We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity

Elisabeth Kaplan

Abstract

This essay considers the role of archives and archivists against a backdrop of the contemporary debate on identity, illustrated by research on the establishment and early years of the oldest extant ethnic historical society in the United States—the American Jewish Historical Society—and the construction of American/Jewish identities. Recent intellectual debate has examined questions of national, ethnic, gender, class, and community identities, of individual and group identity, and of the formation of identity. A spectrum of positions has emerged from this debate. On one end, identity is viewed as "real," intrinsic to individuals and communities or even biologically based. On the other, identity is conceived of as social fiction, constructed culturally for political and historical reasons. On the whole, serious scholars have rejected the former view. Archivists should be cognizant of this fact because they are major players in the business of identity politics, whether they are conscious of it or not. Archivists appraise, collect, and preserve the props with which notions of identity are built. In turn, notions of identity are confirmed and justified as historical documents validate their authority.

The American Jewish Historical Society

At the close of the nineteenth century, American Jews were confronted with a profound philosophical dilemma. An unfortunate confluence of political, economic, and social conditions in the United States and Europe swept the very meaning of Jewish identity into disarray, and left American Jews increasingly uneasy about their status as Americans. The consequences were quite real and far-reaching, the potential for disaster quite

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palpable. Serious challenges demand serious solutions; in 1892 American Jews decided to establish a historical society.

Consequently, on June 7 of that year, forty-one prosperous and well-educated Americans met at the Jewish Theological Seminary at 736 Lexington Avenue in New York City. Their meeting lasted from mid-afternoon until ten at night. Their motive, as they wrote at the meeting's conclusion, was to establish an organization dedicated to collecting and publishing "material bearing upon the history of our country." "The objects for which this society [is] organized," they continued, "are not sectarian but American." The organization would be the American Jewish Historical Society, now the oldest extant ethnic historical society in the United States.[1]

An extraordinary window into this meeting survives in the form of its complete and unedited minutes, an unpublished eighty-five page typescript recorded verbatim by a stenographer present at the meeting. The document details the stated motivations and objectives of the founders of the historical society. It reveals the underlying concerns of the founders, crystallizing their self-perceptions, aspirations, divisions, and anxieties. As well, it exemplifies a tension between the construction of particular forms of identity and the sublimation of others—and the role of archives in these processes.[2]

The American Jewish Historical Society and Jewish Identity, Diversity, and Difference

Although the attendees at the founding meeting of the AJHS were invited because of their status as leaders of American Jewry, their backgrounds varied in national origin and citizenship, religious orientation, social standing, and occupation. Serious doctrinal differences, attitudes, and social frictions divided them. Many of these differences were profound. At the same time, all self-identified strongly as American Jews and apparently felt compelled to attend the meeting as such. Presumably each believed that the ultimate goal of estab-

[1] "Minutes of First Organization Meeting," Archives, American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS), Waltham, Mass. and New York, N.Y. (hereafter referred to as "Minutes"). At this writing, four published works describe the history of the AJHS, in varying degrees of detail: John J. Appel, "Hansen's Third-Generation 'Law' and the Origins of the American Jewish Historical Society," *Jewish Social Studies* 23 (Jan. 1961): 3–20 (Appel's unpublished 1960 dissertation, reprinted as *Immigrant Historical Societies in the United States 1880–1950,* New York: Arno Press, 1980, contains some additional information on the AJHS); Jeffrey Gurock, "From 'Publications' to 'American Jewish History': The Journal of the American Jewish Historical Society and the Writing of American Jewish History," *American Jewish History* 81 (Centennial issue II, Winter 1993–1994): 155–270; Nathan Kaganoff, "The American Jewish Historical Society at Ninety: Reflections on the History of the Oldest Ethnic Historical Society in America," *American Jewish History* 71 (June 1982): 466–85; and Isidore S. Meyer, "The American Jewish Historical Society," *Jewish Journal of Bibliography* 4 (1943): 3–21.

[2] The minutes were subsequently edited down to thirteen pages of text and published by the AJHS, *Report of Organization* (Baltimore: The Society, 1892).

lishing a historical society to represent American Jewry as a whole was important enough at this historical juncture to put aside differences.[3]

The co-existence of difference and unity deserves some examination. That the founders viewed themselves as profoundly connected to one another, as American Jews, is amply evident in the meeting minutes. That they recognized their differences and felt passionately about them is also clear. And that differences and similarities shuffled and reshuffled the attendees into unexpected sub-groupings within that larger collective becomes apparent. A tension between individuality and group membership, accompanied by a self-conscious concern with identity is evident as well. Highly individualized solutions to the dilemmas of American Jewish identity, forged over many years by the individuals present, had to be negotiated.

[3] Cyrus Adler stated at the meeting that 150 invitations had been sent out, 114 people had replied positively to the proposed historical society, and forty-one came to the meeting. A few biographical details about just a few attendees provides a snapshot of the diversity among them:

- Cyrus Adler was born in 1863 in Arkansas. He was a scholar and teacher at the Smithsonian Institution and Johns Hopkins University and a proponent of American Conservative Judaism.
- Oscar Straus was of a distinctly secular orientation, and held numerous political posts including that of ambassador to Turkey and U.S. Secretary of Commerce and Labor. Straus was born in Otterberg (Germany) in 1845.
- Reform rabbi Bernard Felsenthal of Chicago was born in Munchweiler (Germany) in 1822, and was a leading proponent of Zionism in the United States.
- Sabato Morais, born in Leghorn, Italy, in 1823, was the founder of the Jewish Theological Seminary and leader of American Orthodox Judaism.
- Kaufmann Kohler, rabbi, theologian, and leader of American Reform Judaism was born in 1843 in Bavaria.
- Alexander Kohut, born in Hungary in 1842, was a Talmudist and rabbi, a champion of Conservative Jewry and one of the keenest opponents to Reform Judaism.
- Charles Gross, medievalist at Harvard University, was born in New York in 1857.
- Morris Jastrow, born in 1861 in Warsaw, was chair of Semitic Languages at the University of Pennsylvania, and the son of one of Isaac Wise's chief opponents.
- Max Cohen was librarian of the Maimonides Library of New York.

There was, apparently, only one woman present at the organizational meeting, a Mrs. M. D. Louis, about whom no further information has been found. Henrietta Szold was not present at the founders meeting, but was, in her absence, elected to the AJHS council. Szold translated and edited a number of works including Graetz's *History of the Jews*. She later retired from her scholarly pursuits to devote herself entirely to the Zionist cause.

Jonathan Sarna presents an important discussion of the diversity of the leadership of American Jewry, such as those who likely comprised the original group of 150 invitees, in "The Spectrum of Jewish Leadership in Ante-Bellum America," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 1 (Spring 1982): 59–67. As Sarna has observed about American Jewry in general during this period, "The American Jewish community was not completely polarized into immigrants and natives, as too much of the literature implies; there were instead a whole series of subcommunities and people . . . who resisted categorization" (Sarna, "Cyrus Adler and the Development of American and Jewish Culture: The 'Scholar-Doer' as a Jewish Communal Leader" *American Jewish History* 78 [March 1989]: 393). It is important to note here that the role of rabbis, whose stature was significantly diminished in the United States from what it had been in Europe, was accompanied by the rise of various kinds of secular Jewish leaders. The term "ethnic broker" has been used in this context; in this case as "a communicator who is respected by his group and acts as a spokesman in intergroup relations. . . . Brokers may be traditionalist, or assimilationist in their emphasis, but they are united in their conscious, or unconscious task of assisting people in finding a place within the general society." Mark Bauman, "Role Theory and History: The Illustration of Ethnic Brokerage in the Atlanta Jewish Community in an Era of Transition and Conflict," *American Jewish History* 73 (Sept. 1983): 78.

