

# The Burdman-Levy Archival Expedition of 1962 to Europe

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*Rabbi Ted Levy (left) making a latex mold of a gravestone in Curaçao, July 1952. (Courtesy Mrs. Ina Rae Levy)*

The 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first Jewish settlement in New Amsterdam affords us an opportunity to reflect upon our history: personal, professional, and even institutional. It seems appropriate that as we celebrate this anniversary of the establishment of Jewish life in America during the 2004-5 academic year, we should pause and take stock of the institutional history

of The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (AJA). An examination of the AJA's history reveals that it not only played an important role in the Tercentenary Celebration of 1954, but through the building of its documentary collection it promoted the specific direction that historical study would take.

The purpose of this essay is to examine one piece of the AJA's history — the Burdman-Levy archival expedition to Europe and Israel in 1962 with Rabbi Theodore S. Levy and his wife, Ina Rae Levy. This expedition took them on a journey which marked a milestone in the development of the AJA's collections. The story of that expedition reveals both the methods that the AJA's founding director, Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus (1896–1995), employed to gather material and something about the historical roots of American Jewry in the early modern Atlantic world.

## Background

When he founded the AJA in 1947 on the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College, Jacob Rader Marcus had already been

teaching Jewish history for over two decades. In order to understand the significance of the AJA's founding, it is first necessary to recount, briefly, Marcus's own personal history. Jacob Rader Marcus was ordained at the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in 1920, the same year he received his B.A. in history from the University of Cincinnati. Appointed to the HUC faculty shortly after ordination, there being no academic program for Jewish history in the United States, Marcus decided to do graduate work at the University of Berlin. His main field of study was German and continental Jewish history, and he was awarded his Ph.D. in 1925.<sup>1</sup> Marcus began to study the American Jewish experience in earnest during the 1930s and reached a personal epiphany during the war years, announcing to one of his classes that he was finished studying European Jewry and would henceforth devote all his scholarly attention to recounting the history of American Jewry.<sup>2</sup> Committing himself to the scholarly study of American Jewish history was, in fact, a daunting task, for it did not exist as an academic field. Indeed, there were few university-level researchers publishing or teaching the subject.<sup>3</sup>

As a professional historian, who also happened to be a Reform rabbi, Marcus knew that he would first need to create a resource base for his work. To this end Marcus would spend the next four decades of his life building the archival holdings of the institution that now bears his name. He recognized that without primary documents — the fundamental building blocks of historical investigation — there could be no scholarly analysis of the American Jewish experience.<sup>4</sup>

Marcus envisioned the AJA as an information-based archives rather than an antiquarian institution. The distinction is fundamental to the events behind the Burdman-Levy expedition, for an antiquarian institution is interested only in original documents. Marcus, meanwhile, conceived of the AJA as an archives that would preserve and make accessible information, in whatever form, that would then be made available to any researcher who wanted it.<sup>5</sup> Thus while Marcus liked to acquire original documents, he would be satisfied with high-quality copies of primary sources. The AJA collection bears the imprint of this philosophy, as, in addition to manuscript material, researchers

will find microfilm, typescript copies of original documents, and photocopies among its holdings.

How did Marcus locate and then acquire the documentary material of the American Jewish experience? His acquisitions often resulted from personal contacts, correspondence with people who held collections, and even advertisements mailed to people and institutions. Marcus also traveled extensively as a speaker, serving as scholar in residence at a number of congregations, and for special events such as the 1954 tercentenary.<sup>6</sup> During these trips he would make the acquaintance of a variety of individuals who were custodians of historical records. Marcus would then negotiate to acquire either the originals or copies of that material for the AJA.<sup>7</sup>

Through his collecting expeditions, Marcus built the AJA into one of the central locations for the study of the American Jewish experience, attracting scholars from all over the world to the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion. Although a majority of the credit for creating the institution and expanding the collection rightly goes to Marcus, it is important to realize the role several of his rabbinic protégés played in helping to build the AJA's holdings.

