

Shorter Features

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The Shorter Features department includes short articles on various aspects of archives administration. The department also may include articles about archivists' experiences implementing archival programs of particular interest within specific institutional settings. Members of the Society and others are encouraged to submit papers for consideration. Papers should be sent to Maygene Daniels, Gallery Archives, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC 20565.

Collection Management at the American Jewish Archives

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When the American Jewish Archives (AJA) was founded in 1947, its stated goal was "to preserve for all time the record of American Jewry." In pursuit of that goal, the staff of the AJA has collected and cataloged approximately 4,000 linear feet of personal papers and records in an ongoing attempt to chronicle the broad spectrum of Jewish life and activity throughout the United States and the Western Hemisphere.

In the summer of 1983 the AJA staff faced a new and different challenge. Their four-story building on the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) was full. In addition, the archives had two large unprocessed collections totaling two thousand linear feet stored

off-site in a vacant dormitory and waiting for a permanent home. The AJA needed fifty percent more shelf space just to house current accessions.

Faced with a number of unpleasant choices, including deaccessioning, cutting off future accessions, or maintaining the status quo, AJA staff worked to develop at least a temporary solution to this problem. The institution's long-range goal is to construct a new, larger building or to build an addition to its existing structure. Budget shortages for the indefinite future, however, have delayed these plans along with any hopes for other options, such as the purchase and installation of compact mobile shelving.

Out of room and out of necessity, AJA staff began a collection management pro-

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gram. It consisted of three parts: first, reprocessing older collections in order to reduce their size by eliminating extraneous materials; second, microfilming; and third, using off-site storage.

In the early years of the AJA most accessions were not processed according to any archival standards, if they were processed at all. New accessions were usually transferred into acid-free boxes in the same condition and arrangement as they were received. In 1976, however, with the help of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the AJA staff implemented a new system of processing and cataloging manuscripts in line with the principles of arrangement and description set forth in the SAA's *Basic Manual Series*.

The first step in the AJA's collection management program was to conduct a complete survey of all collections accessioned and cataloged prior to 1976. These collections were evaluated for level of processing, physical condition, and efficiency in use of boxes and folders. Based on this information and on the staff's evaluation of the importance and past use of each collection, collections were designated for reprocessing, and a schedule was established assigning reprocessing priority.

This survey took four months. Of the approximately 1,000 feet of manuscripts examined, 350 were designated for reprocessing. As expected, the survey revealed that many of the AJA's older collections, especially those accessioned prior to 1960, practically had been dumped into boxes and lay there curled and without folders. Others were in highly acidic folders or next to yellowing newsprint. During reprocessing, staff straightened the documents, removed rusting paper clips and staples, photocopied yellowed and brittle pages, and stored all the documents in acid-free boxes and folders. New finding aids then

were written for all the reprocessed collections. A detailed inventory to the folder level was prepared for those collections determined to have the greatest importance. Catalog cards with descriptive cross-references were prepared for less important collections.

The AJA was able to devote a large amount of staff time to reprocessing because, with two exceptions, the archives had only a small processing backlog. The exceptions were the two large collections stored off-site, which are to be processed in special projects funded by grants. The entire processing staff thus could devote full-time attention to reprocessing for six months. After this period, part-time student workers performed the bulk of the reprocessing with the occasional assistance of the professional staff. In fact, throughout the project the staff relied heavily on student workers. They were carefully trained and supervised and made it possible to reprocess a number of collections at once, greatly reducing the time and cost of the project.

Finally, two years after the beginning of the survey, reprocessing of the 350 feet of manuscripts had been completed and a reduction of 160 feet, nearly one-half the original total, had been realized. This entire reduction came from discarding duplicate and extraneous materials and from more efficient use of boxes and folders.

Some of the more important collections reprocessed during the project include the papers of the following Jewish notables: Jacob H. Schiff and Felix M. Warburg, both financiers, philanthropists, and leaders of the early twentieth-century American Jewish community; Rabbi Levi A. Olan, theologian and past president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis; Rabbi Nelson Glueck, archaeologist and fourth president of HUC-JIR; industrialist Lazard

Kahn; and author Bella Rosenbaum Weretinkow. Important institutional archives reprocessed include those of the Jewish Community Council of Brooklyn, New York, and the Jewish Community Relations Council of Cincinnati, Ohio.

The second part of the AJA's collection management program consists of microfilming. The initial collection survey had revealed that the archives held seventy-five feet of negative photostatic copies of congregational records. The vast majority of these had been boxed inefficiently and without folders. Although clear and readable, they had curled badly over the years and had been wasting valuable shelf space.

The AJA is now implementing a plan to microfilm these records and discard the negative photostats. To date, ten feet have been microfilmed. Although microfilming is expensive, the decision was justified for three reasons. First, the AJA owns its own microfilm camera and has the necessary staff to operate it. It, therefore, can proceed with the filming at its own pace or could even discontinue filming at any time should the process become too expensive or time consuming. Second, the AJA has a large enough microfilm budget to cover the anticipated cost of the project. Finally, the records are bulky and deteriorating. Microfilming them will preserve their content for posterity and save much-needed shelf space.

The third and final part of the AJA's collection management program is the use of off-site storage. The program's goal has been to transfer the archives' least used and least important collections to another building to make room for the more important and frequently used collections. The AJA was able to do this effectively because the Klau Library on campus loaned for this purpose, free of charge, a climate-controlled storage area with five hundred feet of shelf space in

the closed stack area of its building.

Using the results of the collection survey and guided by more than twenty-five years of experience, the AJA's archivist designated 360 feet of records to transfer to the storage area. The finding aids for each collection were kept in the catalog but were annotated to indicate the change of location. To date, the archivist's judgment has proven accurate; in the one and one-half years since the collections were moved, only a handful of requests for them have been received. Eventually these records will be considered for reappraisal.

Collection management at the American Jewish Archives has proven to be successful. It has used standard archival procedures and available resources, including student workers, free storage space, and micrographics capability. The collection management program, although not a permanent solution to storage problems, has been a useful and practical tool allowing the institution to continue its operations while planning for the future. The program opened nearly six hundred feet of shelf space in the archives building (almost twenty percent of its entire storage area), while improving the physical condition of a number of older collections. The project also increased intellectual control over holdings and provided researchers with better access through development of new, more in-depth finding aids.

The AJA learned that collection management can be adapted to meet an individual repository's needs, problems, and resources. It can help balance the limitations of space, money, and time against the archivist's obligation to serve the future by preserving the past. Finally, the AJA learned that collection management is the practical application of accepted archival principles to that vexing archival problem—shortage of space.