These multiple, intersecting circles of belonging and difference are not unusual. As will be discussed later, thinkers in the area of identity politics have theorized that identification with one group does not preclude another, that individual identity does not preclude multiple group identities, that people inhabit multiple "worlds" at once. Shifting, evolving, continually negotiated and renegotiated, individual and group identities co-exist, although their characteristics may not always be consistent. Identities themselves are socially constructed in response to external conditions and needs. Group identities are solidified in contrast to perceived "others". This process cuts both ways: for example, despite the diversity among them, American Jews were perceived by the general or non-Jewish culture as somehow different and often as homogeneous; at the same time non-Jewish America—despite its obvious diversity—was perceived by American Jews as both different and in many ways monolithic.

Yet those who assembled at what would be the first organizational meeting of the AJHS viewed themselves, in that particular setting, as connected, belonging to a group, sharing what would today be described as an ethnic identity. Wsevolod Isajiw's remarks on the topic inform the use of the term "ethnic identity" in this article. "In contrast to the objective approach by which ethnic groups are assumed to exist, as it were, 'out there' as real phenomena, the subjective approach defines ethnicity as a process by which individuals either identify themselves as being different from others, as belonging to a group, or are identified by others as different."[4]

The founders would not, of course, have termed themselves an ethnic group, or deemed their predicament a crisis of group identity in which their ethnicity was at stake.[5] As recent concepts, the terms themselves cannot be imposed anachronistically, nor can past historical events be made to bear their weight.[6] But certainly those who gathered to establish the AJHS perceived themselves as "different,"

[4] Wsevolod Isajiw, quoted in Patrick Geary, "Ethnic Identity as a Situational Construct in the Early Middle Ages," *Medieval Perspectives* 3 (1988): 3.

[5] Erik Erikson was the architect of the idea of the "identity crisis," and current popular and scholarly assumptions about identity can in large part be traced to his work in the late 1950s and 1960s, although that work has received its share of criticism. Erikson wrote the entry for "Identity-psychosocial," (a term he himself made up) in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1968). "Historical processes," he wrote, "seem vitally related to the demand for identity in each new generation; for to remain vital, societies must have at their disposal the energies and loyalties that emerge from the adolescent process: as positive identities are 'confirmed,' societies are regenerated. Where this process fails in too many individuals, a *historical crisis* becomes apparent. Psychosocial identity, therefore, can be studied from the point of view of a complementarity of life history and history." Curiously, the entry has never been updated in subsequent editions of the *Encyclopedia.*

[6] To do so can lead to a gross misreading of the past. As Patrick Geary remarked in reference to the study of medieval history, because ethnic identity is a modern construct, "examinations of 'ethnic identity' risk anachronism when the origins of contemporary concerns and antagonism are sought in the past." Geary, "Ethnic Identity," xiv.

"belonging to a group," and "identified by others as different." The terms "ethnicity" and "identity" are used in this article to evoke these perceptions.[7]

It is quite clear from the minutes that the participants were genuine in their desire to make and present history, and serious about undertaking the nuts-and-bolts activities needed to facilitate that—identifying, collecting, preserving, compiling, and publishing archival materials. Their excitement at the prospect, as well as their recognition of the enormity of the project is evident; as Oscar Straus commented, "How rich this field is probably none of us has an adequate conception. The material that we are to seek is scattered, disjointed, and covers a great many years."[8] At the same time, as will be elaborated upon later, one gets the sense from the minutes as a whole that the participants were conscious of these activities as the means by which to achieve a larger mission: to mold a cohesive and positive image of American Jewry, one which would combine their understandings of themselves as American Jews and of Judaism with their perceptions of Americans and America, and that the proposed historical society provided the natural means by which that image could be constructed and presented to the American public.

The initiative was not an exercise in vanity or luxurious self-absorption. The founders believed that they were operating in an atmosphere of crisis. Embattled from within and from without, they needed to craft an image that would protect and preserve the future of American Jewry for generations to come, and in the process stave off both external detractors and internal disintegration.

Examined in historical perspective, how serious was this situation, and what were its causes? Very generally, the social class to which many of the founders of the AJHS belonged was a segment of what is generally described as the second wave of Jewish immigration to America. The "German Jews," as this group has been called, began to arrive in the 1830s, following on the heels of a much smaller number of Sephardic Jews who had been present since Colonial times.[9] On the whole, a combination of conditions in mid-nine-

[7] There is a host of literature on the construction of ethnicity and ethnic identity. Works used in the preparation of this article include: Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969); Ronald Cohen, "Ethnicity: Problem and Focus in Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7, no. 3 (1978): 379–404; Charles F. Keyes, ed., *Ethnic Change* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981); Walter P. Zenner, "Jewishness in America: Ascription and Choice," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 8 (January 1985): 117–33; Gunnar Myrdal, "The Case Against Romantic Ethnicity," *The Center Magazine* (July/August 1975): 26–30; Eugene Roosens, "Creating Ethnicity: The Process of Ethnogenesis," *Frontiers of Anthropology* 5 (1989): 12ff.; Gillian Bottomley, "Culture, Ethnicity, and the Politics/Poetics of Representation," *Diaspora* 1 (Winter 1991): 303–10; Werner Sollors, ed., *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Nicholas Thomas, "The Inversion of Tradition," *American Ethnologist* 19 (May 1992): 213–30.

[8] "Minutes," 10.

[9] The numbers are small but the percentages are dramatic. Arthur Hertzberg estimates that approximately 100,000 German Jews came to the United States between 1820 and 1860, and that the total number of Jews living in the United States was 150,000 by 1860. Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 106. Hertzberg's remarks upon the misuse of the term "the German Jews" to describe this group are worth noting; his contention is that the term tends to homogenize what was in fact a diverse group (*The Jews in America,* 102ff.).

teenth-century America, particularly an expanding economy, allowed these European Jews, with exceptions, to acculturate rapidly and to achieve "middle class" status within one or two generations. By the 1850s, American Jews on the whole held an unprecedented position in the history of modern Jewry. But by the 1880s, that status was seriously threatened. The position of American Jewry at the close of the nineteenth century was growing increasingly precarious, for reasons that are complex and can only be summarized briefly here.

External causes have been widely documented. The 1880s ushered in a period of intensified xenophobia, nativism, and explicit anti-Semitism. The recent centennials of the American Revolution and the American Constitution, as well as the approaching four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's landing resulted in a widespread enthusiasm in the United States for cultivating tradition.[10] That these events coincided with an unprecedented influx of immigrants, most of them poor, and that the late 1880s saw the beginnings of a financial instability derived from the conflict between free silver and the government's adherence to the gold standard, served to intensify this concern with history in a negative way, to inflame existing nativist fears and foster nationalist fervor, causing widespread discontent that crossed geographic and class boundaries. Results for Jews included new or newly enforced exclusionary measures, as well as physical violence in the form of riots, personal attacks, and other threats.[11]

In general, the definition of "Americanness," and the question of who had a right to the title of American, acquired an edge and became a pressing concern by the 1880s. The American Historical Association was formed in 1889, and the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1890. Immigrant groups seeking to be included as true Americans began to form historical associations that served, among other functions, as vehicles for promoting and publicizing their accomplishments as Americans, as well as repackaged versions of European backgrounds that seemed consistent with American values. Immigrants expected

[10] Michael Kammen has written extensively on the phenomenon of burgeoning popular interest in "tradition" and history at this time. See, for example, his *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

[11] John Higham's *Strangers in the Land* (New York: Atheneum, 1965) is the seminal work on nineteenth-century American nativism. Since the early 1960s, when the study of American Jewish history "came into its own," scores of works on Jewish immigration to the United States, American Jewish life in this period, and the difficulties confronting Jewish immigrants and their children have been published. Irving Howe's *The World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) remains a classic, as does Nathan Glazer's *American Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957). An enduring and insightful analysis of the issues confronting American Jews is Selma Stern-Taeubler's "Problems of American Jewish and German Jewish Historiography," in *Jews from Germany in the United States,* edited by Eric E. Hirshler (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1955), 3–17. Also useful is Chaim I. Waxman, *American Jews in Transition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983). The journal of the AJHS has published numerous articles on the topic; many of these are cited elsewhere in this article.

these accomplishments and representations of the past to find favor in a wider American culture.[12]