Marcus did most of his foraging for documents from his home base at the Hebrew Union College. As American Jewry approached the tercentenary, however, Marcus realized that the anniversary celebration offered a unique opportunity to promote scholarly attention to the origins of the American Jewish community. While most historical/commemorative attention was focused on the arrival of Jewish refugees at New Amsterdam in 1654, Marcus understood that these refugees “followed a pattern characteristic of Jews in periods of expulsion: they settled in the nearest towns and countries which offered them political tolerance and economic opportunity.” Marcus therefore recognized that in order to understand the antecedents of United States Jewry, it was first necessary to examine the early modern (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) Dutch, English, and Spanish colonies in the Atlantic basin. Marcus decided to “backtrack, both geographically and chronologically, over the road from New Amsterdam–New York to Brazil, in order to collect whatever information is available.”<sup>8</sup> This

backtracking would take Marcus to those islands of the Atlantic basin in which the antiquity of Jewish settlement in some cases predated 1654.

To carry out this task, Marcus enlisted the assistance of Rabbi Theodore (Ted) Levy and Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman, two of his rabbinic “boys,” to accompany him on his first expedition to the West Indies and South America.<sup>9</sup> Ted Levy was the photographic and archival assistant to gather the materials. Financial assistance was provided by the Lessing Rosenwald Foundation. The expedition’s goal was simple: to “secure copies of all Jewish manuscript materials up to the year 1800.”<sup>10</sup>

Marcus recorded the details of the 1952 expedition, which lasted from June 28 through July 27, and published them in *American Jewish Archives*, his semi-annual “magazine” (as he called it). It is worth mentioning that in its early years the subtitle of Marcus’s magazine was “Devoted to the Preservation and Study of American Jewish Historical Records.” Although many issues contained path-breaking scholarly articles on the American Jewish experience, the journal was Marcus’s primary vehicle for announcing documentary acquisitions and for publishing examples of historically significant documents.

At the end of his account of the 1952 expedition, Marcus observed that “Copying these records — several thousand pages — will not only make them available to students of Jewish and general history, but will save most of them from the destruction to which they seem destined in the present depositories.”<sup>11</sup>

The 1952 expedition did more than salvage records from destruction and obscurity. It made available in one location — the AJA in Cincinnati — the necessary materials for any historian wishing to investigate the antecedents of the Colonial American Jewish experience. Marcus himself would make good use of these records in his monumental three-volume *Colonial American Jewry, 1492-1775*,<sup>12</sup> which helped lay out the direction of historical research on this subject over many years. One such example was Eli Faber’s volume in “The Jewish People in America” series, sponsored by the American Jewish Historical Society. Faber remarked that “among the secondary sources devoted to early American Jewry, the works of Jacob Rader Marcus are

preeminent, providing the fullest coverage and deeply influencing all subsequent works on the subject, including the present one.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite his new acquisitions, Marcus was keenly aware that the records of Colonial Jewry were nonetheless incomplete. As he noted in his account of the 1952 expedition:

In order to complement and to complete the work which has already been done, it will be necessary to make an Archival trip to Europe. We know now that there are in European archives literally thousands of pages of documents which will throw light directly on the American Jewish Communities. These materials are to be found in the national archives of Holland, Denmark, France, England and Spain.

Marcus then added: “We sincerely hope that some generous and farsighted philanthropist will provide us with the means to make this trip.”<sup>14</sup> It would be another decade before Marcus obtained the critical financial help needed for the next phase of his archival scavenger hunt.

## The Burdman-Levy Expedition of 1962

In a June 1962 press release, Marcus announced that he was about to embark on his long-sought archival trip to Europe. Rabbi Ted Levy and his wife, Ina Rae Levy (nee Burdman) accompanied Marcus. In promoting his trip Marcus made reference to the transatlantic ties American Jewry had enjoyed since the community was established in 1654, echoing statements he made during the lead-in to the tercentenary a decade earlier. The destinations of the 1962 expedition included Denmark (Copenhagen), The Netherlands (Amsterdam), Spain, Portugal, England, France, and Israel. With the exception of the first and last two countries, this proposed itinerary followed closely on Marcus’s original vision from 1952.<sup>15</sup> Marcus’s close relationship with his protégé, Ted Levy, led to a deep friendship with Levy’s in-laws. Marcus impressed upon Doris and Harry Burdman the importance of funding this expedition while valuable materials were still available.

