



Archives, Documentation,
and Institutions of
Social Memory

Essays from the Sawyer Seminar



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German Jewish Archives in Berlin and New York

Three Generations after the Fact

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Since 1955, the Leo Baeck Institute (LBI) is the central research institution for the history of German-speaking Jewry. The New York institute (there are affiliated Leo Baeck institutes in Jerusalem and London), with its vast archives, is in the midst of major changes. Its relationship to the public is expanding, with close association to major research and museum facilities in New York, at the Center for Jewish History (CJH), and in Berlin, at the new Jewish Museum (JMB). By becoming part of CJH, the LBI and the German Jewish legacy are recognized and integrated into the American Jewish identity, at the same time when "European Jewry" is emerging as a third force next to Israel and the United States.

The LBI became the central research archives for the history of German-speaking Jewry because at a time when no institution was interested in collecting and preserving these materials, the LBI became the only repository for the documents and personal papers of the refugees from central Europe.

Historical Background

In 1955 a group of leading representatives of German-speaking Jewry in America, Great Britain, and Israel decided to create a research center for the preservation of their own history and culture. German Jewish culture as it had been known was wiped out from continental Europe, and the expectation was that this extermination was final. Ten years after the Holocaust, the founders of the LBI agreed that in order to preserve the memory of

this prolific ethnic group it was necessary to create a memorial to its vanished glorious existence. The plan was to collect as much documentation as possible to become a research archive and eventually to write a comprehensive history as the closing statement. It was to be more than merely an archive, however, but also, as the renowned historian George Mosse said, "the calling card of German Jewry." The survivors would have a safe haven for their papers, their memoirs, and their photos. The institute became—along with others such as Congregation Habonim, founded one year after Kristallnacht, or the newspaper *Aufbau*, which very quickly became the major voice for the refugees from central Europe—a social institution as well as a scholarly one.

At the time, there was no German Jewish historiography in Germany. One of the first to attempt to introduce German Jewish historiography in postwar Germany was Adolf Leschnitzer, one of the founders of the LBI in New York, who in the 1930s had built a Jewish school system for Jewish students expelled from German schools. Starting in the late 1950s, he held lectures and seminars at the Berlin Free University. The generation of senior historians in Germany, the United States, and Israel teaching and researching German Jewish history almost all went through Professor Leschnitzer's courses (these historians are about to retire).

For many years, the LBI existed as a singular entity on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, serving as a repository for the documents and a gathering point for members of the generation of refugees from Nazi Germany and widely ignored by the larger Jewish community. The LBI