telegraphic Agency, the papers of the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Joseph Isaac Schneerson, the papers of the Rothschild families of Paris and Vienna, partial records of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the Vienna Rabbinical Seminary, and the Jewish community of Salonika.

12 For instances of this phenomenon from Lithuania, see Leyzer Engleshtern, *Mit di vegn fun der sheyris ha-pleyte*, Tel Aviv, Igud Yotsei Vilna Ve-ha-sevivah be-yisrael, 1976, pp. 101–102; Chaim Grade, ‘Fun unter der erd’, *Forvets*, March 15, 1979; Nesia Orlovitz-Reznik, *Ima, Ha-mutar kvar livkot?*, Tel Aviv Moreshet, n.d., p. 9.

**S**chewen **S**achlich  
und dardem Brief und man hat offter  
mündlich das man die gemeinliche  
den Reich in Stadt Worms demütlich  
vorbringen lassen ein Brief von  
solcher am Reich Kayser und für  
dem dritten Christmiltelsteden Ferdinand  
ausgangen kraft dessen Worms auf  
richtete Juden Ordnung approbirt und  
bestätiget worden auf Staat und Weile  
solcher Brief von Wort zu Wort hier  
nach geschrieben steht und also lautet.

**F**ür Ferdinand der Dritte von  
Habsburg Kaiser zu allen Zeiten  
Moseus

*[Faint handwritten text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page]*

17th century document from the archive of the Vienna Jewish Community (Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People)  
Credit: Michal Fattal

They were unknown to researchers, and were totally inaccessible to scholars, for 44 years after the end of the War. Only in the waning years of Soviet rule, under Gorbachev's *Perestroika*, did the existence of the Special Archive of the USSR and of its Jewish collections become known.<sup>13</sup>

Some of those collections were restituted to their rightful owners in the 1990s and early 2000s, such as the records of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Rothschild family, but most were not. They remain in Moscow to this day. While they are accessible to researchers, many of the collections are disorganised, misfiled, or have woefully inadequate finding aids. When the Jewish Archival Survey in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine prepared a guide to the Jewish collections of the former Special Archive, major irregularities were discovered. For example, the collection of the 'Union of Austrian Jewish War Veterans' contains a large number of medieval and early modern Hebrew manuscripts from the Vienna Rabbinical Seminary; and the collection of 'the Vienna Jewish Religious Community' contains files that belong to the European branch of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), and many files of writings by the former Lubavitcher Rebbe, Joseph Isaac Schneerson. This is not the kind of treatment that cultural treasures deserve.<sup>14</sup>

The Jewish archives that were discovered in the American zone of occupied Germany were much more fortunate. The American military concentrated them in the Offenbach Archival Depot, and restituted most of them to their

13 Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, *Trophies of War and Empire: The Archival Heritage of Ukraine, World War II, and the International Politics of Restitution*, Cambridge, Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2001.

14 David E. Fishman, Mark Kupovetsky, and Vladimir Kuzelenkov (editors), *Nazi-Looted Jewish Archives in Moscow: A Guide to Jewish Historical and Cultural Collections in the Russian State Military Archive*, University of Scranton Press in Association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Scranton, 2010.

rightful owners, such as the archives of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Paris Rabbinical Seminary.<sup>15</sup> The Americans recognised the YIVO Institute in New York as the rightful heir to the Vilna YIVO, and the YIVO books and archives that were deported to Frankfurt were subsequently shipped by the Americans to New York.

The problem was with documents and records originating from defunct organisations—and most local Jewish organisations were now defunct, because their members and leaders had been slaughtered – or documents whose prior ownership was unknown. These heirless records were handed over to Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR), an organisation headed by Professor Salo Baron. JCR was recognised as the inheritor of heirless Jewish cultural property, and as such, it distributed books, and also archival records, between Jewish institutions in Palestine, the United States, and other countries.<sup>16</sup>

Some important surviving Jewish archival collections made their way to Israel. The archives of several German Jewish communities, including Hamburg, and the Gesamtarchiv der deutschen Juden, had been confiscated in 1938 (before the creation of the Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage). These collections were incorporated into various German State archives, and were discovered after the War by the Israeli archivist Alex Bein. Bein entered into negotiations with German archival authorities on behalf of the Jewish General Historical Archives, later renamed the Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP).

15 See Jean Claude Kuperminc, 'La Reconstruction de la bibliothèque de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1945-1955' in *Archives Juives* vol. 34, no. 1 (2001) pp. 98-113.