It is interesting to note that Marcus never published an account of the 1962 expedition. The reasons for this lacuna are not clear. In part it is likely that he lacked a specific venue for relating the story. By 1962 his *American Jewish Archives* had undergone a transformation. Its primary purpose was no longer to promote the AJA’s acquisitions;

rather, it was devoted to the study of American Jewish history, and its pages contained both scholarly articles and published documents. Although some diverse notes from the trip exist in the archives, and the individual collections acquired in 1962 are identified in the AJA's catalogue, the details of the trip and its significance were in danger of being lost to posterity.

We are fortunate in being able to reconstruct the history of the Burdman-Levy Archival Expedition, as both Rabbi and Mrs. Levy consented to an interview with Ina Remus, who was then serving as a project historian at the AJA. The interview provides an insider's perspective on the events — the challenges, tribulations, and triumphs — of the eight-week period.<sup>16</sup>

Rabbi Levy was not only one of Marcus's "boys," he was also assistant rabbi for a time with Rabbi Bertram Korn at Keneseth Israel Congregation in Philadelphia. Korn, one of Marcus's first doctoral students, wrote some of the early seminal texts on American Jewish history, and Levy had served as Korn's proofreader.<sup>17</sup> Levy recounted that it was because of Rabbi Korn that he first became acquainted with Marcus and shortly thereafter began "doing a lot of things for him." His efforts involved working at the AJA, helping to organize collections, and photocopying materials that were on loan. Marcus thought so highly of Levy's abilities that he asked him to join the 1952 expedition "as a technician." As Rabbi Levy explained: "We photocopied a lot of the material and in 1952, when I went with him, that was my job, to photocopy... and make many of the arrangements for him...." After the 1952 trip Levy and Marcus remained close; indeed, Marcus signed his letters to Rabbi Levy as "Uncle Jake." Rabbi Levy and his wife, Ina Rae, became so committed to the AJA's mission that they (Ina Rae in particular) decided to help Marcus fulfill his desire to travel to Europe. For example, Ina Rae Levy played an active role in developing the journey's itinerary.<sup>18</sup>

The expedition lasted from June 24 through August 5, 1962. Eight countries were visited in all, as previously enumerated, and they spent between three to five days in each and two weeks in Israel.<sup>19</sup> Such an intense schedule was designed to maximize the amount of material that could be obtained. Rabbi Levy recounts the kinds of material they searched for:

...census, tax receipts, ship lists, some of the civil cases in the courts.... vital statistics, we examined marriage records, and death records, and congregational records, even synagogue penance [*sic*] when we were permitted to look at them....

The type of records that Marcus asked the expedition to locate and copy fit into his overall historical philosophy. Marcus reveled in collecting facts, which enabled him to make historical generalizations based on all the relevant data he could acquire. He often remarked that “the fact scrubbed clean is more eternal than perfumed or rouged words.” Since he was in the early stages of writing his magnum opus about the colonial era, he required immense amounts of information in order to develop an understanding of the patterns early American Jewish life followed.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, then, given his historical needs, Marcus had high expectations for this expedition.

The 1962 excursion also reveals some of the challenges that historical researchers experienced as they trolled for documents. Ina Rae Levy recounted how even before they left for Europe they were informed that “the archivists with who[m] we were going to be working, were very protective of their... information and did not readily welcome anybody coming to look to try to copy... or get any of their information.”