The internal factors threatening the status of American Jews at this time are less familiar. Essentially, the apparatus with which "traditional" Jewish identity was constructed had eroded within a few short generations. The quite recent segregation of European Jewish communities was exchanged for the far more open American political and social landscape. European restrictions and exclusionary measures had served to keep Jewish populations functioning in varying degrees of isolation, discouraging contact and integration, and at the same time supporting the infrastructure for relatively constant and consistent renewal of Jewish beliefs, customs, and values.[13]

In contrast to the European states from which they came, America was founded upon variations on Enlightenment-era ideologies of equality, freedom, and individualism. Class structures were less rigid and certainly less explicit. Traditional restrictions on the social, economic, and political activities of Jews had by the late nineteenth century been removed from most state constitutions, and democratic values were generally accepted if not always upheld. This presented great promise, but also a paradox. Acceptance came with a price, and immigrants and their children encountered conflicting messages: tolerance and enlightenment had their limits; anti-Semitic prejudices nurtured for centuries held firm.[14] A persistent and oppressive incongruity faced

[12] On the establishment and later development of immigrant historical societies, see John Higham, "The Ethnic Historical Society in Changing Times," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 13 (Winter 1994): 33–34. It is not uncommon to encounter the efforts of marginalized groups of various kinds to remodel aspects of the past to serve the perceived values of the present. This is evident in the writings of many nineteenth-century Jews. One example is found in the autobiography of Oscar Straus. In describing his father's participation in the European revolutions of 1848 and subsequent emigration to America, Straus made the extraordinary comment that his father and his father's peers "were American in spirit, therefore, even before they arrived." Straus, *Under Four Administrations: Recollections of Oscar S. Straus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), 4. Straus was not the only one to attempt to project back in time what he considered to be American ideals onto his European forebears. Arthur Hertzberg contends that the number of American Jews who claimed relatives involved in the failed 1848 revolutions was grossly inflated. Hertzberg, *The Jews in America,* 102–3. Another particularly striking example of this phenomenon in a European setting is described in Michael Marrus in *The Politics of Assimilation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971). French Jews, tenuous in their citizenship and anxious for acceptance into the general society, drew parallels between the French Revolution and the revolt of the Maccabees (96ff.).

[13] There is a solid body of literature on European Jewry in the pre-modern period and in the period of emancipation, i.e., the late eighteenth through mid-nineteenth century. Especially good are the works of Jacob Katz: *Jewish Emancipation and Self-Emancipation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1986); *Emancipation and Assimilation* (Westmead, England: Gregg International Publishers, 1972); *Out of the Ghetto* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); and *Tradition and Crisis* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1961). Other valuable perspectives include sections of Arthur Hertzberg's *The French Enlightenment and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); and Marrus's *The Politics of Assimilation.* For an excellent concise sketch of these issues, see Gershom Scholem, "Jews and Germans," *Commentary* 42 (May 1966): 31–38.

[14] It is worth noting the evolution of historiography on American anti-Semitism. Early works on American anti-Semitism display a consensus among historians that American anti-Semitism was virtually nonexistent until the 1880s, or that where it did exist, its impact on Jewish life was not significant. Examples of this view include Oscar Handlin's *Adventures in Freedom: 300 Years of Jewish Life in America*

American Jews, who were "expected to become . . . American[s], but not at too rapid a pace. . . . The Jew was enjoined to cease being so clannish, but found many obstacles placed in his path when he attempted to assimilate into the mainstream of American society."[15]

The adjustment to these new conditions required, for the "German Jews," a major transformation in the ways in which they thought of themselves and their communities. Frequently, these forces were faced not gradually over generations, but within single lifetimes. The interplay of new freedoms and stubborn prejudices engendered in Jews a continual and anxious self-examination that colored all aspects of Jewish life and reverberated over generations.[16]

As historian Jacob Katz has commented, "Jewish identity is as problematic in the modern world as it was not in pre-modern times."[17] With many of the shackles which had sustained European Jewry's isolation from the general culture removed, and with a greater potential for prosperity in America, Jews were legally free to choose among the elements of an identity previously prescribed by a stable set of criteria, in effect, to "determine how Jewish [they] wanted to be." Every aspect of Jewish life now came under intense self-scrutiny. "New questions forced [Jews] to rethink age-old principles and behavior: Was there still a discrete Jewish people to which [they] belonged? How did a modern Jew affirm his Jewishness?" At the same time, Jews faced the entrenched opposition described above. In America, as in other locales, these questions had to be

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(New York: McGraw Hill, 1954), 73–74, and "American Views of the Jew at the Opening of the 20th Century," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 40 (1950): 323–44; John Higham's "Antisemitism in the Gilded Age," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43 (March 1957): 559–78, and "Social Discrimination Against the Jews of America, 1830–1930," *American Jewish History* 47 (Sept. 1957): 1–25.

By the 1980s, a new body of research argued that persistent strains of anti-Semitism, ranging from the subtle to the virulent, are endemic to American culture, and that anti-Semitism has had a considerable impact on Jewish life in both concrete and subtle ways. Examples include: Naomi Cohen, *Encounter with Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States 1830–1914* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984) and "Antisemitic Imagery: The Nineteenth Century Background," *Jewish Social Studies* 47 (Summer–Fall 1985): 307–12; and Louise Mayo, *The Ambivalent Image: Nineteenth Century America's Perception of the Jew* (Rutherford, N.J.: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988). Leonard Dinnerstein's *Uneasy at Home: Antisemitism and the American Jewish Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) contains an excellent bibliography on the topic to that date.

[15] Cohen, *Encounter with Emancipation,* xii.

[16] Although sweeping analyses of the psychological affects of historical developments on individuals or groups should be approached with caution, several works, including Cohen's *Encounter with Emancipation* and her biography of Oscar Straus, *A Dual Heritage: The Public Career of Oscar Straus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), have used primary sources to convincingly demonstrate these phenomena. Scholarship on this period in Jewish history supports this interpretation. See, for example, the work of Jacob Katz, Selma Stern-Taubler, and Gershom Scholem previously cited. Theoretical works, such as Sander Gilman's *Jewish Self Hatred: Antisemitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) provide useful models against which to examine primary sources. Gilman's book describes the phenomenon in terms of internalized hostilities and the adoption of a sense of "Otherness."

[17] Katz, *Jewish Emancipation and Self-Emancipation.* Katz continues, "In the Middle Ages and until the breaking up of the ghetto in the eighteenth century, whatever the burdens of Jewish life might have been, a self-questioning skepticism about individual identity was not one of them."

answered with an eye to the demands of the national cultures that Jews sought to join. "The ties of Judaism that still bound [American Jews] to a faith and to a people had to be interpreted in ways that would not obstruct their acceptance as Americans."[18] The redefinition of Judaism as a religious creed spurred the conviction that "in all other respects Jews belonged to the general category of citizens. In reality, however, Judaism even in its post-emancipation version continued to represent an entire minority culture, and the Jews a conspicuous subgroup. *The problem was that no ideology had been developed to justify or account for this state of affairs.* The resulting burden of a split and confused identity caused terrible suffering among many Jews, whose very personalities were disfigured by the dilemma."[19] And as historian Michael Meyer has written, "the appearance of a new historical consciousness . . . began to play a crucial role in the formation of modern Jewish identity . . . after centuries in which historical interest was at best limited. . . . The process was by no means simple and straightforward."[20] It was this set of circumstances, externally imposed and internally felt, at once optimistic and troubling, that culminated in the 1880s and drove the movement to found the American Jewish Historical Society.

"Head 'em off at the past": Historical Societies and the Construction of Identity"[21]

The historical society movement in America originated in 1791 when Jeremy Belknap and seven others met to organize the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston.[22] Subsequent state historical societies were modeled after the MHS, which was itself heavily influenced by the principles and organization that characterized the Society of Antiquaries in London.[23] The founders of the MHS expressed their goals in the constitution they drafted: "The preservation of books, pamphlets, manuscripts, and records, containing historical facts . . . to mark the genius, delineate the manners, and trace the progress of society in the United States . . . and rescue the true history of this country from the ravages of

[18] Cohen, *Encounter with Emancipation,* xi.