16 Michael J. Kurtz, *America and the Return of Nazi Contraband: The Recovery of Europe's Cultural Treasures*, Cambridge University Press, 2009; Dana Herman, 'A Brand Plucked Out of the Fire': The Distribution of Heirless Jewish Cultural Property by Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc. 1947-1952, in *Neglected Witnesses: the Fate of Jewish Ceremonial Objects During the Second World War and After*, edited by Julie-Marthe Cohen with Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek. Buihlth Wells: Institute of Art and Law; Amsterdam: Jewish Historical Museum, 2011, pp. 29-62

These talks paralleled Nahum Goldmann's negotiations on reparations with the German government. Bein demanded the restitution of German-Jewish communal archives to the Jewish people, and their transfer to Israel. In the case of the remarkable Hamburg archive, an agreement was reached in 1955 to restitute most of the collection to Israel, and they are housed at the CAHJP.

Most of the vast archive of the Vienna Jewish community was discovered by the Americans, and returned to the newly reconstituted Viennese Jewish community. Its leaders decided to deposit its historical records in the CAHJP in Jerusalem. These are the prime examples of surviving archival collections that made Aliyah, so to speak.<sup>17</sup>

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17 Daniel J. Cohen, 'Jewish Records from Germany in the Jewish Historical General Archive', *Leo Baeck Yearbook* vol. 1 (1956), pp. 331–345; The Vienna collection was the subject of a recent lawsuit between the Vienna Jewish community, which claimed that the materials had been loaned to the CAHJP, and demanded their return, and the CAHJP.

### III. BEHIND THE ARCHIVAL IRON CURTAIN

The situation of Jewish archival collections was very different behind the Iron Curtain, in the USSR. The Soviets had virtually dissolved all independent Jewish organisations back in the 1920s. The authorities confiscated the organisations' property, including their archival records, and handed them over to state repositories. (There was even an effort to concentrate the confiscated collections in a central state-sponsored Jewish archive in the Ukrainian SSR, but it ended in failure). A second wave of Jewish archival confiscations took place in 1940 in the newly incorporated Western territories of the USSR, which the Soviets conquered under the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact: the Baltics, 'Western Belorussia' and 'Western Ukraine'.

Many of the Jewish archives held in Soviet state repositories were evacuated eastward at the time of the German attack on the USSR, in June and July 1941, along with general collections. These fortunate collections remained intact during the War in their places of evacuation, and never fell under the control of the ERR. But they suffered from other problems during the post-War years of state antisemitism, under Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev.

During the height of Stalin's antisemitic campaign (1948–1953), some Jewish documentary collections were destroyed by State Repositories. Many that were not destroyed remained unprocessed – that is, they had no inventories or finding aids – for decades. In part, this was because the archives had no staff with knowledge of Hebrew and Yiddish, or with familiarity of Jewish history. But that was more a symptom than a cause. A more important reason for non-processing was that Jewish collections were automatically ascribed a low-priority, as

collections which 'do not possess scholarly or practical significance'. As unprocessed collections, they could not be examined by Soviet scholars and researchers.

*In the Soviet Union ... most archival collections of Jewish provenance were caught between the hammer and the sickle: Whether they were left uncatalogued, or kept under lock and key as classified material, the outcome was the same: no access*

Those collections of Jewish provenance that had inventories were automatically labeled 'classified' and kept in 'special preservation', due to their Jewish subject matter. So most Jewish archival collections were caught between the hammer and the sickle: whether they were left uncatalogued, or kept under lock and key as classified material, the outcome was the same: no access.<sup>18</sup>

Another problem was the archival iron curtain. Western scholars could not examine even those materials that were processed and not in 'special preservation'. When Abraham Katsch was allowed to review rabbinic manuscripts in Moscow and Leningrad in 1957, his article about them was a sensation in the world of Jewish scholarship. Similarly, Michael Astour's 1963 receipt of a microfilm of the final, unpublished volume of Israel Zinberg's *History of Jewish Literature*, written in the 1930s, was hailed

*Rothschild documents as arranged by the Russian State Military Archives*

*Reproduced with the permission of the Rothschild Archive*

<sup>18</sup> Efim Melamed, 'Iz istorii sobirania i izucheniavreiskogo pismennogo nasledia na ukrainie v 20–30 gg. XXogo veka' ('From the History of Collecting and Studying the Jewish Documentary Heritage in Ukraine in the 1920s–1930s [in Russian]'), *Judaica Rossica*, #4. Moscow, 2006, pp. 51–77;



in the Jewish press as a breakthrough.<sup>19</sup>

It was actually dangerous for visiting Western scholars to try to conduct research on Jewish history in the Soviet Union. In the late 1970s, a young scholar wrote a dissertation on the Jewish community of Odessa. He decided to travel to Odessa on an official academic exchange program between the USA and USSR, and by agreement with his American sponsoring organisation, IREX, provided a false research topic to his Soviet hosts. His false topic was 'The Odessan Press' in the hope that he would be able to order materials on the Odessan *Jewish* press. Not only was he not allowed to see the material he was interested in, but he was under constant surveillance, both in the reading room and in his dormitory, because of suspicions that he was a spy (either for the USA, Israel, or Ukrainian nationalists). Eventually, he was forced to leave Odessa mid-year, when a provocateur handed him a suitcase with allegedly secret documents for transmittal to the CIA.