In order to smooth the path through the archival maze, or at least reduce the bumps, they obtained letters of introduction from prominent scholars or politicians. These letters came from an eclectic mix and included: Professor Samuel Sandmel, then serving as the provost of HUC, Abraham A. Ribicoff, the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, and Senators Clinton P. Anderson of New Mexico and Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota.<sup>21</sup> Ina Rae Levy even recalled that Marcus called upon other professional connections, such as his friend Cecil Roth, the Anglo-Jewish historian who also worked in this field, to help provide introductions and hopefully smooth the path.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to letters of introduction, the Levys were able to periodically call upon family connections to assist in the expedition’s work. For example, when in Amsterdam they experienced their first barrier, as one of the archivists Ina Rae Levy was warned about refused to let them view some material. Levy then called upon his cousin in

Amsterdam, Lydia DeVries, for assistance. (Levy's mother was born in Utrecht.) In response to his request, his relative "made a phone call and as a result of that, we got into the Archives at Amsterdam. Otherwise, we never would have." The success in Amsterdam was particularly important, as the records of that community, especially its synagogue, revealed a great deal about the transatlantic connections that supported Jewish life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Marcus regarded the Amsterdam congregation, and told the Levys repeatedly, that it was "the Mother synagogue of all Jews in the western world" — a phrase that the Levys still remember and quote after forty years.

Not all the stops required personal or political interventions. Rabbi Levy noted the archivists in Portugal as being "favorably disposed" to their work. In Lisbon they found a complete run of inquisitorial records dealing with the Jewish community of Brazil and which covered the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Since the 1654 refugees' point of origin was Recife, Brazil, such material had immense significance to the origins of the American community.

Throughout the expedition Marcus and the Levys had to make critical decisions about which documents to copy. As Rabbi Levy recounted, "Xeroxing was, I think, on a very limited basis then. It was rather expensive to have these things microfilmed and brought back to the Archives."

Although the Levys helped locate the material, the final arbiter of what would be copied was Marcus. Rabbi Levy recalled that Marcus took extensive notes while examining the material prior to ordering copies. The final tally of material copied during this trip, in microfilm alone, was two hundred and twenty-six reels.

## Significance

Even after forty years the Levys retained vivid memories of their time with Marcus. Having accompanied him on both expeditions, Rabbi Levy developed a keen sense of the significance of his work. On the 1962



*Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus (left) with Rabbi Theodore Levy, May 1979. (Courtesy Mrs. Ina Rae Levy)*

expedition, for example, he recalled how documents were threatened with destruction, not by wanton acts but through neglect. Though the documents were not in similar danger in Europe, they languished in obscurity, at least as far as American Jewish historians were concerned. Rabbi Levy regarded both expeditions as “the opportunity of a lifetime” and saw that in every place they went people “knew the name Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus.”<sup>23</sup>

From a historiographical perspective two questions need to be considered: How important were these collections for Marcus’s scholarship and what impact did they have on later scholarship? Assessing its impact on Marcus is relatively straightforward. In the introduction to the first volume of *The Colonial American Jew*, Marcus remarked,

I believe in every discipline, every area, every subject, there has to be at least one work which supplies the Stoff, the raw material, if only for others to summarize, to reevaluate, and even to reject.<sup>24</sup>

An examination of Marcus’s *oeuvre* reveals extensive use of the documentary material collected during the 1962 expedition. It formed an important and integral segment of Marcus’s understanding of the transatlantic nature of Jewish life during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an aspect of colonial American studies that Marcus helped pioneer. According to Jon Butler of Yale University, Marcus “provided historians with an unparalleled range of sources for the history of early American Jews.”<sup>25</sup>

In addition to his own work, numerous scholars over the past forty years have utilized the collections gathered during the Burdman-Levy expeditions. A small sampling of recent research finds that significant scholarship, dealing with some of the most controversial aspects of American Jewish history, has drawn upon the documents collected during these two major expeditions. For example, both Eli Faber’s *Jews, Slaves, and the Slave Trade*<sup>26</sup> and Jonathan Schorsch’s *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*<sup>27</sup> have tapped into the multinational resources that are available at the AJA.

The legacy of Jacob Rader Marcus in creating the AJA and endowing it with a philosophy that emphasized the accessibility of documents for researchers is easily documented. Less well known, but

equally important, is the story of how this collection was created. It is, therefore, important to pay homage to the dedicated work of people such as the Levys and Burdmans that enables the mission of the AJA to be carried out.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Lance Sussman, “‘Historian of the Jewish People’: A Historiographical Reevaluation of the Writings of Jacob R. Marcus,” *The American Jewish Archives Journal* 50, nos. 1 and 2 (1998): 11–21.

