

## **Archival Judaica in Post-Soviet Countries: The Problem of Its Preservation and Use**

by Dr. Iryna Serheyeva

### **Brief Review and Historical Survey**

At present, collections of Jewish material and collections containing documents related to the history and culture of variously-located Eastern European Jews are stored in central and regional state archives and their branches, in manuscript departments of state libraries and museums, and in archival institutions within the Academy of Sciences system and different public organizations.

Collections of Jewish documents and materials formed from the collections of various Jewish public organizations, parties, research institutes, and communal and educational structures are located in the majority of archives in CIS countries and the Baltic States. In practically every governmental archive (starting at the level of the city and at the level of the country) there exist both separate collections containing exclusively Jewish materials and general collections that include documents reflecting some aspect of Jewish life in that country.

Nowadays the majority of archival collections and separate funds are described and catalogued and some of them have an *aparatus criticus* (scientific publications, references, literature cited, guide books). Practically all of these documents were

removed from structure of the *spezhran* (special storage) and opened for researchers.

A number of problems appear when working with Jewish archives, looking for the documents on the certain theme, or developing indexes and catalogues. One of them is the *scattering* of materials in various repositories not only within one archive or one city, but also in various countries. For example, the documents relevant to the life and activity of S. An-sky (3 collections), Sholom-Aleykhem (4 collections), D. Ajzman (5 collections) are located in the archives of Moscow, Petersburg, and Kyiv. A similar situation occurs with documents of many Jewish institutions (Society for the Promotion of the Enlightenment among the Jews in Russia, Jewish Historical Ethnographic Society, Society for Jewish Literature, and The Culture League, to name only some of many Jewish groups). This situation has developed as a result of the dispersal of documents housed in one collection during the 1920s and 1930s.

Another and not smaller problem for researchers is the disorder or dispersal of documents even within one archive. It is completely clear that many collections were formed as a result of one collector or from a complex selection of documents on a certain theme. Accordingly the documents are directly relevant to the theme or to a certain person related to the collection. This concerns epistolary documents to a considerable extent. But, unfortunately, only with rare exceptions are there systems for cross indexing or annotating catalogues when making up indexes and catalogues in archives. One pleasant exception to the rule is the Russian State Archives of Literature and Art (RGALI), where professionally-made catalogues show not only the presence and structure of documents in a particular collection but also show the availability of separate

documents kept in other collections. In RGALI's catalogues there are special references to and indications of other collections and stored items, revealing in detail the full complex of documents connected with the particular person or organization.

Actually, Jewish collections in archives in the countries of the CIS are now more or less described and presented in guidebooks and indexes.

The first of the directories of Jewish collections in archives of the former USSR became the preliminary list of archival collections *Documentary Sources on Jewish History in the Archives of the CIS and the Baltic States*, which was prepared and issued by Dmitry El'jashevich in 1994. The directory contains more than 900 titles of collections located in these archives and is supported by a system of auxiliary indexes. Three years later the book was published within the framework of the Project Judaica (a joint project of the American Jewish Theological Seminary, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, and The Historical-Archival Institute of the Russian State University for the Humanities). This edition is, as a matter of fact, a preliminary list. Work on elaborating its description of Jewish collections still proceeds.

This project now issues special reference media detailing collections in the various countries and cities. The volumes devoted to the archives of Moscow and Byelorussia have already been issued, while the work on another volume—about the archives of Kiev and the Ukraine—is practically finished. One about Moldova and the Baltic countries is under development.

If the first directories contained only fundamental information about the availability of documents in a certain collection (its ordinal number, its beginning and

ending dates, and the number of files or items of storage) the latest editions have expanded descriptions. Besides the basic data, they have annotations and brief historical or biographical information about the collection's originator. This considerably expands the information value of these editions and facilitates the work of researchers.

Experts on archives, historians, and philologists are all involved in realizing the descriptions of Jewish collections. It is necessary to note that in the ten years since D. El'jashevich released his preliminary list the situation in the archives has changed.

If at the beginning of the 1990s collections had only just been opened and very often—possibly owing to a traditional fear—were arranged with some artificially made *mystery*, now leaders of archives and archival institutions in these countries are directly interested in this work and give the maximum amount of information to researchers that they can.

