

French-Jewish Archival Holdings in the "Special Archives" in Moscow

As historians interested in modern Jewish history, we are especially privileged to work at a time when not only it is possible to peruse archival holdings kept in archives in Eastern Europe but also to recover holdings which had been presumed lost during WWII. The most important collection of archival material that disappeared during the War is kept in the well-known "Special Archives" in Moscow which has recently been renamed "The Center for Safekeeping of Historical Collections of Documentation".

This archival institution was established exclusively to handle archival material that was looted by the Germans throughout occupied Europe and then captured by the Red Army in 1945 and shipped to Moscow. The material was kept there in complete secrecy until 1990 when the first articles referring to the "Special Archives" were published in the Moscow daily *Izvyestya*.¹

When it became possible for researchers to use the holdings of the "Special Archives" it became apparent that they include records from France, Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Holland, Yugoslavia, Greece and Germany itself. Most of the material is of non-Jewish origin and one can find there such important record groups as The French Ministry of Interior, Polish army and police units, various Nazi offices and more. At the same time some 80 Jewish record groups from almost all the countries mentioned above are kept at the "Special Archives",² some of which are of utmost importance for research in modern Jewish history.

There can be little doubt that the most important French Jewish holding kept at the "Special Archives" consists of several series of records originating from the Alliance Israélite Universelle. It is well known that prior to the German occupation of Paris, part of the Alliance archives had been dispatched from the city to Bordeaux but had then disappeared. Georges Weill, in an article published in 1965,³ mentions that the financial documents and the basic set of the Comité Central minutes were lost on their way to Bordeaux when the lorry that carried them caught fire. You can therefore imagine my excitement when during a visit to Moscow in 1992 I discovered that precisely these series of records are kept in the "Special Archives".

The material in question, some 450 files, includes the following series of records:

1. The original set of the Alliance Comité Central minutes from 1860 until 1926. There is a large gap in the set and minutes from 1876 to 1897 are missing. I should perhaps mention here that, at a first glance at least, the original version does not differ much from the well-known abstracts of the minutes published in the *Alliance Bulletin*.
2. A series of files on financial and legal matters pertaining to the Alliance schools throughout the world. It is evident that two separate series of records were kept for the Alliance schools: the well-known one, contained letters and reports from schoolmasters and teachers while the second one holds important information on legal and financial aspects relating to the schools. In this series, for example, one can find the original firman (an Imperial Ottoman decree) of the Mikveh Israel agricultural school dating from 1870 as well as early maps of its lands.

3. Questionnaires containing personal data on directors and teachers in the Alliance schools. These are of great importance for researchers interested in biographical information on the Alliance staff. The questionnaires give the following information: name, date and place of birth, education, date of entry into the service of Alliance, former and present positions and marital status.

In connection with the Alliance material kept in the "Special Archives" one should mention another important record group: that of the well-known ENIO, the Alliance seminary for teachers. This record group holds 50 files from the years 1892-1939.

Surprisingly one finds only one archive of a French Jewish community in the "Special Archives", that of Bordeaux (72 files from the years 1602-1940). In contrast to this the "Special Archives" have a long list of archival material of international Jewish bodies that were located in France before WWII. It is perhaps possible to learn from this fact something about German intentions regarding Jewish archival holdings, at least in France. Evidently the Nazi authorities were mainly interested in material that could be of value for their propaganda efforts to show that a Jewish scheme to control the world existed, and much less in material from local Jewish communities.

The most important archives of Jewish international bodies are the archives of the World Jewish Congress Paris office from the years 1936-1940. It includes, all in all, about 1,000 files some of which pre-date the official establishment of the organization and document activities that brought the Congress into existence. Other records are arranged according to various departments: the Organization Department, Economic Department, Jewish Youth Department, Information Department, a collection of press cuttings and, most important, the Political Department, where one finds records on negotiations with the French authorities concerning Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe in France. This series includes many letters written by Albert Cohen.

Another archives of a major international organization are those of the European Office of the American Joint Distribution Committee (Joint), an American Jewish relief organization established in 1914. The archives contain some 660 files from the years 1922-1940, many of which are files of correspondence with Joint offices in other countries. Another holding affiliated to the Joint are the archives of the American Jewish Reconstruction Foundation established by the Joint and the Jewish Colonization Association in 1924 in order to provide relief to Jewish communities of Eastern Europe.

A special group of archival holdings kept in Moscow are those of the Paris offices of various Zionist organizations. The archives of the Jewish Agency office in Paris include only 42 files from the late 1930s and 1940 but the material itself is very important. It concerns mainly political and welfare activities on behalf of Jewish refugees, including correspondence with the French Ministry of Defence on the establishment of a Jewish Legion in the French Army. Much more extensive are the archives of the Keren Kayemeth (Jewish National Fund) in France which comprises more than 1,000 files. This archives is very important in two separate fields: North African and French Jewish communities. As is well known, many of the Zionist activities in North Africa were supervised from France and for this reason one can find in the archives of the French Keren Kayemeth some 75 files of correspondence with Keren Kayemeth offices in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. No less important are the files of correspondence with local Keren Kayemeth offices throughout France. Some of them include detailed lists of Jews in various French localities which may be of value for genealogical research.

Yet another kind of record kept in the Moscow archives are personal papers, the most important of which seem to be the archives of the French branch of the Rothschild family. These include almost 1,400 files referring to Henri, Morris, Eduard, Robert, Edmond and Phillip de Rothschild. The files of Edmond deal mainly with his collection of art and various financial matters.

Another important personal archives is that of Silvain L?vi, a well-known intellectual and one of the leaders of the Alliance. The material, some 25 files, refers mainly to his professional work.

Finally, one should mention two collective record groups which encompass numerous small record groups, individual documents and printed material. This very heterogenous collection includes some 350 files of the Jewish Colonization Association, the French Section of the Hashomer Hatsair, the Palestine Pavilion Committee of the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris and much more.

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1. G. Aly, S. Heim. *Das Zentrale Staatsarchiv in Moskau ("Sonderarchiv").* Rekonstruktion und Bestandsverzeichnis verschollen geglaubten Schriftguts aus der NS-Zeit. Duesseldorf, 1992, p. 7.
 2. *Ibid*, p.38-43. For a detailed list of Jewish archives from Austria kept at the "Special Archives" see: G.Jagschitz, S. Karner. "Beuteakten aus Oesterreich." *Der Oesterreichbestand im russischen "Sonderarchiv" Moskau.* Graz-Wien, 1996.
 3. G. Weill, "Les archives de l'Alliance Isra?lite Universelle anterieures a 1940", *Archives Juives*, vol.2, no. 2, 1965-66, p.7.

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