[19] Katz, *Jewish Emancipation and Self-Emancipation,* 132 (emphasis added).

[20] Michael A. Meyer, "The Emergence of Jewish Historiography: Motives and Motifs," *History and Theory* 27 (1988): 160.

[21] "Head 'em off at the past," a line perhaps apocryphally attributed to the Firesign Theatre, expresses precisely the process of constructing history and historical identity through the use of conventions such as historical societies and archives. Thanks to Bob Horton for reaching into the dark recesses of his memory to provide this line.

[22] Louis Leonard Tucker, "Massachusetts," in H. G. Jones, *Historical Consciousness in the Early Republic: The Origins of State Historical Societies, Museums, and Collections, 1791–1861* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: North Caroliniana Society and North Carolina Collection, 1995), 6.

[23] Tucker, "Massachusetts," 17.

time, and the effects of ignorance and neglect."[24] It is not surprising that the founders of the American Jewish Historical Society also took the MHS as a model.

Cyrus Adler's attempts at organizing an American Jewish historical society began in earnest in 1888, the year in which Minerva Publishing Company in New York issued two virulent and scurrilous anti-Semitic tracts entitled *The Original Mr. Jacobs* and *The American Jew: An Exposé of his Career.* At the same time, Minerva announced that it would soon issue a monthly publication to be called *The Anti-Semite.* The types of anti-Semitism emerging in the United States in the 1880s were starting to resemble those already causing problems for Jews in Germany and France.

Adler called the first organizational meeting of the AJHS in June 1892. Attendees included scholars, politicians, philanthropists, educators, librarians, rabbis, and a variety of kinds of Jewish community leaders. A few prestigious non-Jews also attended, including historians Herbert B. Adams of Johns Hopkins University, John B. McMaster of the University of Pennsylvania, and A. Howard Clark of the National Museum in Washington.[25] Adler served as the society's first corresponding secretary. Oscar Straus was its first president.

If those invited to the first organizational meeting were looking for a way to present an image of American Jewry to the general culture, a historical society provided not only an appropriate but an ideal forum. This fact alone demonstrates a widely held confidence in the authority of the historical record. By the 1890s, state and patriotic historical societies played an integral role in the shaping of "American identity." The historical society had become, by this time, almost obligatory for groups seeking to establish and present to the larger culture a cohesive identity. In this way, the idea of the historical society, though originating in Europe, had taken on a distinctly American flavor by the 1890s. The act of founding a historical society had become a demonstration of "Americanness," and the concept of an historical society itself was one that had the stamp of American approval.[26] Constructed carefully, an American Jewish historical society could not be accused of unpatriotic intentions or fostering "clannishness" or dual loyalties.[27]

Steeped in German culture as they were, the founders of the AJHS may have held the notion that promoting historical writing about the Jewish past could recreate and unite the Jewish people, and could be "a tool for reversing the declining salience of Jewish identity," of forwarding progress "on the road

[24] Tucker, "Massachusetts," 7.

[25] Handwritten draft of Adler's letter, n.d., Cyrus Adler Papers, P-16, Box 2, folder title: "Correspondence re: founding of AJHS," Archives, AJHS, Waltham, Mass. and New York, N.Y.

[26] Other ethnic groups also founded historical societies in this period. See John J. Appel, *Immigrant Historical Societies in the United States 1880–1950* (New York: Arno Press, 1980).

[27] Under Adler's direction, the AJHS's structural elements (constitution, meetings, committees, membership requirements) followed the model set by state and national societies. "Minutes" 10, 53.

to social, cultural, and political integration." Nineteenth-century German historians, certainly, had been a catalyst for German unity by "center[ing] on the German legacy [and] unearthing [German] history to create a German national identity."[28] This fact was not lost on the founders of the AJHS. The proposed Jewish historical society was to be a means by which Straus, Adler, and their colleagues, as representatives of American Jewry as a whole, would address the most basic philosophical dilemma of American Jewish life—the fusion of Jewish ideals and perceived American values into a viable, public, American Jewish identity.

The simple fact of the meeting itself is significant; the historical society would be an entirely new kind of institution for American Jews. While nonsynagogal Jewish institutions had existed in America from the mid-nineteenth century on, these were service organizations or benevolent societies whose function was aid to Jewish communities. The earlier institutions, such as B'nai B'rith, founded in 1843, had historical roots in the tradition of Jewish charitable associations organized to administer to the physical and educational needs of members of the Jewish community, as well as to foster acculturation. Historically, individual Jews were seen as representatives of the entire community; these institutions ensured that the needs of poor or unacculturated Jews were taken care of and did not reflect negatively upon the Jewish community as a whole, whose own status was often legally and otherwise insecure. In America, the benevolent societies followed in this tradition and focused on the internal needs of the communities. Thus these were inward looking organizations, established to deflect, not attract, public attention, and therefore run quite consciously without a public face.

The AJHS was an entirely different sort of institution. Its goal was precisely the opposite: to create and promote a public face for American Jewry. It was in this respect unprecedented, and represented a major shift of outlook for the Jewish community. In pre-emancipation times, custom and synagogal strictures forbade any form of public display which might attract attention to the community, much less an official organization created for the very purpose of outreach to the general public. This custom remained intact, for the most part, throughout the nineteenth century, though by the 1880s leaders of the Jewish community, such as Adler and Straus, had started to question its necessity. The measure of acceptance into the wider culture that they had achieved, coupled with their steadfast confidence in American democracy, tolerance, and equality, engendered in them a measure of comfort with a public affirmation of their identity as American Jews (although it should be noted that this confidence was at times only superficial, as is demonstrated in their writings). These opportunities and this confidence had not been shared by their predecessors.

[28] Meyer, "The Emergence of Jewish Historiography: Motives and Motifs," 165.

Those gathered at the Jewish Theological Seminary on 7 June 1892 were united in their conviction that an American Jewish historical society that collected the evidence of American Jewish history was the means by which to project to other (newly immigrated) Jews and to the general public a positive image of American Jewry. But the founders of the AJHS were not united in their conceptions of just what the content of that image should be, or precisely how it should be presented. Ironically, this lack of consensus was accompanied by the stated imperative that to the public the endeavor should appear unified. Its function, after all, was to create and project a cohesive and confident image. Therefore all hints of controversy were edited from the published version of the minutes.[29] But the full transcript provides a complete and unmediated picture of the meeting and the struggles that characterized the groundwork for the proposed historical society. It also provides an extraordinary testament to the extent to which power can be invested in archives.

On the surface, the challenges facing those present at the first organizational meeting were fairly straightforward, just what one would expect for a budding historical society: to delineate the scope and objectives of the proposed society and to determine the direction and form the organization was to take. As the discussion unfolded over the course of the afternoon and into the night, practical questions were raised: should the society concentrate on publishing or collecting historical materials? What would be the geographical scope of collecting activities? What would be the historical period collected? Which denominations should be—or not be—represented in the materials collected? What kinds of documents would be the focus of a collecting strategy? In answering these questions, the accompanying social issues and depth of feeling with which they were invested would be revealed. Each and every statement of opinion is accompanied by an emotional plea, threat, or warning relating to concerns far larger than the business at hand.

As the participants voiced their gravest and most urgent concerns, they evinced an unquestioning faith in the ability of the historical record to meet and to overcome the political and social forces that confronted them. Through the manipulation of historical materials, their fears about the current threats to American Jewry might be alleviated, and their hopes for a more optimistic future met. The historical society would mirror precisely the American Jewish identity they sought to forge.

An early point of contention was whether the proposed society's chief activity ought to be the collection and preservation of historical documents, or the writing of history. If the former, would there be enough popular support for the enterprise? Would the society then serve the purpose of educating the Jewish community and the general public? These concerns begged the larger

[29] AJHS, *Report of Organization;* Kaganoff, "The American Jewish Historical Society at Ninety," 470.

question: would a historical society devoted to less publicly oriented concerns adequately address the problem of American Jewish identity?