Nevertheless, already-issued directories and indexes can not pretend to completely clarify the structure and content of these collections. The problem is that collections that do not have a direct relationship to Jewish history and culture still contain a significant amount of Jewish documents. In many cases they come to light either during deliberate work demanding significant time and resources or by a casual search or from researchers engaged in studying adjacent subjects.

Practice shows that a huge amount of documents are kept in non-Jewish collections. We can give as examples the collections of the Department of Police, the Security Branch, the Acceptable Committee, and the Soviet Bodies. (However, this list can be continued endlessly.) A certain amount of documents related to Jewish history and

culture and to political and national movements are stored in similar collections. At best, in the indexes and guidebooks to such archives, the availability of documents without detailed information about their content or search methodology is fixed.

### **Modern State of Research in Archival Judaica**

Within the last twelve years historians, archivists, and Judaica researchers have prepared and issued special directories and guidebooks on Jewish document collections in various archives, as well as on the structure and content of the documents themselves. As an example, it is possible to mention the archives of Smela and Chernigov (Ukraine). It is necessary to mention G.Dejcha's guidebook *Archival Documents on the History of the Jews in Russia from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the Beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Moscow, 1994) and *Documentary Sources on Jewish History and Culture in Moscow Archives* (Project Judaica, Moscow, 1997), as well as catalogues of exhibitions devoted to various people and organizations. More than 400 reviews on archival Judaica were published. For a more detailed look one can see this bibliography in the index to the *Archival Judaica of Russia, the Ukraine, and Byelorussia* that was developed and issued in 2001 by Efim Melamed. Lists of publications are available also in the scientific periodical press devoted to Jewish history and culture: *Vestnik* ('Bulletin') of the Jewish University in Moscow, *The Parallels*, *Istoki* ('The Sources'), editions of the society Jewish Heritage, and others.

Let's leave behind the discussion about the quality of published research; it is not a task of the report. It is important for us to note that within these last years the process of

opening Jewish collections has gone on actively, and what is especially joyful is that the quantity has gradually turned into quality: the researchers' level of readiness is rising and youth with special educations are actively involved in the work.

At present the majority of archives in the countries of the CIS have started to prepare new directories and guidebooks, as the old ones issued in the Soviet era did not completely depict the content of the collections. These new guidebooks take into account the presence of all collections (including Jewish ones that were kept in special collections before) and whenever possible these books expanded search aids that detail the content and structure of the collections.

Of great interest is the practice of publishing specialized guidebooks and indexes. We can give as an example a guidebook published in 2002 called *Personal Archival Collections of the Institute of Manuscript of NVLU*. This guidebook presents 264 personal collections, including three Jewish ones, those of S. An-sky, Sholom-Aleikhem, and A. Harkavi. Each part of the guidebook contains brief historical and biographical surveys, as well as a description of the available materials systematized in the determined order and the codes and systems of search, and the edition is supplied with the developed *aparatus criticus*. Now the Institute is preparing a similar guidebook on the collections of public organizations and institutions.

Three years ago the Library issued a catalogue of audio archives of Jewish folk music by Lyudmila Sholohova. It is a large catalogue and developed in every detail. Now a series of compact discs is being issued that represents the recordings of Jewish folk music from the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The records were made on Edison phono-

cylinders during expeditions to the ‘Jewish Pale of Settlement’ and the Jewish *mestechki* and colonies. Irina Serheyeva’s book about the personal collection of Semen An-sky is preparing to be released. The book will publish all of the ethnographer’s documents that are stored in the collections of the Institute of Manuscripts.

It seems to me that one of the main goals in archival work is now the development of such catalogues and directories, in which information on collections and documents connected to one collection’s originator will be presented. Similar editions (whether printed or electronic) will considerably facilitate the work of researchers and will expand access to the underlying sources.

### **The Physical Condition of the Collections**

Unfortunately, in the majority of cases Jewish documents stored in the archives of the former USSR are in a sorry state. One reason is the condition of old paper (which was far from being of high quality initially) and another is the poor storage conditions in which the documents were kept until now. The overwhelming majority of them demand immediate conservation and restoration without which they cannot be given to researchers. The unlimited use of and free access to such documents may result in their full physical destruction.

