
The Brazilian Jewish Historical Archives: Its Creation And Its Research Projects

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The intention of creating a Jewish Archives in Brazil dates back to the 1950's when two institutions were formed which, on the whole, had the same goals as the present Brazilian Jewish Historical Archives. The first of these institutions, the Brazilian Jewish Institute for Historical Research, had its start in Rio de Janeiro. The well-known American historical researcher Arnold Wiznitzer spent some time there, studying the history of the Jew in colonial Brazil. He also published his papers in the magazine *Aonde Vamos?* The Institute did not survive his departure.

The other institution, which had its start in Belo Horizonte at about the same time, was called the Brazilian Israelite Historical Archives. The person most closely attached to it was also an important historical researcher named Isaias Golgher, whose main work is concerned with Brazilian history, especially with Minas Gerais. These two institutions did not last very long, since the enthusiasm of their founders, who were respected scholars, was supported neither by a professionally and intellectually competent group nor by the public and the community at large.

In 1969, when the Center for Jewish Studies was formed at the University São Paulo, among the departments planned was a documentation center where all kinds of research material would be kept for use by professors and students of the University. The documentation center, however, never materialized. In 1975, another project was presented to the Technical Commission of the Jewish Studies Center: a proposal for a historical archives with broader aims than the documentation center and one independent of the University.

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There were various reasons why we proposed the creation of an institution completely independent from the University. In the first place, the Archives was to possess a legal identity of its own, so that it would be eligible for financial support from private foundations and other institutions. If it were declared by the government to be in the public interest, such support would be more readily obtainable. Then, its institutional independence would arouse greater enthusiasm among its participants and would attract people who did not belong to the University. Finally, the specific material the Archives was meant to preserve — that is, material reflecting the Jewish experience in Brazilian localities — would not be deposited in the Archives unless the institution was clearly a sound one devoted to the welfare of the community — a circumstance which is usual in university institutions.

Only recently, however, was it found possible to implement the project. With the increasing number of historical studies underway in Brazil, many scholars and researchers took an interest in the Brazilian Jewish community and in the role played by Jews in the evolution of Brazilian society. Nowadays many dissertations and theses probe various aspects of the subject. This fact, added to others, underscores the need for a center where scholars would be able to find, systematically organized, the sources necessary for their research. Other countries have long supported institutions which preserve basic documents and which have widened considerably the range of historical investigations thereby enabling whole generations to become more conversant with past as well as present experience, and with the local as well as international history of the Jewish people.

We can find such institutions not only in the United States, where they are of great importance and are a source of pride for all the scholars interested in contributing to the illumination of Jewish history, but also in France, England and other countries, not to mention Israel, which is becoming the major center for the documentation of Jewish history.

Thus, it is clear that the Brazilian Jewish Historical Archives came into being not only as a result of local scientific need but also in order to complement, within its limits, the group of institutions which have taken on themselves the task of preserving vital information about everything con-

cerned with Jewish life. It is even more urgent to undertake this kind of work in Brazil because up to now "old papers," either personal or institutional, have been simply thrown away; precious documents, evidence, and even whole chapters of community history have disappeared in this way.

The Archives, aiming to put a stop to this loss and to salvage as much as possible of the remaining data, proposes:

- a to organize and maintain an archives which will preserve all types of material: photographs, periodicals, newspapers, diaries, letters, personal papers, official papers, etc. (for this purpose, a number of special sections will be created: one for photographs, one for periodicals, one for oral history, and so on);
- b to provide researchers with relevant data on the history and life of the Jewish people in Brazil; and,
- c to contact native and foreign researchers and institutions with similar purposes in order to exchange information and thus enrich the collections and provide researchers with additional data.

Founding such an institution has not been easy and has called for widespread community support. The support has been forthcoming from the very beginning and has been a great incentive to our work. However, the growing awareness that the Archives is an important effort must be translated into material support from the community's responsible agencies.

After drawing up the bylaws and determining the governing body and the aims of the institution, we planned the first research projects:

- 1 Colonial period – New Christians
- 2 The Jews in Recife during the Dutch Rule
- 3 Imperial period
 - a immigration from Morocco
 - b immigration from Alsace-Lorraine
- 4 Immigration during the Republican period
 - a the settlement of Jews in the South through the JCA
 - b immigration and its origins between two World Wars; social welfare; early patterns of communal organization; the *verbaende* and cultural activities
 - c industry, commerce, science, culture: Jewish contributions
 - d Sephardic immigration from the Levant between the two World Wars
 - e immigration following the Second World War
- 5 Recent immigration:
 - a from the Arab world
 - b from South American countries

As far as a survey of sources is concerned, we propose to work along the following lines: I - graveyards; II - newspapers and periodicals; III - archives of institutions which have preserved relevant documents; IV - the recording of oral interviews to provide material for the oral history section. We are ready now to detail each of these four items.

I - Graveyards:

- a the survey of graveyards is important because of the inscriptions on tombstones and also the form and decoration of the tombstones themselves. The tombstone survey must be accompanied by a search of graveyards registries. In the main, the graveyards are for the general public, but there are a few which are communal.
- b The important graveyards for this survey are:
 - 1 Rio de Janeiro
 - a São Francisco Xavier
 - b Cemitério dos Ingleses
 - c Nilópolis - communal
 - d São João Batista
 - e Vila Rosaly - Orthodox
 - f Caju - communal
 - g Petrópolis
 - h Rezende and others
 - 2 São Paulo
 - a Consolação
 - b Araçá
 - c Santo Amaro
 - d Protestantes
 - e Franca
 - f Campinas and others
 - 3 Other Brazilian states:
 - a Belo Horizonte
 - b Curitiba
 - c Porto Alegre
 - d Pelotas
 - e Livramento
 - f Belém
 - g Manaus
 - h Macapá
 - i Corumbá, Cuiabá and others

II - Newspapers - We must investigate newspaper collections for the various historical periods under consideration, either in the central public libraries of the main cities or the university libraries and private collections in order to take notes of every news item about or reference to Jews.

III - Other Archives

- a Jewish Institutions: To consult the local Jewish federations which are able to provide us with a list of societies significant for our research, whether they are philanthropic, social, cultural, sports, political, or other, so long as they are community-oriented.
- b official institutions: 1 - local notaries public and registry offices: wills; the buying and selling of real estate; business contracts; birth certificates; marriage certificates; naturalization papers.
2 local courts of justice: lawsuits
- c Municipal, state and national archives
- d Customs and port archives

IV - Oral testimonies: of famous and aged people who are able to tell about some aspects of the activities pursued by the institutions to which they have belonged.

To be able to go on with these various projects, we need a group of rather idealistic scholars because of the amount of scientific as well as material effort involved.

As far as we can see, there is an urgent need in other South American countries for the creation of Jewish archives similar to the one we have created in Brazil. The lack of a local Jewish historical consciousness in Latin America leads to a failure to recognize the importance of most communal institutional documents and to the likelihood of their disappearance. We hope to see this warning seriously taken before it is too late. On the other hand, we condemn the idea advanced by some foreign archivist circles that it is impossible to organize Jewish archives in South America and that the documents should be removed to "more important" places. As a consequence of this feeling, some collections, including Brazilian ones, were partially ransacked by such "archivists," who did not realize that they were making off with fragments of the collections — which thus became incomplete and harmed researchers everywhere. Fortunately, if belatedly, the idea has been emerging that knowledge or consciousness of local community history — possible only if we preserve its evidence — is a form of identification with traditional Jewish values.