

The Program of the American Jewish Archives

BY THE EDITORS

During the late winter of 1947—in December—Dr. Nelson Glueck, President of the Hebrew Union College, authorized the establishment of the American Jewish Archives. He appointed Dr. Jacob R. Marcus, the Adolph S. Ochs Professor of Jewish History, to serve as director; Rabbi Bertram W. Korn, the Ella H. Philipson Fellow in American Jewish History, to serve as associate director; and Dr. Selma Stern-Taeubler, the well-known historian of German Jewry, to serve as archivist.

Prior to this time the only institution devoted exclusively to the field of American Jewish historical research was the American Jewish Historical Society, founded in 1892. The activities of this organization have been pioneering ones; it has already published thirty-eight volumes of essays, source materials, and indices, thereby laying a foundation for scientific scholarship in the field. No historian or sociologist who attempts to understand the American Jew can afford to neglect these productions; they are basic and invaluable, although admittedly of uneven quality. The library of the American Jewish Historical Society, situated in the city of New York, has an excellent collection of both manuscripts and printed records, but because of the accident of its geographic situation, it serves primarily, though by no means exclusively, those who dwell in the New York metropolitan area. The time has now come to make provision for those students and researchers living between the Rockies and the Cumberland plateau, and to offer

study opportunities to the 1,100,000 Jews living in the Mississippi basin.

The creation of this new Jewish depositary in Cincinnati, the oldest Jewish settlement west of the Alleghenies, is but one phase of the inevitable geographic expansion of American Jewish culture. We may assume that it is but a matter of time before a similar archive will be established on the Pacific coast. This Jewish academic expansion is a repetition of the story of the development of the general — non-Jewish — American historical societies and archives throughout the nation. Today there are literally hundreds of such organizations and libraries throughout the land; several states have dozens; New York state alone has 142 of them.

The establishment of Jewish historical and archival centers is a particularly fortunate development. American Jewry is at this moment the largest surviving body of Jews in any one country. These United States today shelter 5,000,000 Jews, almost one-half of the 11,000,000 who have survived the Hitler era. American Jewry has become the "center" of world Jewish spiritual life. When the Jewish historian of the next generation reaches the year 1939, he will begin a new chapter in the history of his people, a chapter which must be called, "The American Jewish Center." This Jewish community has now become the pivotal and controlling factor in that historic development which began in the thirteenth pre-Christian century in Palestine and has

continued throughout the intervening centuries in Babylon, Spain and Germany-Poland. The present position of American Jewry was thrust upon it in 1939 when the Jews of Poland began to perish in the wake of the German invasion; its roots, however, as an American Jewish expression, go back to the middle of the seventeenth century and even earlier if we include those individuals who sailed with Columbus, who marched with Cortez, or who lived and died as crypto-Jews in the great settlements of South America, the Caribbean, Mexico and the old Spanish southwest.

It is rare for a historian to be granted the privilege of watching and "filming" history as it actually occurs. Yet that is our privilege today. This is a young country; incredibly young. The Gratz brothers — distinguished enterprisers who helped open the trans-Allegheny country in the eighteenth century—first came to these shores in 1754, at a time when there were less than two million souls in the American colonies; today, in this land of one hundred and forty millions, there are hundreds of people still living who enjoyed the friendship of, and listened to the romantic reminiscences narrated by, Mrs. Tom Henry Clay, a granddaughter of one of those merchant venturers.

It is still possible today to collect considerable amounts of colonial Jewish material and thus to document much of the life of American Jewry from its very first moments. Only too often in the past the study of Jewish history has been a post-mortem autopsy. We propose to collect the records of this great Jewish center, not after it has perished, but while it is still young, virile, and grow-

ing. It is a remarkable opportunity and challenge.

* * * *

The study of American Jewish history is primarily the study of the interrelationship and interaction, within the life of the individual Jew and the Jewish community, of the Jewish heritage and the American environment. Judaism, the expression of Jewish life, took root 3500 years ago in a Near Asiatic environment. This religion and its followers have lived through a variety of cultures and tremendous inner changes down to the present day. The American Jew with his composite background, stemming from Slavonic East Europe, or Germanic Central Europe, or Iberian Southwestern Europe, is now in the process of evolving a type of Judaism in this new Anglo-Saxon, Christian environment which will permit him to be all-Jewish and all-American. He is attempting to create a successful adjustment. The opportunity to observe this process in its "becoming" offers a fascinating and instructive field of study.

The perception, analysis and recording of the symbiosis of Judaism and Americanism is obviously a part of American history. To be sure, it does not comport with the orthodox historiographic tradition. It will not have much to do with Congress, with statute law, with sieges and blockades, although individual Jews have participated in almost every event in American life since the earliest days. But American history is also the record of the various social, religious, cultural, ethnic and racial groups who have moved in crisscross fashion through the confusion of American life. The story of this nation is not a straight Anglo-Saxon line beginning in England and stretch-

ing primly and unwaveringly across the centuries. It is also the history of a host of influences, peoples and institutions moving and darting in from all angles and converging in one central agglomerative mass to create an American people and epos.

