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Lisa Moses Leff. *The Archive Thief: The Man Who Salvaged French Jewish History in the Wake of the Holocaust*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xii + 286 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-199-3809-54.

Review by Elizabeth Campbell Karlsgodt, University of Denver.

“The allure of the archives,” according to Arlette Farge, “entails a roaming voyage through the words of others, and a search for a language that can rescue their relevance.”[1] For Zosa Szajkowski (1911-1978), a Jewish writer and historian who escaped the Holocaust and immigrated to the United States, the pull of Jewish archives and books went far beyond allure or *goût*, in Farge’s original French term. In Szajkowski’s view, rescuing Jewish history in the wake of World War II meant rescuing (stealing) Jewish documents from archive centers and libraries, organizing them to fit his own interpretation of Jewish national history, and selling them to willing buyers in the United States and Israel. At the Strasbourg municipal archives in 1961, Szajkowski was caught slicing documents from bound volumes and slipping them into his briefcase. Seventeen years later in New York, a police sting operation led to his arrest for cutting rare pamphlets from bound volumes at the Public Library. After an overnight detention, he committed suicide by drowning himself in a midtown hotel. It was an ignominious end to an influential, but turbulent career.

Lisa Moses Leff tells Szajkowski’s fascinating story in a book as gripping as a crime novel, with profound insight into the role played by archive collections in the modern construction of national histories. Drawing on extensive archival research in France, the United States and Israel, and dozens of Szajkowski’s own writings, Leff creates a complex portrait of this “archive thief,” who was no simple villain. “The writing of the ‘real’ history of French Jews on both sides of the Atlantic,” she explains, “has been facilitated by Szajkowski as a historian, collector, and thief” (p. 4).

In the first chapter, Leff describes Szajkowski’s “passion” for archival documents as illustrated by the 1961 incident in Strasbourg. The subsequent chronological chapters take the reader back through his biography, enabling us to understand his baffling violation of precious documents. Born Yehoshua Frydman to a poor Jewish family in Russian Poland in 1911, he attended a secular school for Jewish children in Zareby. He loved Jewish books at a young age, and in 1921 was among a few students who lobbied the new Polish government to purchase Yiddish texts for the school library. In 1927, at the age of sixteen, he moved to Paris to join two older brothers and a sister and entered a vibrant community of Yiddish-speaking Jews. He worked various odd jobs to make ends meet and joined the French Communist Party. He became an autodidact journalist and regular contributor to the Yiddish-language Communist daily, *Naye Presse*. Following standard practice in the Yiddish community, he used several pseudonyms, including “Szajkowski.”

In the mid-1930s, he met Ilya and Riva Tcherikower, Ukrainian Jewish intellectuals who had fled persecution in their homeland and in Nazi Germany, and immigrated to Paris. They were affiliated with the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Instiut (Jewish Scientific Institute, or YIVO) in Vilna, dedicated to studying Jewish life, especially the Yiddish-speaking world. YIVO researchers were inspired by the influential Jewish historian Simon Dubnow, who had argued in the late nineteenth century that Jews

needed to use modern research methods grounded in evidence to understand their national history and maintain secular autonomy within the diaspora. YIVO recruited a network of *zamlers* (collectors) who gathered a wide range of sources on Jewish life—folk stories, ephemera, oral histories—for future preservation in archives.

Szajkowski, whose lack of a high school diploma prevented him from enrolling in French universities, secured a YIVO fellowship in 1938 that enabled him to study French and Russian Jewish history under Ilya Tcherikower's supervision. He became a proponent of his mentor's view that Jewish emancipation during the French Revolution had led to excessive assimilation and a loss of Jewish autonomy, identity and influence. "With the Tcherikowers' patronage and guidance," Leff explains, "this Communist worker was turning into a scholar" (p. 36).

The outbreak of World War II forced the Yiddish-speaking community in Paris to scatter. In an atmosphere of rising anti-Semitism and uncertainty, Szajkowski volunteered for the French Foreign Legion. He saw active combat during the German invasion and on 15 June 1940, he sustained a chest wound in a battle near Pont-sur-l'Ain in Franche-Comté. He was evacuated to a hospital in Carpentras and once released, he remained in the city for the following year. The Tcherikowers had secured coveted U.S. immigration visas for themselves through YIVO, which had been re-established in New York, and promised to help him escape as well. In the meantime, Szajkowski delved into the history in the Carpentras region, where Jews had lived under Papal sovereignty from medieval times until the Revolution. He collected documents and Judaica given to him by Jewish families and sent them to the Tcherikowers for YIVO in New York. He sent a Torah scroll, a collection of Hebrew grammar books from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and documents on Yiddish music. "Salvaging archives," Leff notes, "had proved he was someone of worth, and thus someone worth saving" (p. 63). And indeed, in 1941, his YIVO connections helped him get on the lists of some two thousand artists and intellectuals, including Marc Chagall and Hannah Arendt, who obtained visas to the United States through the Emergency Rescue Committee, represented in France by Varian Fry.

