

TO OUR READERS...

It is merely a coincidence that four scholars, all female, have authored articles in this particular issue of our journal. This happenstance sparked an interesting question: Who were the women who played important roles in the history of this journal and, concomitantly, in the history of the American Jewish Archives itself?

The AJA's first archivist, Selma Stern-Taeubler (1890–1981), was appointed to her post in 1947 in conjunction with the appointment of the AJA's first director, Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus (1896–1995).¹ For a decade, Dr. Stern-Taeubler played a major role in charting a course for the development of the AJA as well as the character of the AJA's journal, which began appearing in 1948. The nature of her contributions during those formative years deserves amplification.

Stern-Taeubler was a historian who contributed significantly to American Jewish history at a time when few women had scholarly credentials and worked in this field. She was born in Kippenheim, Germany (located just south of Strasbourg), to Dr. Julius and Emilie (Durlacher) Stern. As a youngster, she distinguished herself as a brilliant student and, in 1904, she claimed to have been the first female to matriculate at the gymnasium in neighboring Baden-Baden. She went on to pursue advanced studies in German history and languages at the universities of Heidelberg and Munich. In 1914, Stern-Taeubler published her first major work on the French revolutionary and self-proclaimed “Orator for Humankind,” Anarchasis Cloots (1755–1794). Although she concentrated on German history initially, Stern-Taeubler soon shifted her interests to the study of German Jewish history. In 1919, she became a research fellow at the *Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin, which was founded and directed by historian Eugen Taeubler (1879–1953). He would subsequently become her husband.²

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Stern-Taeubler, as she now called herself, began publishing important studies on the history of German Jewry including a major work on the history of Prussian Jewry, *Der preussische Staat und die Juden* (1925). In 1929, she published a biographical study on the German Jewish financier, Joseph Süß Oppenheimer (1698–1738), which Jacob Rader Marcus later characterized as a work filled with “spirit and insight.” By the dawn of the 1930s, she had earned “a career of distinction in pre-Hitlerian Germany.” Her work was disrupted by the rise of Hitler and the advent of the Third Reich. Once the Nazis closed the *Akademie* in 1934, the couple—like so many of their peers—lost their jobs and their livelihoods. Fortunately, Eugen and Selma's lives were spared when, in 1941, the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati invited Eugen (as one of a modest number of refugee scholars) to join its faculty, thereby enabling him to secure a coveted entry visa.³

Although little is known about her early years in Cincinnati—tradition holds that she was compelled to clean houses to earn a livelihood—there can be little doubt that Stern-Taeubler’s academic world as it had been in Germany no longer existed. Her adjustment to a new life in Cincinnati must have been a difficult and frustrating experience. One can easily understand why Stern-Taeubler would have been eager to accept Marcus’s invitation to become the AJA’s first archivist in 1947. In this capacity, she would once again have an opportunity to contribute to an intellectual enterprise that interested her and for which she was uniquely qualified.

For Marcus, who was determined to create a national research center from a *tabula rasa*, having a scholar like Stern-Taeubler working as an archivist must have seemed like a stroke of good fortune. Cast out of Germany and her familiar environment, Stern-Taeubler nevertheless possessed an array of professional skills that Marcus and the fledgling AJA sorely needed. She was a meticulous researcher with “scientific” training who, in Marcus’s opinion, had produced “monumental works on Prussian Jewry.” The newly established AJA would make good use of her knowledge and skill.⁴

Creating a “detailed analytical index” of the Mordecai M. Kaplan Papers—donated to the AJA by Kaplan himself—became one of Stern-Taeubler’s first assignments. That inventory, like so many of those she created, is still in use today. In addition to her archival work, Stern-Taeubler contributed to the AJA’s journal. Beginning in the second year of the journal’s existence, she began publishing an annotated roster of the AJA’s recent “Acquisitions” (a practice that the AJA’s archival professionals continue to the present day). As she noted in her brief introduction to that first effort, the AJA’s holdings were already burgeoning thanks to a steady flow of documentary contributions from “congregational officers, community leaders, secretaries of societies, fraternities, committees, lodges, clubs, and homes, and through the courtesy and helpful cooperation of rabbis and others all over the country.” Her meticulousness and attention to detail are evident in all of her rosters. Marcus was undoubtedly correct when he later observed that “students who use her lists of acquisitions in the American Jewish Archives will appreciate the magnificent job she has done.”⁵

Given her record of significant scholarship, Stern-Taeubler merits the distinction of being called the first woman historian to have her work published in the AJA’s journal. In 1952, she prepared a valuable compilation of documentary information gleaned from the American press in 1852 and listed chronologically from January through December. Her objective was to provide the journal’s readers with glimpses of the American Jewish experience from one hundred years earlier. This woman’s contributions to the AJA and its journal were remarkable. Here was a distinguished scholar working in a new language, whose previous research had focused on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Prussian Jewry. Within a few years of relocating to Cincinnati, she was col-

lecting primary resource material and writing in English about the American Jewish community—a community that was far more than an ocean removed from the world she knew best.

