

For historians, students of historiography, and archival educators, this volume may provide useful information on how businesses view their histories and how archivists may contribute. Marketers will benefit from information about company anniversaries. For corporate archivists, it may validate past training and current experiences, but provide few new ideas.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> James M. O'Toole, ed., *The Records of American Business* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1997).

## **The Archive Thief: The Man who Salvaged French Jewish History in the Wake of the Holocaust**

By Lisa Moses Leff. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 304 pp.  
Hardcover. \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-19-938095-4.

In September 1978, Zosa Szajkowski, a respected scholar of French Jewish history, was arrested in a police sting operation after he was caught stealing from a collection of rare pamphlets and ephemera in the New York Public Library. A few days later, he took his own life in a hotel room in midtown Manhattan. Szajkowski's suicide culminated his tragic life, which Lisa Moses Leff unravels in *The Archive Thief*. Moses Leff, a history professor at American University specializing in French Jewish history, tells Szajkowski's story against the backdrop of the violence and traumatic upheavals that shaped his life, and the experiences of his generation of Jewish émigré scholars from Eastern Europe: anti-Semitic persecution, war, genocide, and repeated forced migrations coupled with persistent economic insecurity.

*The Archive Thief* is part biography, part social-intellectual history, and part bibliophile thriller. Szajkowski's existence was not only interwoven with his scholarship, but also with the sources that formed the basis of his work and, at times, his economic existence. As Moses Leff reconstructs his life, she highlights his impressive scholarship, while unearthing the materials he collected and used in his works. With a detective's sensibility, she follows the traces he left behind in his footnotes, in the documents he used, and in the archives and libraries he visited. Moses Leff not only reconstructs his life and scholarship, but also the history of his thefts. Between 1940 and his death, Szajkowski collected,

and later stole, tens of thousands of documents in France and brought them to the United States. A passionate collector, he had acquired rare Judaica in Nazi-occupied France, shipping the materials to the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (“the Yiddish Scientific Institute”), his home institution in New York. What had initially begun as a salvage operation during the war became an illicit habit. While pursuing his own research in France, Szajkowski gathered and stole rare documents, which he sold to reputable institutions in the United States and Israel, including Harvard, Brandeis, Hebrew Union College, and other institutions interested in collecting rare French Judaica, after he had completed his own work.

Researching the history of these acquisitions, Moses Leff takes the reader where few researchers ever go: to the “backstage of the archives” (p. 65)—as she writes in reference to historian Antoinette Burton’s work uncovering archives as historical actors<sup>1</sup>—to the institutional records, inventories, and acquisition files documenting the histories of research institutions and the provenance of their collections and materials. She finds what many archivists know too well when dealing with legacy collections: many institutions dedicated to preserving historical materials do not sufficiently document their own histories, the provenance of their materials, and their collections. Indeed, in an unintended, yet positive, consequence of the discovery of some of Szajkowski’s thefts in France, some archives were prompted to inventory and catalog their collections for the first time.

Moses Leff became interested in the story of Szajkowski while doing research on Jewish history in nineteenth-century France. She became aware of the dispersal of collections of rare French Judaica in the United States and Israel, as well as of noticeable gaps in French state archives and synagogue records. Through her own scholarship, she became familiar with Zosa Szajkowski. Moses Leff’s unique connection to Szajkowski through her own research well positioned her to be able to fully reconstruct his story, with all its nuance and ambiguity. Her understanding of the significance and impact of Szajkowski’s scholarship on French Jewish history pervades the book; as she weaves the story of his life and work with appreciation for his passion for collecting as well as his extensive bibliographic knowledge, she is careful not to downplay the consequences of his thefts on archives in France. The bibliography of Szajkowski’s work included as an appendix to the book serves as testament to his prolific scholarship.

Moses Leff raises fundamental questions about the meaning of documentary heritage for Jewish communities shattered by the Holocaust and the consequences of the looting of millions of cultural assets that was an integral part of the German war strategy. What are the functions of community archives for those who survived as refugees across the globe? Who are the custodians of

the Judaica whose rightful owners were murdered and of materials looted by German troops? What is the appropriate place and context for making these materials, including their provenance, available for researchers? What are the responsibilities of archives and archivists in protecting records and communities displaced by persecution and genocide?