During the war, Szajkowski believed he and other YIVO researchers were actors in a pivotal moment in Jewish history, when the intellectual core of the diaspora was shifting from Europe to New York. Like ancient rabbis who had documented Jewish history and preserved Jewish culture in exile—*Galut* in Hebrew—Szajkowski and other Yiddish scholars "were bringing the no-less-sacred manuscripts that would allow future generations to know what had happened to their people in the days when they had dwelled in Europe" (p. 55). Yet it remains unclear exactly how he obtained precious documents in Carpentras in 1940 and 1941. He reported to YIVO only that various private individuals had provided them—a man who had held communal debt records in his basement; another who required payment for *pinkassim*, record books of Jewish organizations and events, in this case in eighteenth-century Carpentras; the daughter of a synagogue caretaker who gave him Judaica from her family's collection. In the context of war and occupation, he painted his own efforts as the heroic rescue of Jewish national treasures.

Once in New York, Szajkowski joined YIVO's training (*aspirantur*) program and received a modest stipend. He once again was part of a vibrant Jewish community, but eventually he was drawn to opportunities provided by the U.S. army: an expedited path to citizenship, higher income and a military role in Hitler's defeat. He became a paratrooper and on the eve of D-Day, jumped from an airplane near Ste-Mère-Eglise. He survived the invasion, served as a translator, and after the liberation of Paris was able to secure regular furloughs and spend time in the French capital.

Caught between identities as an immigrant Frenchman and immigrant American, he learned the full extent of Jewish suffering under the Nazis, including several family members who had been deported to Auschwitz from France. Writing from Paris in November 1944 to Riva Tcherikower, Szajkowski confided, "The pain is unbearable. When you come into a club, you hardly find anyone you know.

Everyone's been sent off to death" (p. 95). He saw Jewish survivors in post-liberation Paris unable to return to their apartments or regain businesses and other seized assets. He came to realize the extent of French betrayal of his people and felt the country was no longer a trustworthy custodian of Jewish history and culture. "Ever a cultural nationalist," Leff explains, "reconstruction could not simply be material; it had to have a foundation in scholarship, for which libraries and archives were a cornerstone" (p. 101). And this cornerstone, in his view, should rest at YIVO in New York, away from political maneuvering in post-liberation France.

The great cultural disruption caused by Nazi looting and a lack of systematic recovery and restitution processes in the months following liberation gave Szajkowski access to a wealth of materials. From an unspecified but willing donor, for example, he obtained meeting minutes of the Union Générale des Israélites de France (UGIF) in the Southern Zone, found in an abandoned building in Marseille, and sent them to YIVO in New York. Eventually, he served the U.S. army in Berlin, where his uniform gave him access to Allied-controlled repositories with thousands of recovered cultural objects. His quest for books, anti-Semitic pamphlets and Nazi government documents "became obsessive, driving him to trespass and carry off items to which he had no legitimate claim" (p. 129). In the summer and fall of 1945, he sent hundreds of boxes to YIVO through the army post office. He was well aware that he was violating American military directives forbidding the seizure of objects owned or looted by the Nazis. He sometimes ripped chapters out of books to consolidate shipments, with a sense of vengeance for Jewish suffering. He admitted to Riva, "I'm doing my barbaric work with a clean conscience" (p. 134).

Back in the United States after his military service, Szajkowski once again joined YIVO, though his lack of an advanced degree kept him from attaining the most prestigious positions. Still, he was a prolific writer and, as Leff explains, he made a significant contribution to Jewish social and economic history in scores of published articles, rethinking the effect of emancipation and focusing on the plight of poor Jews. However, he tended to dwell on the description of his sources, rather than analyzing them in broader context. As a result, his work received mixed reviews from scholars and he became disillusioned in a postwar world with a diminished audience for Yiddish writers. The camaraderie of 1930s Paris had evaporated, replaced by "a world where alienation, competition, and mutual resentment reigned" (p. 188).

In this environment, Szajkowski became more self-interested as he continued to "collect" documents during trips to France. Librarians and archivists got to know him and increasingly suspected this quirky man might be stealing from their collections. The head of YIVO in New York, Max Weinreich, warned him in 1949 not to acquire documents unethically in an upcoming trip to France, a veiled accusation that prompted his resignation from the organization until 1953. Szajkowski's cunning wartime methods had become problematic by the late 1940s: "As the extraordinary times of the war faded into memory, Szajkowski, once hailed as a book rescuer became an archive thief" (p. 147).