For a decade, Stern-Taeubler labored together with Marcus. Although her contributions to the early development of the AJA and its journal have generally been overlooked, when she retired in 1956, Marcus took special note of his colleague's exceptional contributions to the AJA and to the life of the mind:

The same understanding of the importance of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, which is displayed in all her books, she brought also to her work at the Archives. Many scholars have spirit and insight, but not all have a deep-seated respect for accuracy; nor are they all devoted to the truth insofar as it is given to them to recognize it and to acknowledge it. Selma Stern-Taeubler is, with all her other gifts, a profoundly conscientious scholar ... [and] the Archives ... in large measure, is "the work of her hands."⁶

In addition to recognizing the important contributions of Stern-Taeubler, it is quite clear that Marcus was genuinely aware of the fact that women's lives and experiences had largely been excised from the history of American Jewry. His interest in collecting remarkable documentation on the American Jewish woman testifies to the fact that he was not only cognizant of this gaping hole in the field but also intended to collect and preserve the critical data that future historians would need in order to fill it and reconstruct the history of American Jewish women and, in turn, reconceptualize American Jewish history. In 1981, Marcus published an important collection of these primary source documents, many of which he himself had brought to the AJA.⁷

In addition to Stern-Taeubler, other women contributed to the American Jewish Archives during its early years. In 1953, Frances Fox Sandmel (1917–1989), a poet and wife of HUC faculty member Samuel Sandmel (1911–1979), became the first woman to publish a book review in the AJA's journal. Other women would contribute books reviews in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁸ In 1963, the journal published an intriguing memoir, "The Jews of Alaska," written by Jessie Bloom. Other memoirs by American Jewish women would follow.⁹

In 1968—three years prior to the formation in New York of Ezrat Nashim, the well-known women's study group that advocated the advancement of women's role in Jewish life, and four years before HUC ordained Sally Priesand, the first woman rabbi—Rose Klein, the wife of Rabbi Joseph Klein (1912–1996), published a historical essay on "Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation."¹⁰ In 1976, Sarah Schmidt, then teaching American Jewish Studies at the University of Maryland, became the first woman with a doctorate from an American university to contribute an article to the journal. The following year, Naomi Cohen, a professor of Jewish history at Hunter College of the City of New York, published an article in our pages. As this issue shows, many others would follow.¹¹

The number of women scholars in the field of American Jewish history has grown dramatically over the past three decades. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, women, who have since gone on to careers teaching and studying American Jewish history, won a considerable number of AJA fellowships. Today, many of the field's leading scholars are women and, on the basis of those who are currently conducting their doctoral research at the AJA, we can be confident that women will continue to occupy a prominent place in the field.

One of the most beneficial consequences of this trend comes from the proliferation of new perspectives that women have brought to the study of American Jewish history. The authors who have contributed to this current issue exemplify this observation. Joan S. Friedman's research on Solomon B. Freehof sheds new light on how this Reform Jewish scholar's childhood and educational experiences influenced the directions of his career. In Joellyn Wallen Zollman's innovative article on the synagogue gift shop, we have found a new lens through which we can examine and evaluate the evolving nature of American Jewish culture during the course of the twentieth century. Maxine S. Seller's analysis of Americans who became citizens of Israel during the first decade and a half of the state's existence enables us to begin the process of comparing and contrasting the attitudes and values of American Jewish immigrants to Jews who immigrated to Israel from other native lands. Finally, Mara W. Cohen Ioannides's documentary analysis uncovers an ideological struggle that pitted Henry Berkowitz (1857–1924), editor of the first Union Haggadah (1907), against Samuel S. Cohon (1888–1959), editor of a revised version of that same ritual (1923). Their debate over one section of the Passover ritual opens our eyes to the historical and philosophical issues that separated two generations of reformers.

In his narrative essay on the history of American Jewish women, Jacob Rader Marcus prophesied that:

The new generation of [American Jewish women] will become increasingly important. In the past, Judaism has survived as much through its women as through its cocky minority of men. . . . Women have always been the invisible majority.¹²

The current issue of *The American Jewish Archives Journal* demonstrates that the prediction that Marcus published in 1981 concerning the growing prominence of a new generation of American Jewish women has come to pass. We are grateful to the many scholars, women and men, who contribute to the pages of this journal and concurrently enrich the field of American Jewish history.

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