Thankfully this aspect of Jewish archival history is now a thing of the past.

#### IV. THE JEWISH ARCHIVAL LANDSCAPE IN EUROPE

In the decades since the War, Jewish archival culture and awareness in Europe has advanced. Most European Jewish communities now have archival repositories that collect and preserve documentation. The first community to do so was Poland, which established the Jewish Historical Institute in 1947. (Its founders were influenced by the legacy of YIVO and Polish-Jewish historiography.) In other countries, institutions that were originally founded to collect Holocaust documentation subsequently broadened their mission to include documentation on pre-War Jewry and contemporary Jewish life. The Memorial de la Shoah-Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine in Paris and the Fondazione Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea in Milan are prime examples. In Germany, the Central Council of Jews in Germany established a

central archive for German-Jewish history in Heidelberg in 1987, much later than in other Western countries. But there are still no central Jewish archives in Great Britain, Austria, and other smaller countries. (In Great Britain, the major Jewish collections – of the Board of Deputies, Chief Rabbi etc. – are held in the London Metropolitan Archives.)



*19th century community protocols of the Pest Jewish Community in the Hungarian Jewish Archives*

*Courtesy of Grego (Gergely Földvári)*

Among the former Soviet-bloc countries, only Hungary and the Czech Republic have central Jewish archives, which, interestingly, were established during the period of Communist rule. The Jewish communities of Russia and Ukraine have not created such institutions in the 23 years since the fall of the USSR. In general, it is fair to say that the development of Jewish archival institutions in contemporary Europe has been gradual and steady, but modest, when

<sup>19</sup> Abraham A. Katsch, 'From the Moscow Manuscripts of David Ha-Nagid's Midrash on Genesis', *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 48 (1957–58); Michael Astour, 'Der nay-gefunener band fun d'r yisroel tsinberg's "geshikhte fun der literatur bay yidn" *Di golden keyt*, no. 49 (1964), pp. 14–21.

compared to the explosion of Jewish museums.<sup>20</sup>

Jewish archival culture in Europe still faces its challenges. One shudders to think of the many Jewish organisations and communities that just shove their records into an attic or basement, and dispose of them as trash a few years later,



Documents of the former Medias Jewish Community found in the abandoned synagogue (Romania)

Courtesy of Yoraan Rafael Reuben

The interior of the synagogue

Courtesy of Yoraan Rafael Reuben

to make space in the attic or basement for newer papers, which await the same fate. Because of this deplorable indifference to recent Jewish history, it may end up being more difficult to write the history of European Jewish communities in the second half of the 20th century than writing on the second half of the 19th century. How many closets, attics, and basements are stuffed with disorganized documents? The great historian Shimon Dubnov lamented this treatment of Jewish historical documents in his manifesto 'Nahpesa Ve-Nahkora' ('Let us Search and Study'), which he wrote as a young man in 1891.<sup>21</sup> In pessimistic

moments, it seems that Jewish archival awareness has not advanced very far in the 123 years since Dubnov's publication of that essay.

<sup>20</sup> Most such institutions are surveyed in *Preserving Jewish Archives as Part of the European Cultural Heritage*; Proceedings of the Conference on Judaica Archives in Europe, 1999. Ed. by J.-C. Kuperminc and R. Arditti. Paris: Ed. du Nadir de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle, 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Simon Dubnov, *Nahpesa Ve-Nahkora*, Odessa, Ha-Pardes, 1892. The original Russian version, *Ob izuchenii istorii russkikh evreev i ob uchrezhdenii istoricheskogo obschestva*, was published in St. Petersburg a year earlier.