By 1950, the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) in Paris discovered that various books and pamphlets from its collection had been sold to the New York Public Library and the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. With its catalog and borrowing records in disarray, the AIU could not be certain how the items had been taken, but Szajkowski became the main suspect. The general secretary of the AIU at the time, Eugène Weill, wanted to avoid controversy over the work of a Jewish scholar from the United States. He requested a meeting with Szajkowski, who managed to evade seeing Weill, but did not forbid him from using the library.

Over the course of the 1950s, Leff recounts, Szajkowski was motivated less by shaping Jewish diaspora nationalism than by profit. In 1958, for example, he divided a record book he had acquired in Carpentras in 1940, giving one part to YIVO and selling another to the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem. Libraries in Israel and the United States and universities such as Brandeis ended up competing to acquire traces of the Jewish diaspora, and were willing to purchase items from

Szajkowski without asking provenance questions. Israeli and American research institutions, Leff convincingly argues, were complicit in his operations: “they became as responsible for the new round of scattering as the dealer, who merely brought them the goods they so desired” (p. 198).

Remarkably, Szajkowski continued this activity until his arrest outside the New York Public Library in 1978. By then, librarians saw him as a “strange man” who had been “acting quite erratically,” and rumors were circulating about his “sticky fingers” (p. 199). Following Szajkowski’s suicide, historian Richard Cohen explained in an obituary that the writer and thief had “felt that the Jewish world abandoned him on the wayside, without the means to support his life with dignity” (Cohen, as cited on p. 189).

Szajkowski’s story is stunning and Leff tells it exceptionally well. *The Archive Thief* is a meticulously researched scholarly work that deftly incorporates archival sources, Szajkowski’s published writings, and his private correspondence. Oxford University Press appears to be aiming for a wide readership with this accessible history that eschews jargon and overwrought theoretical analysis. It is beautifully written and sophisticated without ever becoming pedantic.

The same characteristics that will make *The Archive Thief* so appealing to public audiences may leave some scholars feeling the introduction could situate the book more fully in the intersecting fields of Jewish, French and American history, and in archival studies and library science. A work that spans the histories of Europe, the United States and Israel, it also invites some reflection on its place within the so-called “transnational turn.” Relevant cultural and political theory (Derrida, Benjamin, Foucault) and scholars’ complicated fixation on archives also could be further developed.[2]

In the postwar chapters, the broader context of the Cold War could be underscored to a greater extent. When U.S. authorities in Germany decided in 1947 to transfer eighty thousand recovered YIVO volumes to New York instead of Vilna, where they had been held before the war, there is an opportunity to delve deeper into the postwar geopolitical context and Soviet control over former centers of Jewish learning.

There is also a broader parallel that could be drawn to the power of private American art museums after World War II, which like libraries and research centers, often did not research the ownership history on donated items. The displacement of cultural property in the Holocaust created tremendous opportunity for private collectors and acquisitive institutions, especially in the United States, that happily accepted donations without asking provenance questions. Rare books, manuscripts, Judaica and works of art were all part of a wave of moveable cultural property that reached American shores in the mid-twentieth century, with legal and ethical implications historians are still working to understand.

One might also question the book’s title: did Szajkowski truly salvage French Jewish history? As Leff shows, he certainly helped to preserve numerous documents, while dispersing and isolating others, and significantly contributed to our understanding of Jewish economic and social history in France. He shaped archive collections in the United States that would enable a new generation of scholars ask the kinds of questions he thought should be answered by his chosen documents. Szajkowski saw his own work in such heroic terms, but thanks to Leff’s evenhanded analysis, doubt remains. Could one man, this man, accomplish such a task?

The question is bound to animate many classroom discussions. For undergraduates, this story of historical intrigue would be especially fitting for upper-level courses and capstone seminars on the historian’s craft. *The Archive Thief* also will be useful in graduate seminars combined with texts on historical method, cultural theory and the political role of archive collections in modern nation states.

Anyone who has experienced a sense of magic while immersed in archives will understand the allure and passion surely felt by Szajkowski. History is the better for Leff's skillful telling of his story.

NOTES

[1] Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton, foreword by Natalie Zemon Davis (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 123, originally published as *Le Goût de l'archive* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1989).

[2] See Nancy L. Green, "French History and the Transnational Turn," *French Historical Studies* 37/4(Fall 2014): 551-564, and a broader discussion of intellectual "turns" in "AHR Forum: Historiographic 'Turns' in Critical Perspective," *American Historical Review* 117/3(2012): 698-813. Leff cites Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Book Collecting," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968). This reader would have welcomed a more extensive analysis of archives as subjects in intellectual history, including Foucault's *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972). Farge's essay on the highly personal nature of archival research, cited above, also merits some discussion.

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