

Christine Barrass

Senior Archivist, Private Archives Branch, Library and Archives Canada

The Jewish Collection at Library and Archives Canada

For many researchers, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) (formerly the National Archives (NA) and Public Archives (PAC)), does not come to mind automatically as a rich resource for the study of Canadian Jewry. Yet over the past 45 years, LAC has made great efforts to collect material from a wide range of sources documenting many aspects of Jewish life in Canada. These collections hold enormous potential for researchers studying Canadian Jewry. This article will give a brief overview of the history of the Jewish collections, and highlight three collections that hold promise as sources for the study of Jewish history, women's history, and the history of grassroots social movements.

LAC has always had a mandate to acquire and preserve materials that document the heritage of Canada. Historically, this broad scope meant that acquisition practices reflected the public and scholarly interests of the time. Until the early 1970s, therefore, the Public Archives mainly acquired records documenting the country's political history, which left many groups of Canadians underrepresented in the collection. This changed with the publication of the final reports of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1969. The Commission found that while the PAC had not deliberately discriminated against any group, there had been insufficient funding for the Archives to adequately target and acquire materials representing the broader Canadian experience. Thanks to additional funding granted by Treasury Board, and the Public Archives created the National Ethnic Archives section in 1972.

Acquisition of records of Canadian Jewry now fell exclusively to the new National Ethnic Archives section, and more specifically to its former archivist Lawrence Tapper. Tapper built the collection into what it is today. Among the first collections to be negotiated under the new section included the Zionist Organization of Canada and the Canadian Zionist Federation. By 1978 no fewer than 85 fonds about Canadian Jewry had been acquired, and Tapper was able to publish *A Guide to Sources for the Study of Canadian Jewry*. Since that time, LAC has built a collection about Canadian Jewry with a number of strengths. Our rabbinical collections are important sources for the study of the development of the various movements in Canada, and include works by rabbis Gunther Plaut, Dow Marmur, Emil Fackenheim and Reuven Bulka. In addition, we have many fonds from community leaders, activists, and organizations, including Hadassah leader Clara Balinsky, lawyer and human rights advocate Bert Raphael, and B'nai Brith.

The development of LAC's Canadian Jewry collection has not been without tension. In the 1970s the PAC felt that its facilities, resources, and impartiality would create the conditions to be the repository of choice for Jewish collections, and would become the primary place where these records would reside. Various community organizations and individuals, however, did not agree, and favoured maintaining control over Jewish collections within the Jewish community itself. Concern existed about

the acquisition methods used by PAC as well; many were of the opinion that the organization's goal was to acquire everything it could, regardless of whether or not an archival source may be more suitable to another Jewish collection. However, with the application of strategic acquisition policies beginning in the 1980s, LAC focused on material of national significance. Tension surrounding the Canadian Jewish collection lessened, while a concurrent expansion of archival programs within Jewish community organization became extremely active in preserving material.

LAC's archival Jewish collections cover a relatively recent historical period, generally from the late 19th century until now. The oldest item in LAC's collection relating to Canadian Jewry is a Sefer Torah donated by Montreal's Shearith Israel synagogue, Canada's oldest Jewish congregation. This Torah was originally thought to have been written in Spain prior to the Inquisition. When Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, it was transported by refugees to Amsterdam and eventually made its way to the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation of London, England sometime after 1656. In 1768 the London-based congregation gifted the Torah to the congregation of Shearith Israel, who used it until the 1970s, when they decided its fragility precluded its use on a regular basis and donated it to the PAC. Based on this chronology, this Sefer Torah was thought to have been in use for at least 500 years by the time of donation to PA in 1979. There was, unfortunately, no documentation to support this belief, and an appraisal by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America revealed that it most likely dated from the late 17th or the early 18th century, and may have been written in North Africa. Despite this more youthful date, Shearith Israel's Sefer Torah maintains its status as our oldest item relating to Canadian Jewry.

Emil Fackenheim

Eminent philosopher and Reform rabbi Emil Fackenheim began donating his material to LAC in 1977. His twenty-first and final donation was made in 2004, following his death in 2003. Well-known for his controversial belief in a 614th mitzvah, an extensive collection of various media documents his profound analysis of the religious, social, and political problems of the day, as well as his formative years, and illustrate clearly the evolution of his philosophy and ideology both in the pre- and post-WWI era. But the collection also reveals a more personal side that rarely emerges in his public writings. The correspondence with scholars such as Yehuda Bauer, Leo Strauss, and Abraham Heschel provides glimpses into their personal lives and relationships even as they discuss and debate common issues.