The participants were divided on the two perspectives. Some advocated that the society's objective should be simply to collect materials to be stored in a permanent repository, which would supply the evidence needed to support the work of future historians. And, as needed, such documents could also provide proof of Jewish patriotism against the charges of anti-Semites. One participant was confident that a focus on collecting and preservation would be adequate. He suggested that the society stress "especially the collection of documents by which it is shown how the Jews of the United States have attained their high intellectual position, and they need not stand back in any community in this country and they are on the highway to greater successes, . . . all this showing how their status has been attained and what it is apt to be in the future should come within the scope of our work."[30]

Another camp objected that the preservation of documents alone would not make for a powerful enough public statement. As Reform rabbi Kaufmann Kohler argued, "we should not simply as scholars and historians register facts but . . . should publish such essays, articles, or longer works that would stir the interest of the Jews and show our fellow citizens what the Jews have done in the history of culture in America." Kohler viewed this as urgent and worthy of immediate attention because he believed the collecting of historical materials could counteract the precarious situation of American Jewry. "The practical and theoretical aim before this society," he continued, "should be to get facts and put forth within the year a work that would at once reflect credit on the Society and enhance the interest in our work by showing what the Jews of America as a body collectively and individually and as patriots and in the Jewish congregations have done for the Government, for the culture and for the entire history, the National or Racial history of America."[31]

Harvard medievalist Charles Gross argued in the same vein for publication and his reasoning reveals the routinely voiced (though nonetheless heartbreaking) and naively optimistic response to an irrational, entrenched American anti-Semitism. "The parent of prejudice against the Jews of America, the prejudice that still remains here, is ignorance," he intoned. "If we can dispel that ignorance. . . . I think that will do away with a great deal of the prejudice. . . . The Jews of this country have been ready to offer up life and fortune for this country. . . . If we can make that plain through the researches of the Society . . . we will elevate the position of the Jews in America . . . and dispel prejudice.[32]

[30] "Minutes," 18.

[31] "Minutes," 31.

[32] "Minutes," 14–15.

If the society were to collect and weave archival materials into published histories, then the organizing members would have to delineate its collection policy. Should its scope be limited to the United States, to North America, to the entire New World, to the Western hemisphere? Should it be limited geographically at all? Should it collect from all Jewish denominations, and what about pertinent materials created by non-Jews? Should it allow European members?

Answers to these questions were inextricably entwined, and would have significant ramifications for both the historical society and for the image of American Jewry it sought to project. In the contemporary climate of xenophobia, aggressive patriotism, and contested ownership of the mantle of the "true American," many immigrant groups sought to discover (or fabricate) "ancestors" as far back in American history as possible, providing themselves with an unbroken link from the earliest times to the present. At the same time, they often tried to disassociate themselves from recent (Eastern) European pasts. As Kaufmann Kohler put it, "Connections with South America must at once be sought; the conditions precedent to immigration to this country must be studied in Spain, Portugal and Holland," effectively eliminating study of more recent immigration and immigration from Eastern Europe."[33]

Rabbi Bernard Drachman suggested that the society's membership and focus should not be limited to Americans but should be instead "a Jewish historical society of universal importance," stating that to do the former "would be an act of American patriotism, [while] the second would be an act of universal science." His tentative statement that the latter might be a more scholarly and appropriate goal for a historical society was soundly dismissed by others present who felt that the longstanding presence of Jews in the Americas should be a primary concern of the society.[34]

On the other hand, Kaufman Kohler argued, apparently persuasively, that a broad (albeit selective) scope might best serve the immediate objective of the society to project an image of devoted patriotism. "German Jews" frequently sought to associate their own experience with that of historically prestigious Sephardic Jews, renowned for their high culture and their acknowledged contributions to pre-Inquisition Spanish society, and alleged to be among the first Europeans to set foot upon the American continent. Many of these Sephardim had become conversos or marranos: Jews either sincerely or superficially (for self-preservation) converted to Catholicism. When Kohler suggested that the society not exclude European and South American Jewry, or even their Catholic descendants whom he described as Jews by "blood" if not by faith,[35] he was attempting to claim these early explorers and settlers as the distinguished forebears of contemporary American Jewry.

[33] *Report of Organization,* 7.

[34] "Minutes," 26.

[35] "Minutes," 10.

The results of these debates were actualized in practice. What the founders of the AJHS hoped to achieve can be deduced in part by studying lists of accessions and tables of contents from early numbers of the society's *Publications.* Accession lists were not published for every year, but a sampling from 1892 to 1898 suggests a special interest in documenting the presence of Jews in North America prior to the Revolutionary War and activities of Jews during the war. For example, the society accepted in 1896 a certificate of Myer Hart dated 1778, referring to the care of British prisoners. In 1897 it accessioned a 1739 letter from the governor of Jamaica concerning Jews. Early American Jewish sermons, speeches presented at synagogue consecrations, portraits of prominent American Jews and obituaries and memoirs regarding them, constitutions of Jewish benevolent societies, biographies of American Jews, Hebrew grammars and works of Old Testament exegesis, and documents celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Hebrew Sunday Schools in America all found their way into the collections of the AJHS in its first six years of operation.[36] Among the more unusual items acquired was a 1722 pamphlet regarding the baptism of Judah Monis, who became the first professor of Hebrew at Harvard College.[37] Viewed collectively, these materials indicate a lengthy and firmly rooted American Jewish history, and an American Jewry characterized from the start by patriotic zeal, good work, and a new, American-style piety.

Throughout the 1890s the AJHS collected published histories and biographies of Jews as well as proceedings and other publications from Jewish organizations such as the *Alliance Israelite Universelle* in Paris. The society also acquired some general historical works and reports, publications, and bulletins from a number of state historical societies, the American Academy of Political and Social Science, and other professional organizations.[38] In 1898 the society solicited and received the Official Army Register for 1897 from the U.S. War Department, as well as Official Army Registers for the Civil War years of 1861 to 1865.[39] In 1900 the AJHS started a campaign to discover names of Jews who had fought in the Spanish-American War, and launched a nationwide survey to compile names of Jews buried in American cemeteries prior to 1850.[40] Research articles published by the AJHS in the 1890s indicate a similar emphasis on patriotism.

"Precedence evokes pride and proves title," writes historian David Lowenthal in a chapter devoted to the importance of "Being First" for heritage seekers, and it is not surprising that recurring themes of research articles in the

[36] See AJHS *Publications,* vols. 1–6 (1893–1898).

[37] AJHS *Publications* 5 (1897): 212. Harvard would not hire Jews. Monis claimed that his conversion to Christianity was sincere. Lee M. Friedman, *Early American Jews* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), 22–39.

[38] AJHS *Publications,* vols. 1–6 (1893–1898).

[39] AJHS *Publications* 6 (1898): 163.

[40] AJHS *Publications* 8 (1900): vii–viii.

Publications included numerous Jewish "firsts."[41] Other topics of these early research articles included careers of American Jews who had held public office or other distinguished positions, participation by Jews in voyages of discovery (including that of Columbus) to the New World, early settlement in the West Indies and South America, the activities of Sephardim in the American colonies, American Jewish involvement in the Revolution and the Civil War, and pre-1800 community histories. Volumes 1 and 2 of the *Publications,* for example, contain research articles on "The Colonization of America by the Jews," "Jews Mentioned in the Journal of the Continental Congress," "Jewish Beginnings in Kentucky."