In this polilineal series, American Jewry is but one hair-thin line, numerically small, but distinctly visible because of its early urban character, its commercial proclivities, its high degree of literacy, and its struggle for civil and economic liberties. Whether this small group has made any special "contribution" to American life is yet to be determined. We shall first have to agree on a definition of the term "contribution". But whatever the definition, many of us are not particularly interested in studying American Jewish history from this viewpoint. Whether the immigrant Jew came in 1654 to New Amsterdam or in 1924 to New York, we seek to understand how he lived, how he worked, how he established his own cultural-religious community, and how he interacted to this novel environment, creating a new Jewish life and at the same time helping to give birth to a new American world.

In order better to understand and study the history of American Jewry, we shall have to study its life as a "community". American Jewry is a "fellowship" (*Gemeinschaft*), a closely knit ethnic-religious commonalty. (We do not mean a legally-recognized religious corporation like the European *Gemeinde* or *Kehillah*, or the Catholic church in Quebec.) This living-together of Jews finds its most tangible expression in the religious core, the independent religious congregation. The American Jewish Archives, therefore, will concentrate on the acquisition

and study of synagogal minute books, trustees' minutes, financial and cemetery records, charters, constitutions and their amendments, temple dedication and anniversary booklets, and similar literary materials. Since the leadership of these religious institutions was frequently their most obvious form of expression, the Archives will also assemble collections of rabbis' manuscript files, sermon notes, and other rabbinical papers.

Of course the synagogue does not exhaust the field of Jewish corporate expression or communal manifestation. While it is true that originally all Jewish institutions were religious in the sense that they operated within the periphery of religious control and were ostensibly religiously motivated, it should constantly be borne in mind that with the dawn of the French Revolution and the breakdown of the oligarchical, corporate Jewish community, the secular Jew and secular Jewish societies made their appearance. Today, therefore, there are numerous American Jewish fraternities, lodges, *Landsmannschaften*, and clubs of a cultural, social, philanthropic, economic, and civic defense nature that have drawn large numbers of Jews into their ambit. It is essential that the records of these organizations — at least typical examples — be collected and preserved.

Every Jewish community is in many ways the aggregate of a series of individuals. Consequently the intensive study of the individual is indispensable. We are interested, therefore, in collecting the papers and studying the lives and careers of individual Jews and their families, particularly if we are able to trace them from their earliest appearance on the American scene. It is true that we shall often enough find nothing specif-

ically "Jewish". (We are still not certain that we can define this adjective!) Any student of American history knows that only too frequently the typical Jew, like the typical Catholic or Protestant, Swede or Italian, Mason or Knight of Columbus, is about 90 per cent amorphously American and about 10 per cent an example of his specific religious group, lodge, or club. Very often—in the majority of cases, to be exact—the records of an individual Jew do not throw any light on his relation to his religious past, or to the ethnic-nationalistic culture from which he or his forebears stemmed. The very fact that many records of this type studiously avoid all Jewish references is highly significant, for if personal reminiscences like manuscript and privately printed autobiographies do not express the Jewish reactions of their authors, we may draw interesting conclusions about their conscious or unconscious assimilation and submergence into the main stream of American life. The larger American history, particularly, will profit from the preservation and examination of this type of material.

These Archives have been established primarily for the collection of manuscript and unpublished materials. It is not intended to compete with the Hebrew Union College Library—in whose building it is housed—in the assembling of printed works touching on the American scene. But, because it has been designed to serve as a research center for established scholars, for students of the Hebrew Union College, and for others

who wish to explore the American Jewish field, every effort will be made to assemble—in open shelves—a working library of the standard reference books on general and American Jewish history where the scholar may find the essential tools at arm's reach. To further this purpose it is also planned to build up a file of American Jewish periodicals, magazines and journals. Gifts of significant general and Jewish reference books, and of runs of American Jewish periodicals will therefore be gratefully accepted.

In order to inform the interested public and co-workers in the field of American history of our progress and activities, we will publish this semi-annual bulletin: including lists of our more important accessions and, in each issue, at least one article of scientific calibre.

We will welcome the cooperation of all persons interested in this venture, whether laymen or scholars, and will gratefully welcome contributions of funds and materials, loans or copies of significant records, and above all we solicit references to Jews—however that word may be defined—in the history of the United States.

We seek to ascertain the facts as they actually are; and we desire to promote the study of those materials which will further a knowledge of the American Jew, not only for the purpose of understanding this present period in the millennial history of the Jewish people, but also so that we may grasp the ethos of Americanism and thus make another contribution to the history of humanity.