<sup>2</sup>Personal story related to the author by Rabbi Albert Plotkin of Scottsdale, Arizona, who was one of Marcus’s students.

<sup>3</sup>Although the American Jewish Historical Society was active in this period, Jeffrey Gurock argues that its work was primarily known for its antiquarianism and filiopietism. On the AJHS in this era, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, “From Publications to American Jewish History: The Journal of the American Jewish Historical Society and the Writing of American Jewish History,” *American Jewish History* 81, no. 2 (Winter 1993–94): 190–205.

<sup>4</sup>For an analysis of Marcus the historian, see Gary Zola’s extensive introduction in *The Dynamics of American Jewish History: Jacob Rader Marcus’s Essays on American Jewry*, edited by Gary P. Zola (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 2004), xiii–xxxii.

<sup>5</sup>I owe this point to Jonathan Sarna of Brandeis University. For Sarna’s assessment of Marcus’s contribution to the field of American Jewish history, see “Jacob Rader Marcus (1896–1995),” in *The Dynamics of American Jewish History*, 3–12.

<sup>6</sup>Marcus’s nearprint file at the AJA contains an entire Hollinger box of press clippings from his various speaking engagements.

<sup>7</sup>The reconstruction of Marcus’s methods is based on an examination of material in the AJA collection and conversations with Marcus’s colleagues, students, and staff. I am particularly indebted to Kevin Proffitt, the AJA’s senior archivist, and Mrs. Eleanor Lawhorn, who served as Dr. Marcus’s personal secretary for over a decade.

<sup>8</sup>Jacob Rader Marcus, “The West India and South America Expedition of the American Jewish Archives,” *American Jewish Archives* (1953): 5–6.

<sup>9</sup>Marcus usually referred to his rabbinic students by the politically incorrect title “boys,” which later in his long life also included his female students.

<sup>10</sup>Marcus, “West India and South America Expedition,” 6–7, although Marcus added that “In actual practice we frequently found it advisable to collect records up to the year 1900.”

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>12</sup>Published by Wayne State University Press, 1970.

<sup>13</sup>Eli Faber, *A Time For Planting: The First Migration, 1654–1820 (The Jewish People in America)* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 174.

<sup>14</sup>Marcus, “West India and South America Expedition,” 21.

<sup>15</sup>The press release can be found in the Burdman-Levy Archival expedition file in the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

<sup>16</sup>The Levy Oral History is part of the Burdman-Levy Small Collection at the AJA. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are drawn from this interview.

<sup>17</sup>*Korn’s American Jewry and the Civil War* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1954) is still the standard book on the subject.

<sup>18</sup>Letter, Jacob Rader Marcus to Ina Rae Levy, May 4, 1962, Burdman-Levy file, AJA.

<sup>19</sup>The itinerary was as follows:

Denmark (Copenhagen) – Five Days

Holland (Amsterdam) – Five Days

England (London) – Three Days

France (Paris) – Three Days

Portugal (Lisbon) – Three Days

Spain (Madrid) – Five Days

Israel (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem) – Almost Two Weeks

Italy (Rome) – Three Days

<sup>20</sup>See Sarna, “Jacob Rader Marcus,” 11, for the context.

<sup>21</sup>Copies of these letters can be found in the Burdman-Levy Small Collection, AJA.

<sup>22</sup>Marcus and Roth corresponded extensively with each other between 1948 and 1962, and their discussions about the transatlantic nature of Jewish life helped shaped the scholarship of both men.

<sup>23</sup>The Levys continued to demonstrate their support for the AJA’s mission by establishing the Rabbi Theodore Levy Tribute Fellowship, which supports scholars working in the AJA’s collections.

<sup>24</sup>Marcus, *Colonial American Jew*, vol. 1, xxvi.

<sup>25</sup>Jon Butler, “Jacob Rader Marcus and the Revival of Early American History, 1930–1960,” *American Jewish Archives Journal* 50, nos. 1 and 2 (1998): 37.

<sup>26</sup>Published by New York University Press, 1998.

<sup>27</sup>Published by Cambridge University Press, 2003.