The same concerns are voiced in the society's published presidential addresses. Oscar Straus's third presidential address at the 1895 "scientific meeting" of the AJHS attempted to forge a connection between the colonial Sephardic congregations and contemporary American Jewry. He did not, however, mention the bitter prejudices and ideological differences that had existed between the Sephardim and Ashkenazim in America, nor the fact that their cultural traditions were vastly different. Straus followed this theme to the astonishing conclusion that the Puritan, Sephardic, and Huguenot founders of America shared an identical spirit, adventurous and courageous, born of Catholic persecution. (Although contemporary anti-Semitism was off limits, or so it seemed, Catholic persecution of Jews under the Inquisition in Latin America received considerable attention in early volumes of the *Publications.*) Straus's implication, of course, was that contemporary American Jews had as much right to the mantle of the founding father as the Protestant groups who claimed that distinction as their own.[42]

Not surprisingly, nothing on the subject of current Jewish concerns such as Zionism, contemporary anti-Semitism, socialism, or recent immigration would appear before 1900. Because no file of rejected manuscripts or documents exists at the AJHS archives, it is not known whether such contributions were submitted or offered to the society. Clearly the articles published and materials collected emphasized the American in American Jewry. As the society's "Objects," printed on the frontispieces of each volume of the *Publications* states, the society's aims were "not sectarian but American." What, then, defined the Jewish part of American Jewry, and how were these two strands combined?

Participants at the founders' meeting wrestled with these questions, attempting to define the content of American Judaism, and trying to mold a Jewish model for the Jewish part of the identity they sought to forge. Here again the founders attempted to satisfy the conflicting messages of the larger culture. It was good, in fact necessary, in America for a social group to maintain a strong

[41] David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), chapter eight, "Being First," 174.

[42] AJHS *Publications* 3 (1895): 1–5.

and visible religious identification. After all, embodied in the concept of America was freedom of religion and separation of church and state, a land where multiple faiths worshiped privately and regarded one another with tolerance. But another message forced Jews to perform a balancing act: piety was good, but Jews should not be "too Jewish."

The American Jewish religious scene was fraught with ideological and denominational strife throughout the nineteenth century, and not surprisingly, this conflict found its way into the various conceptions for the proposed historical society as expressed at the first meeting. Nevertheless, most of the rabbis present were willing to suppress their doctrinal differences and unite on one position. As Sabato Morais put it, "Thank God my mind is broad enough to hold all my brethren next to my heart"[43] and urged that the society take care to downplay factional differences among American Jewry, which he feared might cause a "distraction [from] the very object which we have in view to enter upon."[44]

But broad-minded principles were difficult to realize as evidenced when the question of the representation of rabbis in the leadership of the society arose. When, near the end of the first meeting, an announcement revealed that no rabbis had been elected to the executive council, Kohler reacted bitterly. "The clergymen simply are treated by the Jews in a way that they must feel as if the pew and the pulpit are in antagonism." He urged his fellow rabbis to "leave . . . and abandon all work in connection with this Society."[45]

The anger with which these men reacted to the perceived slight was symptomatic of the deteriorating position of the rabbi in American society at that time. Rabbis in America had never been able to wield the unquestioned authority of their pre-emancipation predecessors in Europe. What influence they did have was declining, paralleled by the increased secularism of American Jewry. The religious leaders present at the meeting had assumed that the writing of congregational histories would be the society's main focus, and would be just the right mechanism by which to bolster the waning religious element in American Judaism. They were soundly opposed by the more secularly oriented individuals present, who wanted to promote Jews as Americans who happened to be Jewish, much like Americans who happened to be Baptist, Methodist, or Unitarian. They sought to disassociate themselves from what they viewed as the blind traditionalism of the recent Eastern European immigrants. They did not want a historical society that reflected traditions and tenets irrelevant in their lives and called attention to what they themselves perceived as their own "otherness."

Mythmaking as well as genuine scholarship characterized the early activities of the society. As the founders set the parameters for the historical society, they were also deliberately defining an image of American Jewry for dissemi-

[43] "Minutes," 13.

[44] "Minutes," 11.

[45] "Minutes," 11.

nation to the general public. This was exemplified by Sabato Morais's hope that the society itself "[would] cast lustre not alone upon those few persons who have gathered here to-day but upon all the Jews of the United States."[46] As Dr. Henry Leipziger, assistant superintendent of the New York public schools, declared at the meeting, "As a Jew and an American I feel we must emphasize [our patriotism] more than we have done by bringing the facts promptly and in a scholarly manner before the people."[47] At the same time, they were building a model for dissemination to American Jewry itself. Kaufmann Kohler expressed both objectives when he described the establishment of the society as a "noble and . . . grand undertaking which can only arouse self respect in the Jew and raise the esteem of the Jews in the eyes of our fellow citizens."[48]

This "self respect" was not so simply obtained. Men like Straus and Adler considered themselves quintessential modern Jews, emancipated and confident of their complete and total acceptance into the larger society as Jewish Americans. And yet their writings are peppered with remarks that belie this confidence and reveal the tensions between their self identity as Jewish Americans and an anxiety unchanged from that exhibited by their predecessors. These kinds of remarks are epitomized by Adler's comment that "the prime duty of Jews living everywhere . . . is to be as good Jews as they can be; and this of course means as good men as they can be. First and foremost we ought to remove the blemish from our own midst, so that we may come before the world with clean hands." Even someone of the stature of Cyrus Adler, then, was unable to avoid internalizing the hostilities around him, adopting the assumption that rather than originating in the general culture, anti-Semitism was in some way provoked by the presence of Jews. That this was Adler's feeling as late as 1941, when the line was published in his memoirs, is particularly unsettling.[49]

These strains and anxieties clustered around everyday life, as well as the more momentous contemporary concerns. Zionism, for example, posed grave problems for Adler and Straus and other middle-class American Jews. Zionism brought into relief tensions between commitment to Judaism and American patriotism and demanded a response from public figures such as Adler and Straus. Crafting an acceptable response was an agonizing process. Wholehearted support for Zionism would mean nothing less than the complete and total failure of emancipation, an acknowledgment that Jews could never be accepted as true Americans. It would undermine the image of the "American who happened to be Jewish," and provoke suspicions that loyalty to other Jews, across national boundaries, would take precedence when push came to shove. And yet neither Straus nor Adler—strongly self-identifying Jews, whose defini-

[46] "Minutes," 13.

[47] "Minutes," 29.

[48] "Minutes," 11.

[49] Cyrus Adler, *I Have Considered the Days* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1941), 428.

tions of Jewishness were highly dissimilar—could quite bring himself to dismiss Zionism. In 1891 Adler traveled to England and attended a lecture by Theodor Herzl. Afterward, he offered this conflicted remark: "At that time [Herzl] was receiving little cooperation from the upper class Jews in England. I felt convinced from this meeting that no student of current Jewish affairs could afford to disregard Zionism, but I did not agree with Herzl's proposal."[50] Straus wrote about his own meeting with Herzl in Vienna in 1900, and in his typical fashion as a secular Jew who nevertheless felt as strongly about his Jewish identity as Adler, did so using the language of race. "I told him I was not a Zionist, though I did not want him to understand that I was in any way opposed to the movement, or disposed carelessly to ignore the solemn aspirations which the deeply religious members of my race had prayerfully nurtured in sorrow and suffering through the ages."[51]

These comments exemplified the intense loyalties and worries that swirled around and characterized the atmosphere at the founders meeting in 1892.

Archives, Archivists, and Identity

What prompts people to establish historical societies? What functions do they serve, and what is their enduring appeal? It is critical that archivists, who are employed by these institutions, who foster and populate their collections, and who (in some cases quite explicitly) view documentation of identity as their mission, address these questions.

Archivists play an integral role in the development of historical societies, yet we have published only a handful of histories of them, and have written little about the motives of their founders or how the missions, collecting policies, publication decisions, and other defining characteristics of such repositories have been shaped. Few articles have examined the underlying social or political conditions that motivate these activities and decisions. Little attention has been paid to the political and social consequences of archivists' own work in this area. Yet historical societies continue to multiply and to represent a wide and growing assortment of groups with group identities.[52]

If we as archivists have been slow to question our profession's long held view of archives and archival records as sites of historical truth, we have been equally slow to question assumptions about group and individual identity as

[50] Adler, *I Have Considered the Days*, 233.

[51] Straus, *Recollections*, 156.