## V. THE PROBLEM OF INTELLECTUAL ACCESS AND ITS RESOLUTION – YERUSHA

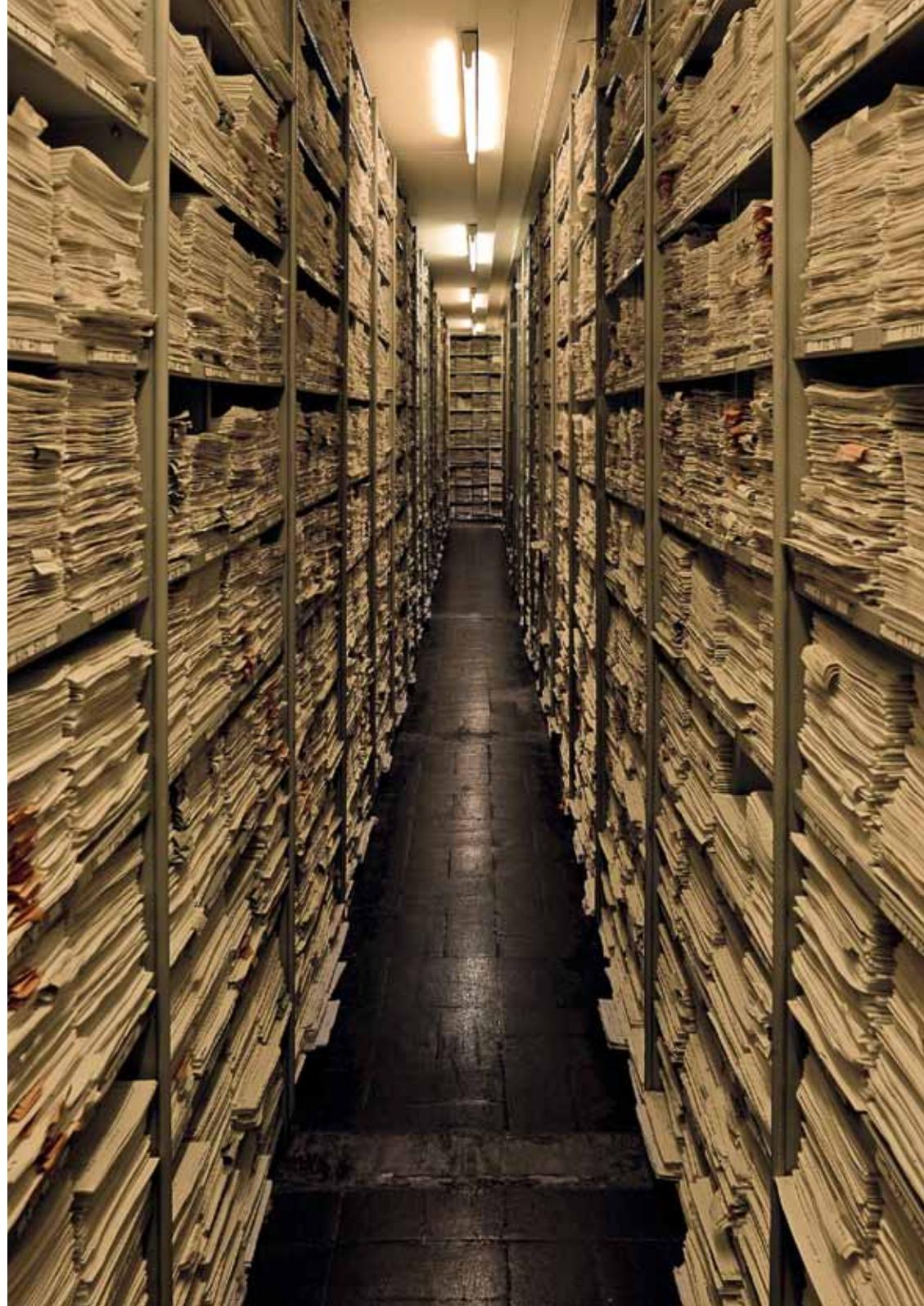
Jews are famously a mobile people, a people of migrants, and their documentation has wandered with them. This poses a problem for Jewish historical scholarship. Unlike other fields of European history, the documents on any given research topic in Jewish history are found not in a single repository or in a single city, but scattered across countries and continents. A scholarly biography of Sholem Aleichem, for instance, would need, at the very least, to examine materials held in New York (YIVO), Tel Aviv (Beit Sholem Aleichem), Jerusalem (the National Library), Kiev (several repositories in the city where Sholem Aleichem lived), and St. Petersburg (the Russian State Archive for Literature and Art). And there are definitely valuable sources in other unknown and unexpected places. So if such a biography should ever be written, the author will have a daunting task.

