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**The Canadian Jewish Congress –
Pacific Region Fonds at the Jewish Museum and
Archives of British Columbia: The Road So Far**

Since 2004 the Jewish Museum and Archives of British Columbia (JMABC) has stored a large quantity of material from the Canadian Jewish Congress - Pacific Region offices (CJC-PR). While the numbers varied between sources, there have been as many as 175 banker's boxes at one time. Boxes were spread between the Archives Repository of the JMABC, Iron Mountain, and in the former offices of the CJC-PR, where the Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver and the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA Pacific Region) now operate. Some of these boxes were with the JMABC from the late 1990s while CJC-PR was still active, while others were discovered in 2018. The road to preserving and sharing these materials has been winding, with fits and starts over the years. Now, with an end and access in sight, the JMABC looks forward to marking these records complete one day in the near future.

While the JMABC is very lucky to have a generous Archives Repository space, CJC-PR material took up a full room out of only five available rooms, and the material was constantly requested for research. Completely unprocessed with no box inventory available, the entirety of CJC-PR's materials were unavailable even to staff at the JMABC. Though safely stored in the archives, this material had not been archived yet. In 2016 it was time to begin tackling this project. It had been too long and there was too much important material to leave languishing.

With funding from the Canadian Federal Government's Youth Employment Strategy, Young Canada Works, we were able to hire the first (of what would be several) Archives Interns to work on processing the fonds in the fall and winter of 2016 and 2017. The process of applying for Young Canada Works itself proved a challenge, with regard to the project planning to take on such a large fonds with an unclear number of boxes. Phase 1, of what would become at least three phases, would involve compiling preliminary box listings and removing unnecessary duplicates. The JMABC had a series of documents, spreadsheets, and database entries that seemed to be inventories of the boxes but without any indication of which ones had been inventoried. Even the task of moving the boxes from the repository to the main office (where all active work is undertaken) required a huge coordination effort from the entire team.

Archives Intern Anna Gooding was the first to lay eyes on boxes that had not been opened in ten, fifteen, or even twenty years. Trying to understand the previous inventories became the first task. If we were able to match up entries to their boxes we would be able to skip ahead to making lists of individual files and save ourselves significant time. These inventories unfortunately proved more trouble than they were worth, being both incomplete and inconsistent, and covering at most a quarter of the boxes in the fonds. Copies of these original inventories have been kept but their origins may never be clear.

Inventoried these boxes was a constant adventure. On more than one occasion we

found a box that was mostly empty, containing only 500 photocopies of a flier, often not even for a CJC event. We wondered who had gone to the effort of acquiring this lurid pink paper in 1984, printing these fliers, and then carefully boxing them up and storing them for almost thirty-five years. The fact that the JMABC had been complicit in storing the fliers for the last fifteen years was too tragically funny for us to contemplate at length. Other boxes contained such questionable treasures as large plastic banners, t-shirts from a community festival, and a complete set of *Jewish Western Bulletin* newspapers for more than four years (a complete set of which is already housed at the Archives).



JMABC volunteers Naomi Caruso and Jana Abramson with CJC-PR banner, 2016.

Now, more than two years later, these strange finds are the ones that stand out. Unpacking materials that had been sitting in our own storage for so long was a surreal experience. Aside from the humorous finds, Anna and I spent most of our time buried deep in the administrative history of the CJC-PR offices. Even from a first glance we were impressed by the breadth of topics in which the CJC-PR was involved; from the internal politics of the Jewish Community Centre of Greater Vancouver to working with sister cities in the USSR, there was a file, or many, on every topic we could conceive of.

As we sorted through the boxes we also spent time going through the various histories we had of the CJC-PR. Drawing on our own collection of oral histories, we were able to learn about past leaders and what drove them, with interviews dating back to the early 1970s. The JMABC itself has ties to CJC-PR from its very beginning, and we were thrilled to see our oral history program reflect these connections. Past presidents including Erwin Nest had also kindly contributed time to writing histories of the CJC-PR and these were of immense help and guidance as we tried to understand the scope of its activities.

In spring of 2017 Anna finished her contract and left us with a much more manageable set of boxes to tackle, no longer half empty and full of distractions. We looked toward 2018 hopeful that we could soon make everything available to researchers. The Young Canada Works funding allowed us to complete a majority of our processing projects, and in the fall of 2017 it again supported the CJC-PR project with funding for a Phase 2 intern. Alison Powell, a recent graduate of Concordia University in Montreal, joined us to continue work on the collection, and for a second year in a row we began the process of moving more than 75 boxes back into the JMABC main office.

In this phase of the project we were able to start setting up guidelines for each series, defining which committees and activities would fit under each, and how they all worked together. Most important, Alison was able to look into each file, confirming its contents and their dates, as well as their place in the larger series. Original order, a core tenet of archival theory that states records should be kept in the same order in which they were created, was hard to confirm in much of the collection. Packed up over a number of years and for a number of different purposes, the collection made little sense without significant intervention. While early boxes had been sent to the JMABC and Iron Mountain just for storage, boxes left nearer to the end of operations reflected entirely different administrative workflows and activities. From Anna Gooding's Phase 1 work we had a list of every box as it stood in the fall of 2016, knowing that if archival bonds must be broken we would also have a way to trace them back again.

Again, we turned to the oral and written histories we had been given, tracking the priorities of the organization across decades. This was reflected even in the changing names of committees, as we tried to track and account for even the smallest changes. As archivists it was our job to let the material speak for itself and to not impose our own beliefs and prejudices on the documents. What emerged during this time was a view that I had not seen in Phase 1, one which highlighted the focus on intersectionality that permeated all aspects of the CJC-PR.

It was clear from the beginning that our project would require at least a third phase. This time I directed Alison toward the series that had been identified as a high priority repeatedly by researchers, namely series on the subjects of antisemitism, Soviet Jewry, refugees, and small communities. Within each of these, every file was processed, providing us with a list of titles (that we now knew to be correct), descriptions, and dates. These seemingly straightforward details would quickly open a wealth of possibilities for researchers who would soon be able to request and consult these files.

Another too-short internship concluded, and Alison returned to Toronto in the spring of 2018 to continue graduate studies. Soon after the completion of Phase 2, just as we created a work plan for what was hoped to be a final phase in 2019, we learned that in the offices of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs there were another fifteen banker's boxes from the CJC-PR's time in the same space. Though potentially overwhelming, in many ways this news could not have come at a better time: Finally we knew how to approach a work plan for a project of this scale, and the fact that this news came before the project's completion meant we would be able to integrate these new additions seamlessly.

In March of 2019, after the formation of a new project plan, the JMABC was the fortunate recipient of the Library and Archives Canada's Documentary Heritage Communities Program funding, which will see the Canadian Jewish Congress - Pacific Region fonds through to the end of processing. The JMABC looks forward to not only ensuring the preservation of this important part of Canadian Jewish history, but also making this material available to researchers for the first time ever. Already, though, the first two phases of this project has been an immense learning experience for several students, many volunteers, and more than one archivist.