[52] H.G. Jones remarked that contributors to a volume of essays on the founding of early state historical societies "lamented the scarcity of studies of the beginning of historical activities in the United States" despite the fact that those early activities laid the foundation for nearly two centuries of research. Jones, *Historical Consciousness*, viii. It is, of course, no secret that archival history in general has received short shrift, as has been persuasively stated by Richard J. Cox, "On the Value of Archival History in the United States," *Libraries & Culture* 23 (Spring 1988): 135–51.

representations of historical truth or reality. This is not for lack of opportunity. The body of work generated by the discourse on identity was so abundant by 1992 that Henry Louis Gates referred to it as the "cliché-ridden discourse of identity" in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* devoted to new approaches to the topic. Five years later another writer in the same journal remarked upon a (still ongoing) "obsessive focus of intellectual interest on questions of identity and cultural difference."[53]

For the past two decades, the concept of identity has indeed been a dominating, driving theme in academic discourse, crossing disciplinary and national lines to include voices from such fields as history, anthropology, literary theory, philosophy, and cultural studies. The discourse on identity has encompassed examinations of national, state, local, ethnic, gender, class, and community identities, of individual and group identity. Many studies of identity construction have turned on concepts of difference and power. "Identity politics" has become shorthand for inquiries into the phenomenon of identity construction and the historical and cultural forces that shape that process. With the intellectual focus on identity politics, essentialist perspectives, which reify identity and regard it as intrinsic, immutable, perhaps even genetic, have for the most part given way to variations of anti-essentialism—identity as social fiction, no less "real" for those who subscribe to it, but constructed culturally, for political and historical reasons.[54]

Concurrent with the swelling of intellectual interest in identity and the development of identity politics as a recognized field of study, these issues have captured the public imagination. However, the two parallel phenomena have entirely different motivations, tenors, and results. If scholarship on identity has examined differences between groups of various kinds, it has done so for the most part with the understanding that such differences may be assigned or chosen, but are in any case driven by culture. Popular interest in identity, on the other hand, fixates on differences as defined in essentialist terms and comprises a hodgepodge of essentialist ideas clothed in the language of identity politics.

[53] Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Editors' Introduction: Multiplying Identities," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992): 625; Tim Dean, "Two Kinds of Other and Their Consequences," *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Summer 1997): 910. Statements about the abundance of research and publications on identity studies are numerous in the literature. See, for another example, the opening sentence of Steven Gregory's "Thinking Empowerment through Difference: Race and the Politics of Identity," *Diaspora* 2 (Winter 1993): 401–10: "Questions of identity are at the forefront of contemporary discussions of culture." (p. 401).

[54] The introduction to Robert G. Dunn's *Identity Crises: A Social Critique of Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) provides a concise discussion on the evolution of identity politics as a field of inquiry and the origins of the term itself. For a representative sampling of work in identity politics see Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *Identities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995); John Rajchman, ed., *The Identity in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference,* edited by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222–37; Charles Spinosa and Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Two Kinds of Antiessentialism and Their Consequences," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Summer 1996): 735–63 and the response to that article by Tim Dean, "Two Kinds of Other and Their Consequences," *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Summer 1997): 910–20.

Exploring heritage, preserving diversity, honoring multiculturalism—all of these have become part of the language of the day, buzz words, or codes. Their intended meanings have been distorted such that they have given way to the unhappy charge of "political correctness" and, more importantly, the polarization of communities. In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, heated discussion of ethnic identity became, as one observer put it, "a mass-mediated pastime, the new topic of talk shows and T-shirts . . . a fad and a style, and everyone knew what to think about it. Indeed it seemed that we were living in a new, monolithic culture of multiculturalism. And yet all this 'publicity' had tended to obscure the more difficult questions."[55]

It is on this level that archivists have joined the discussion. Recent developments in the archival profession demonstrate a fascination with popularized notions of identity—particularly ethnic and gender identity—and a failure to address the "more difficult questions." An extraordinary volume of activity, including grant-funded collecting initiatives, conferences, panel discussions, workshops, and exhibits, has been shaped by the language and tenets of the popular perspective on identity. These efforts are generally motivated by a conviction that somewhere out there exists an authenticity to be restored to the archival record, a natural balance to be righted, a bias to be erased, and a "real" identity to be documented. Methods to achieve these goals have included redirected collecting policies, outreach to new user groups (often described as "under-documented") and efforts to be more "inclusive," usually by enlisting the help of members of such "non-traditional" groups to assist in documentation initiatives.

One gets the sense, from an examination of these efforts, that archivists have remained wholly insulated from the scholarship on the concept of identity that has been so prominent in research for the past quarter century. There is little evidence that the insights generated by that discourse have penetrated the archival world. Attitudes, comments, and project descriptions indicate an obliviousness to the fact that essentialist conceptions of identity were long ago rejected by serious scholars as a means of understanding or articulating ethnic, gender, national, or other differences.[56] As for identity in specific regard to ethnicity, as Karen Leonard wrote in her 1992 book *Making Ethnic Choices,* "that

[55] Rajchman, *The Identity in Question,* viii. The two levels of discourse present a considerable paradox. While an increasingly globalized culture and advances in communications technology would seem to facilitate a lessening of the sharply drawn ethnic divisions of the past, the explosion of interest in popularized identity politics and the rise of violent ethnonationalism indicates that this is not so. See Edwin N. Wilmsen and Patrick McAllister, eds., *The Politics of Difference: Ethnic Premises in a World of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[56] There are exceptions, of course, and occasionally a work of "serious" scholarship that clings to biological determinism appears. Examples include, on the one hand, Charles Murray and Richard J. Hernstein's *The Bell Curve* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), and on the other, the works of many proponents of Afrocentrism. It is worth noting here that these two examples illustrate the opposing uses to which the essentialist approach can be put, providing the raw material for either denigration or glorification of their subjects, neither of them historically or scientifically accurate, both of which obfuscate the roles of individuality, culture, personality, and choice in shaping identity.

ethnicity is not genetically determined but is produced and changed through social relations is now widely accepted."[57]

As archivists, we do not seem to recognize that ours is a subjective endeavor, and we rarely present it as such. Yet authentic voices are authentic only because they declare themselves to be so, or because they reflect an authenticity that we have projected onto them. Attempts to balance the record are simply applications of new biases. There are no monolithic or real "communities" out there. In short, archivists have failed to recognize identity for the social construct that it is, or to find ways to deal with the inevitable presence of point of view in our efforts to document it.

This all presents a curious contradiction. Many archivists have backgrounds in history or in other areas of the social sciences and humanities, disciplines which have long insisted on a critical, evaluative approach to articulations of historical events and phenomena, as well as a firm understanding of subjectivity as an ever-present mitigating factor. And yet archivists are rarely critical and discerning when it comes to documenting identity. Even more curious is the fact that the understanding of and respect for context—and here I mean cultural and historical context—a concept which has always been central to archival work and thinking, is frequently forgotten when it comes to issues of identity.

Why is it critical that archivists and their collaborators consider the connections between archives and the construction of identity? A premise of this essay is that the pervading view of archives as sites of historical truth is at best outdated, and at worst inherently dangerous. The archival record doesn't just happen; it is created by individuals and organizations, and used, in turn, to support their values and missions, all of which comprises a process that is certainly not politically and culturally neutral.[58] In addition, unintended affects can arise from archival activity with the best of intentions. Assumptions about identity, like assumptions about archives, can be outdated and dangerous. Archival work is critical in shaping history. Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, we are major players in the business of identity construction and identity politics.

The temptation to reify identity by means of archives (or any other means, for that matter) as well as the immediate danger of doing so is easily demonstrated. David Lowenthal's discussion of the notion of heritage, of which identity is a cornerstone, is persuasive. "Heritage," he writes, "brings manifold benefits: it links us with ancestors and offspring, bonds neighbors and patriots, certifies identity, roots us in time-honored ways. But heritage is also oppressive, defeatist, decadent." "Heritage by its very nature excites partisan extremes . . . glamorizes narrow nationalism . . . [justifies] jingoism. . . . Heritage passions

[57] Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 12.

[58] This has been persuasively and comprehensively argued in the forthcoming volume *Archival Truth and Historical Consequences: The Construction of Social Memory,* edited by Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook.