*The Yerusha portal will make it possible for researchers to obtain a panoramic view of all collections with documentation on any topic in European Jewish history with just a few clicks of the mouse*

*The International Tracing Service archives in Germany: a non-Jewish archives holding vast amounts of documents pertaining to the Jewish experience during the Holocaust*

*Credit: Richard Ehrlich, Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives*

Nowadays, the problem is not mainly one of physical access. With microfilming and digitisation, scholars don't necessarily need to travel across the globe to examine their sources. The problem is one of *intellectual* access: How does the researcher know where the documents on his or her topic are found? For this we need guides and reference





works on a global scale. For this we need the Yerusha project. The Yerusha portal will make it possible for researchers to obtain a panoramic view of all collections with documentation on any topic in European Jewish

history with just a few clicks of the mouse.

Because only a minority of collections of Jewish provenance survived the War, much of the scholarship on modern European Jewish history relies on, and will continue to rely on, collections of non-Jewish provenance. This includes the records of government ministries, municipalities, courts, political parties, civic groups and associations, which contain much valuable information on Jewish life and Jewish issues. But in such cases, the problem of intellectual access is truly acute: where in these vast general collections are the materials related to the Jews located?

For example, the Ministry of National Education of the Russian Empire, which supervised Jewish schools in Tsarist Russia, existed from 1802 to 1917. Its archival collection consists of 104,918 files. Without guidance, a researcher interested in the history of Jewish education in Russia, will have to pore through an inventory that is many hundreds of pages long to find the files on Jewish schools. And since in the lands of the former Soviet Union, inventories are rarely shared on-line, the researcher will have to examine

the finding aid on-site. Yerusha will eliminate this problem, and spare researchers hours upon hours of poring over inventories, writing open-ended inquiries, and engaging in fruitless searches.

At this point, it is worth highlighting some issues of archival description. It is much harder to describe an archive, and it is much harder to control its contents, than a book. Archival collections are much more voluminous, and contain more disparate material. A modern book has a title, which usually gives the reader a fair idea of its topic. Further, if it has an index, one can find just about whatever one is looking for in it. In contrast, archival collections are usually named after their creator, the organisation or individual which accumulated the documents. If that organisation was large, was involved in several spheres of activity, or existed over a long period of time, the collection's title alone (the name of the collection creator) will not help the researcher have a clear idea of what it does or doesn't contain. And fully indexing (for names and places) a large archival collection of thousands of files is beyond the realm of possibility in most cases.

*Yerusha will ... spare researchers hours upon hours of poring over inventories, writing open-ended inquiries, and engaging in fruitless searches*

So without a good synthetic description of a collection's contents, prepared by a historically knowledgeable professional, even a properly catalogued collection is a closed book, a dead letter to the researcher. Let us take as an example our imaginary biographer of Sholem Aleichem.

If he or she were to look only for collections named 'Sholem Aleichem', they would find a relatively small volume of material, and would miss many of the most interesting documents. Sholem Aleichem did not keep copies of all his letters, yet so much of his correspondence is found in the archival collections of their recipients. Sholem Aleichem did not keep copies of many of his manuscripts; they are found in the archival collections of newspapers and magazines to which he contributed, of publishing houses that issued his works, and even of the Russian censorship bureau. If these collections are not properly described, and if the descriptions are not made broadly accessible, the researcher on Sholem Aleichem will never find those letters and manuscripts.

## VI. YERUSHA IN ACTION

Yerusha is tackling this problem, not just for Sholem Aleichem, but for an infinite number of Jewish historical personalities, institutions and topics.

Of course, not everything needs to be done from scratch. The Yerusha portal will also harvest existing descriptions of collections related to European Jewish history from existing finding aids and previous surveys. The project is conducted in close collaboration with the National Library of Israel, and will incorporate descriptions from all institutions associated with it, including the members of the Israel Archive Network.

The Yerusha project has been active on the ground for the last three years, and still has much work ahead of it. This is a launch, not a landing. The full scope of its accomplishments will become evident to visitors of the portal in the near future.

*Thanks to this project,  
our Yerusha,  
the documentary legacy  
of European Jewry,  
will continue to instruct,  
enlighten, and inspire*

In his 1891 manifesto 'Nahpesa Ve-Nahkorah', Dubnov quoted Cicero, that 'not to know history means to remain forever a child', and he chided Russian Jewry for its childish ignorance of its own past. The Yerusha project is an encouraging sign of the maturation of contemporary European Jewry, and its growing awareness that history and archives are not luxuries, but essential aspects of communal existence. Thanks to this project, our Yerusha – our inheritance – the documentary legacy of European Jewry, will continue to instruct, enlighten, and inspire. The more researchers will delve into the records made accessible by this project, the more they will confirm the words of the Hebrew liturgy:

*How fortunate we are to have  
this extraordinary inheritance*

אשרינו מה טוב חלקנו ומה יפה ירושתנו





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• A project of the Rothschild  
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