Szajkowski, who had immigrated to Paris from his native Poland in 1927 at the age of sixteen, became involved in a thriving community of Yiddish-speaking émigrés from Eastern Europe. He was associated with the YIVO Institute, a research and educational institute founded in 1925 in Vilnius, Lithuania, dedicated to fostering Jewish life and culture. Many *zamlers* (collectors) belonged to its network, gathering documents, folklore, music, and oral histories. This tradition and intellectual environment sparked Szajkowski's passion for collecting and scholarship. "For this nation without a state, an archive, used by those trained in scientific methods, was a portable tool that could be used in their struggle to achieve recognition and perhaps even justice from the world community," writes Moses Leff (p. 41). YIVO had its own archives, which the head of the institute's historical section in Paris, Ilya Tcherikower and his wife, Riva, kept in their apartment. The Tcherikowers had rescued much of this material, which comprised extensive documentation of the atrocities committed during the pogroms in Ukraine from 1918 to 1921, following their escape from Ukraine to Berlin, and to Paris in 1933. After the war broke out, they fled to the United States, leaving their archives behind. Szajkowski was instrumental in helping to rescue this material, later shipping it to New York City, where it today remains a core part of YIVO's collections.

Szajkowski began his first major salvage operation while recovering from an injury in Carpentras in France, where he collected documents and artifacts from synagogues and private archives documenting the rich history of Jewish life in Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, to ship to YIVO. After narrowly escaping to the United States with the help of the Emergency Rescue Committee in 1941, he returned to Europe as a paratrooper and translator for the U.S. Army in 1943. Following liberation, he continued collecting valuable rare materials in France, documenting Jewish experiences in the Second World War. Many members of Szajkowski's family, including all of his siblings, had been murdered in the Holocaust. Like many other Jewish survivors, he felt that neither people nor materials were safe in Europe, and he shipped everything he collected to YIVO in New York. He continued collecting after being transferred to Berlin, where he almost obsessively gathered anti-Semitic publications, Nazi government documents, and propaganda materials he found in abandoned buildings, shipping hundreds of boxes to YIVO.

Following the end of the war, the lines between legal and illegal blurred, while the Allies disagreed over restitution policies. Szajkowski's operation was just a small part of a larger effort to transfer millions of items looted by the

Nazis all across Europe to the United States and Israel. The “Monuments Men” of the U.S. Army moved looted items to several collecting points, including the Offenbach Archival Depot outside Frankfurt. While the American military was committed to returning property to the countries of origin, Jewish organizations in the United States continued advocating for the return of looted books, manuscripts, and artifacts to the Jewish people, wherever they established their new homes, rather than to their countries of origin. Judaica experts appraised and prepared inventories of the materials, sending shipments to libraries in the United States and Israel, including YIVO.

Szajkowski returned to New York, where he, at times employed by YIVO as an archivist, pursued his scholarly interests as an independent scholar. Without any academic credentials or university affiliation, this proved difficult, and he became increasingly embittered and disappointed with YIVO and other institutions to which he had dedicated his knowledge and a good part of his life. Considering these circumstances, Moses Leff highlights his thefts of rare documents from French archives as not only the obsessive continuation of a passion he developed before the war, but also as a pragmatic enterprise to subsidize his modest income to support his scholarship. The chapters dealing with Szajkowski’s postwar years vividly illustrate the practical challenges of doing history and pursuing transnational archival research with limited funds in the 1950s and 1960s.

Moses Leff engages readers with a nuanced set of questions about custodianship, provenance, and restitution of cultural assets that are at the core of archival ethics, and she challenges the perception of archives as national monuments established by states. She writes that there is “also violence in the project of archiving” and cautions that “[a]rchives are not made by the powerful alone; the weak also play a role in their construction” (p. 204). While not directly engaging in the sophisticated professional discussions of the past decades among archivists about postcustodial theory, the significance and challenges of community archives, and repatriation and restitution of looted property, this book adds an important historical perspective to these debates. Well written and deeply moving, it highlights the “backstage of the archives,” where the fascinating histories of archives and their collections are too often hidden.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Antoinette Burton, “Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories,” in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 6–7.