The quantity of materials demanding immediate restoration is huge and simply in excess of what personnel in these archives and storehouses can handle. Moreover, it is necessary to notice that not only Jewish collections are in such condition; therefore many archives should determine in advance which materials require urgent restoration and be

completely clear that Jewish documents do not belong to those (not because of any far-fetched anti-Semitic moods, but owing to objective reality).

One of the ways out of this situation may be microfilming documents and ideally their digitization and conversion to modern information carriers. This would allow not only for the preservation of the materials but also for their wider use, including access to documents through the Internet.

### **Standardization, Digitization, and Networking**

Collections of documents in the archives of the former USSR are described firstly item by item, then are formed into files, and then into collections. This is a traditional, standard system for forming an archival collection. Also there exists another system of formation of documents in the funds accepted in separate archives. So, for example, in the Institute of Manuscripts of NVLU there are documents that are kept separate and have not been gathered into files or folders in the collection. Accordingly, in the inventories only documents rather than their structures are shown.

Moreover, there are no standards for the descriptions among all the archives. They never existed and do not exist now. Document descriptions are made according to the system used in each separate archive. At best, the standards of the description are developed at the level of the former republics (now countries).

For Jewish funds the situation is quite difficult. First of all it is necessary to note that descriptions of these documents are made in translation; the language of the original documents is absent. It is better to pass the quality of translation and its consistency by in

silence. All this complicates the work of both archivists and researchers.

Now there is only one developed and widely used standard for the description of Jewish funds, which was developed by the program Judaica that I mentioned before. But this description standard takes into account only the content of collection as a whole and not the separate documents in its structure.

Developing and introducing a unified system for the description of Jewish funds—one that takes into account all features of the material and provides researchers with a search system—will allow the description of the richest collections to speed up considerably and put them into a wide scientific operation.

No less than this is a problem with the technical equipment of archives. Unfortunately, I am compelled to mention that till now in many archives (especially in small regional and city ones) all work is carried out in the old manner, without the use of computers, simply because of the lack of them.

The big capital archives are in a much better situation. Work on preparing a modern database of document collections has already begun, and some of them have their own sites. Actually, that doesn't mean you can find detailed collection catalogues there. Before preparing this report, I made an experiment and looked over a number of sites related to the central Russian and Ukrainian archives. The catalogues are described but are not presented on the Internet. So I managed to find, at best, mentions about collections, but their structure remained closed.

Clearly, it is subject first of all to the major technical work and, accordingly, demands time, experts, engineering, and financing. I can say on the example of my

library that only books published after 1994 are presented in the electronic catalogue accessible on the global network. All other books, the periodical press, and especially manuscripts only wait their turn.

### **What It Is Possible to Do for the Improvement of Work with Jewish Collections**

It seems to me that the time has come for the creation of special catalogues and directories revealing not only 'Jewish' funds in archives and libraries and Jewish documents positioned in non-Jewish collections (that is already being done in a more or less extended and more or less professional way). The future task may be the creation of special directories and catalogues of documents by themes—personal, institutional—of the parties. As I have already said, these documents are spread not only inside one archive or one country, but also between or among countries. The joint catalogue will considerably facilitate the search of necessary documents and also in many cases will allow separate historical collections of documents to be reconstructed and thus organize for researchers their unified description and representation.

An international coordinating group for this work should be organized. First of all, it should develop a system for presenting the information in the catalogue. The form of the description of documents and collections can be created by working groups in the separate countries for gathering and identifying the information.

The second task, important in my opinion, is the development and further implementations of an international system for the description of materials using modern technologies and the organization of access to this information at various levels.

And the third task and probably the most important is the organization of work on restoring, preserving, and ensuring the copying of documents. Today we speak about millions of documents and thousands of archival collections, but in a short time, if we do not stop the processes of destruction, we will establish the fact that from the richest heritage there are only separate fragments.

I understand that it is impossible, so-called, *to fill the unbounded* in a short report—to depict a history, structure, a condition, and a degree of description of Jewish documents in archives of the former USSR. That's why I limited it only with a short review and a statement of the problem.