There is a limited amount of material from his time in Germany, mostly correspondence and documents relating to efforts to secure him a position at a university abroad around the time of his detainment at Sachsenhausen concentration camp. One interesting item is a children's identity card that Fackenheim obtained in 1930,

when he was 14. He carried it with him during his escape from Germany, and continued to keep it as he moved to three different continents over his lifetime.

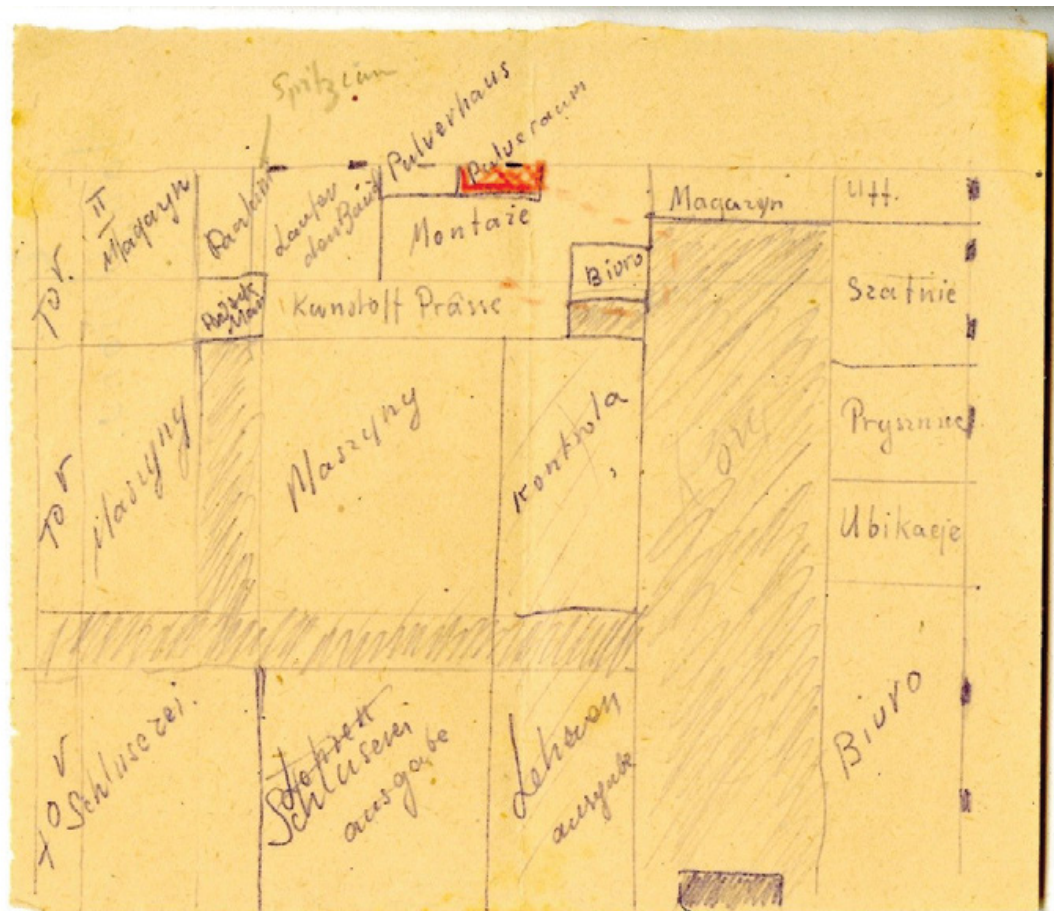


Emil Fackenheim's identity card from Halle, Germany. June 5, 1930. Emil Fackenheim fonds, volume 1, file 4.

LAC's collection has very little in its holdings from Holocaust survivors and on Auschwitz and the Holocaust itself. The governmental records contain information about the Canadian government's response to the war in general, to refugees, and about the experience of Jewish immigrants trying to enter Canada from the perspective of government policies and programs, but our collections hold little that tells the personal stories of survivors. In 2005, however, we acquired Anna Heilman's papers, a small collection of personal papers relating to her internment at Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Auschwitz Revolt, as well as her later efforts to gain recognition for the women involved in that revolt.