. . . play a vital role in national and ethnic conflict, in racism and resurgent genetic determinism."[59]

This last point is perhaps the most worrisome. Archivists seeking to balance the record, to incorporate authentic voices, to resolve the problem of the underdocumented, or even, sometimes, to celebrate diversity must reify identity, thereby making cultural differences immutable and eliminating individuality, personality, and choice within the group in question. All of this requires an essentialist outlook. If ethnic (or national, or gender, or local, etc.) groups are "real" when we try to document them, are they not real, fixed, immutable to their detractors? As Diana Fuss has written, "racial identity and racist practice alike are formed through the bonds of identification."[60] The resulting framework is an unfortunate dichotomy; as archivists we adopt an "us versus them" mentality, effectively making our subjects into the Other.

Instances of archivists' adoption of essentialism are not difficult to find. References to the concept of authenticity, for example, occur with surprising frequency in conference sessions on documenting ethnicity and gender, and are rarely challenged. The inclusion of individuals who are identified with a particular ethnicity may make our professional choices feel more neutral, more "authentic," but it is also true that individuals will sometimes adopt essentialism and essentialist statements about their own identity, a phenomenon which becomes terribly disturbing when put in historical perspective.[61] Essentialist thought of various kinds provides an easy out as we seek to justify our professional goals. One archivist's startling remark that the "quest to collect and preserve recorded remnants of the past . . . seems embedded, even if we do not completely understand why, in human nature"[62] demonstrates that this, like other assumptions about the nature of manuscript collecting, is ripe for further investigation. An awareness of history is not, as has been suggested, "innate, inescapable, something essential to human identity."[63]

[59] Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past,* ix, x.

[60] Fuss, *Identification Papers,* 14, note Fuss's use of the term "identification" is the equivalent to the term used in this essay, "construction of identity." See also Dunn, *Identity Crises,* 3 on definitions of identity, identification, and construction of identity. It is important to note that these outcomes are not limited to the area of ethnic identity. As analogy, look to distinctions Juliet Mitchell draws in her analysis of Freud's view of the relationship between gender and biology. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and Women* (New York: Pantheon, 1974).

[61] Only a few horrific examples are necessary here. At the turn of the century, European Jews identified themselves comfortably and confidently in terms of race, as was the language of the day. Admirable characteristics were played up by Jewish spokesmen and women, and promoted as genetically determined. How easy, then, to support the charge that any supposed negative characteristics too, would be genetically determined, fixed, part of the unchangeable nature of Jews. As the twentieth century comes to a close, the language of race and genetic determinism holds fast in many circles. Initiatives intended to "empower" ethnic minorities by celebrating the notion of positive inherited characteristics only pave the way for those who would use the same rationale to oppress, discriminate, or worse.

[62] Richard J. Cox, "On the Value of Archival History," 137.

[63] David J. Russo, *Keepers of Our Past: Local History Writing in the United States, 1820s–1930s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 1.

Patrick Geary has written that the reification of ethnicity is "inadequate because it leads historians to ignore the processes which give rise to the conflicts and hence to the strategic formation of ethnic consciousness."[64] We would do well to substitute the word "archivists" for "historians" and consider the implications for our work.

Preserving Diversity or Papering over Differences?

What can be learned from the establishment of the AJHS? That the desire to synthesize an American Jewish identity was an objective percolating at the first organizational meeting of the AJHS and was evident in the statements of those present does not mean that the founders and subsequent members and contributors to the *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* did not strive for objectivity in their commitment to archives, historical preservation, and the writing of history. To be sure, social and philosophical concerns were never far from their thoughts. At the same time the founders revered the notion of a historical society as holder of truth, and of that truth as documentary evidence: factual, neutral, created and collected in an objective and impartial fashion. That these two perspectives are in inherent conflict with one another was not apparent to the founders. Their attempts to come to terms with a philosophical dilemma of great complexity and immense proportions existed alongside their conviction that truth, in the form of a historical society and historical documents, could provide the means by which to do so.

These assumptions were not, of course, clearly articulated (or understood) by the attendees. We can only infer meaning from what they said and did at the founders' meeting and from their subsequent actions. Any attempt to reconstruct their assumptions would be guesswork. But their words and actions do seem to indicate a process that works something like this: Archives would serve as the props with which an American Jewish identity would be built. The initial activity of establishing a historical society would begin a tautological process; each step of which would legitimize the next. The historical society would serve as a sanctioned, authoritative base which would enable the collection of archives, carefully selected for their content. With a critical mass of documents, histories could be written. The publication of documents and histories by a historical society would grant legitimacy and authenticity to an American Jewish identity. Once this identity was forged, further collection of archives and writing of histories would confirm and sustain it, continually "proving" its existence.

The rabbis, the academics, the politicians, the educators, the businessmen, and all others at the June 7 meeting, were concerned with image. Their statements reflect, above all, an effort to construct authenticity in the form of

[64] Geary, "Ethnic Identity," 12.

a cohesive and viable American Jewish identity, one grounded in history. The making of such an identity, they hoped, would serve several purposes. It would control the image of the Jew held by the non-Jewish public by setting forth evidence to counteract Jewish stereotypes. It would set an example for the recent immigrants, a model for their self-image, setting guidelines for behavior and ultimately deflecting negative attention from the entire Jewish population. It would alleviate the anxieties that still plagued those already largely assimilated into American life, addressing their uneasiness about acceptance by confirming their historical right to belong. At the same time, they hoped, it would resubstantiate that which had, in a few short generations, become so elusive: a sense of belonging to an ancient and continuous religious-ethnic community, of connection to ancestors and heirs.

The founders set for themselves an impossible task when they set out to construct an image that would be acceptable to mainstream America and serve the needs of American Jewry. The task was made impossible by two factors, both apparent at the very first meeting. The founders were in a weak, defensive position from the outset. America's image of the Jew was not only deeply ingrained, it was ambivalent, "complex and contradictory . . . an elaborate and highly inconsistent stereotype."[65] There was no conceivable way for the founders to counter successfully something so entrenched, bitter, and irrational, using positive, rational means. The second obstacle was less malignant, but equally impossible to overcome. As has been emphasized, this was a diverse group. There were as many versions of American Jewish identity at the meeting as there were attendees. Even with the recognition of their embattled status, the state of peril in which they operated, and the understanding that despite their differences, theirs would be a shared fate, there was simply no way to weave together all of the varied strands of culture and background that the participants brought as individuals, in order to create one American Jewish identity.

The AJHS flourishes more than a century later. Its successes are not diminished by the fact that, as we can see in hindsight, the founders were wholly unsuccessful in their goals to combat anti-Semitism, to relieve internal strife, to construct a single viable Jewish identity, and that the means by which they chose to counter those threats failed them. In the atmosphere of threat and turmoil that characterized the close of the nineteenth century, the AJHS founders turned to archives as a means by which to construct identity, and in doing so they expressed their extraordinary confidence in the power of the document. What this entailed for the AJHS, however, was essentially "papering over" the differences and variety of perspectives that marked its initial meeting. Differences stemming from religious orientation are the most prominent in the minutes, exemplified by conflicts between rabbis and lay people, and among the rabbis themselves. Differences of class, country of origin, education, and definitions

[65] Mayo, *Ambivalent Image*, 179.

of Jewish "tradition," are also intertwined. The attempt to synthesize an authoritative American Jewish identity, then, began with the exclusion of differences that defined the individual participants. Jewish identity—or what might be termed now the Jewish community—could not afford the diverse identities of its individual members.

History constantly reminds us that the reification of ethnic identity does not foster tolerance or acceptance; it constructs communities and then draws hard, arbitrary lines between them, creating differences and making them fixed, constricting the freedom of the individual to define or understand him or herself in multiple ways. We have seen the bloody, horrible results of this process. That archives can be used as props or tools in this process is a sobering thought. And no matter how attractive the hopeful, naïve faith in documentation was to the founders of the AJHS and is today to the archival profession, there is always the potential for destroying the very diversity that our efforts hope to sustain.