Among the last of the deportees from the Warsaw Ghetto, Anna and her sister Esther (Estusia) were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau in September 1943. Both girls were selected to be slave labourers at the Union ammunition plant there, working alongside many other women labourers. Some men were selected to be part of the *Sonderkommando*, slave workers at the crematoria who were regularly executed and replaced with other prisoners to avoid having their knowledge of the camps reach the outside world.

Anne Heilman



Anna Heilman's drawing of the munitions plant. R11520, volume 1, file 7.¹

Word made it to the camp that the Red Army was approaching Warsaw; from there it would be only a matter of weeks before they would reach Auschwitz. Knowing they would be killed shortly, the Sonderkommando began planning revolt. Heilman and a small number of her fellow labourers found out and decided to support this plan. Though they were searched regularly and subject to instant execution if caught, the women began to smuggle gunpowder to the Sonderkommando, who would make grenades by filling the powder into shoe polish cans. On October 7, 1944, crematorium IV was badly damaged by these explosions, and it never functioned again. All of the Sonderkommando were killed in the aftermath of the bombing. The SS traced the gunpowder back to the munitions plant and the women, four of whom, including Anna Heilman's sister Estusia, were betrayed and eventually hanged for their role in the revolt. Heilman's involvement was never revealed until years later.

After liberation by the Russians, Heilman stayed briefly in Belgium, where she re-wrote the diary confiscated in Auschwitz that told the story of the women and the revolt. This diary, along with correspondence from the time, is in LAC's collection. In her later years Heilman campaigned heavily to have the women involved in the revolt recognized as resistance fighters. Indeed, her files on the subject, which comprise about half her collection, detail her efforts to have various cultural heritage sites include displays and ensure that the four women would be remembered on the anniversary of their deaths.

Genya Intrator

The grassroots Soviet Jewry movement campaigned on behalf of Jews to secure their right to emigrate from the Soviet Union. Genya Intrator, a pioneering activist in Canada on behalf of Soviet Jews, began volunteering in this movement as a mature student at the University of Toronto when she was asked by a student group to provide interpretation during a phone call to a Soviet Jew in 1970. She joined the group and had a leading role in Canada's efforts to support the movement.

From 1972 to 1991, Intrator made weekly phone calls to various refuseniks and families of those who had been imprisoned for reasons relating to their applications to emigrate. Having been raised speaking both Russian and Yiddish, Intrator was uniquely placed to transmit information back and forth between activists in Canada and those in the Soviet Union. She had the presence of mind to record the conversations that took place over the phone, both with refuseniks and with other individuals within the movement. With just over 520 hours of recorded conversations, her collection at LAC is unlike any other. She discusses the daily living conditions of refuseniks and prisoners of conscience, their health issues, legal issues, as well as visits to the Soviet Union by Westerners where goods and information could be passed to some of these individuals. Cognizant of the fact that all conversations were being monitored by the KGB, she had to take care not to reveal details that could endanger refuseniks or their families. There is even one recording of a fellow activist in the United States recounting how, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a former KGB officer who listened in on Genya Intrator's phone calls in the 1970s, at one point had dinner with this very activist and her husband in Chicago.

These telephone calls were a primary source of information on the situation in the Soviet Union; it was thanks to these activities by Intrator and others in the movement internationally that these facts were communicated to the press, politicians, and the public in general. Through this constant communication, Intrator developed close relationships with a number of refuseniks, including Ida Nudel and Ida Milgrom, the mother of well-known refusenik Natan Sharansky. As a key player in Canada, she became close with other activists around the world, such as Michael Sherbourne

and Isi Leibler. She also took a few of her cases to the streets, as can be seen in this photo of a demonstration in front of the Soviet embassy in Ottawa on behalf of Sylva Zalmanson.



Sylva Zalmanson protest in front of Russian Embassy in Ottawa. Genya Intrator fonds, R4849, volume 43, file 2.

This article presents just a few of the Jewish collections at LAC. Documenting many aspects of Jewish life in Canada, they all hold promise as historical sources for further study of this subject. Complemented by other multicultural collections at LAC, as well as those focused on social activism, the material at LAC can enrich researchers' understanding of the Canadian Jewish experience.

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A translation of this document can be found in Anna Heilman's memoir *Never Far Away* (University of Calgary Press, 2001), page 118.