

Zosa Szjkowski and the Transfer of French-Jewish Archives to the US

It is a well known fact that during WWII many instances of displacement of archival material took place, which removed the material from its original repositories and locations to those designated by the victorious party.¹

But it seems quite unique to have entire collections removed from one continent to another by a single person acting during and after the hostilities. Such is the case of the late historian and archivist Zosa Szjkowski, who transferred some of the most important French-Jewish archives from France to the US in the 1940s, where, in the end, they found their way to several American Jewish archival institutions. This article aims at explaining the background of this unusual occurrence and, most importantly, at describing the removed records.

Szajko Frydman, who later became known by his nom de plume as Zosa Szajkowski, was born in 1911 in the Polish town of Zareby.² At the age of 16 he moved to France where he enrolled as a student at the Sorbonne.³ Soon he became involved in the French Communist movement going so far as "collecting funds for the Arabs during the Palestine pogroms in 1929."⁴

This changed in the late 1930s when many Jewish intellectuals from Poland, some of whom were previously connected to the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in Vilna, and from Germany, reached Paris. Under their influence Szajkowski left the Communist movement and found "an intellectual climate which gave me a new faith profoundly influencing my life from that time on."⁵

There can be little doubt that Szajkowski's life-long devotion to research in Jewish history and to Jewish archives, which resulted in numerous articles and several books,⁶ and his tragic end⁷ are deeply rooted in this period of the last years before the War.

With the outbreak of the War, Szajkowski, like many Polish Jews who found a temporary shelter in France, volunteered for the French army, but as a foreigner, was drafted into the famous (Szajkowski would rather say infamous) Foreign Legion. After a period of basic training he was placed in the Foreign Legion's 12th Regiment, in which a large number of Polish Jews served.

On June 15th 1940, during fierce fighting against German armor near Pont-Sur-Yonne to the south-east of Paris, he was wounded and evacuated to Bordeaux and later on to a hospital in Carpentras.⁸

In the long run, the injury turned out to be a blessing: while the Foreign Legion's Jewish soldiers were detained in labor camps when the hostilities ended and later on were sent to the concentration camps in the East, Szajkowski was left to recover from his wounds and then decorated with the *croix de guerre* and discharged. "Curiously enough - he wrote in 1975 - those months in the hospital of Carpentras and later in that city were among the most productive of my life. I spent many days in the famous Carpentras library ... Moreover, while in Carpentras I smuggled out from Paris, with the help of French friends, the archives of the Historical Section of YIVO, those of Sholem Schwartzbard, the Simon Dubnow archives and the private archives and library of the Tcherikowers.⁹ Some of these I was able to send immediately to YIVO in New York via Martinique, the others I had to hide."¹⁰

Along with the documents smuggled from Paris, Szajkowski was also able, "by a peculiar combination of circumstances" to accumulate and ship to New York many archival records originating from local Jewish communities in the South of France. Strangely enough he justified this not by the fact that the records were in danger of being seized by the Germans but by the fact that they were "hitherto all but hidden in local archives".¹¹

In late 1940 Szajkowski left France for the US. He established himself in New York as a research assistant in the YIVO Institute but soon afterwards, in January 1943, he entered into active service in the US Army. After three months of basic training he was sent to the Military Intelligence Training Center in Camp Ritchie in Maryland where he attended an eight-week Military Intelligence Interpreter Course. The course completed, Szajkowski, was assigned to the US 82nd Airborne Division and served in Europe in the Normandy, Rhineland and Ardennes Campaigns. According to his "separation form" he "Worked as a combat paratrooper interpreter and interrogator. Interpreted French, German, Polish and Russian into English and English back to the named languages. Worked with military intelligence, also was French interpreter for Allied Komandatura [sic!] of Berlin".¹²

In December 1944, with permission from his commanders, Szajkowski went to Marseilles to look for the archives he had hidden there back in 1940. "I found them intact, they had been well hidden, and the United States military authorities consented to send them to YIVO in New York."¹³ But it is evident that the material sent from France to New York in 1944-1945 contained much more than the records previously hidden in or near Carpantras. The archives of the Union Generale des Israelites Francaises (UGIF), an organization established in 1941, which are today kept in American Jewish repositories,¹⁴ could not, of course, have been located in 1940. The same goes, it seems, for important parts of the Alliance Israelite Universelle (AIU) archives, which were seized by the Germans in 1940 and could only be recovered after the liberation. It seems quite safe to assume that the AIU records were located and removed from France in 1944-1945, most probably during one of Szajkowski's military furloughs in Paris.¹⁵

Most of Szajkowski's French material was acquired by two New York Jewish archival institutions: the YIVO Archives,¹⁶ where Szajkowski worked during almost the entire period of his life in the US, and the Jewish Theological Seminary Archives (JTS).¹⁷

The newly published guide to the YIVO Archives¹⁸ lists about ten archives and collections of French origin, the acquisition of some of which at least can safely be attributed to Szajkowski. As the Guide does not disclose the provenance of the French material it is necessary to establish the Szajkowski connection by using two criteria: 1) Do parts of the archives in question appear in any other American archives? An affirmative response to this question would most probably point to Szajkowski as it was his habit to split archives and offer them to different repositories. 2) Are the archives in question quoted in Szajkowski's articles? An affirmative response would, again, lead to Szajkowski as he often quoted from his records before giving them away to archives. The largest one of the archives which can be safely attributed to Szajkowski is the archives of the UGIF,¹⁹ an organization established in 1941 in order to represent the Jews of France vis-a-vis the Vichy authorities. The archives contain some 21 linear meters of records from both the Northern (Occupied) and the Southern (Free) Zones of France and from most of the UGIF's numerous departments.²⁰ Other important material acquired from Szajkowski by the YIVO Archives is a little more than one linear meter of the AIU records from the 1860s on, with most of the material coming from the 1881-1885 period and relating to Russian Jewish immigration in the wake of the 1882 anti-Jewish pogroms.²¹ The YIVO Archives also has four and a half linear

meters of records of the so-called "Rue Amelot Committee", which was a coordinating committee of various Jewish welfare organizations in Paris established in June 1940²² and almost five linear meters of the Association des Israelites Pratiques ("Kehillat Haharedim"), an orthodox Jewish organization established in 1936.²³

Of all the American repositories which acquired French-Jewish records from Szajkowski only the JTS Archives acknowledged this in an inventory describing them.²⁴ This is of much importance for the entire topic because Szajkowski, as already mentioned, would usually split record groups into parts and make them over to different repositories. Consequently the JTS inventory helps to identify records kept elsewhere in the US as being procured from the same source. The JTS French-Jewish records, which were acquired "at an unknown date, probably during the late 1950s or early 1960s,"²⁵ occupy some 0.3 cubic meters of storage space and are kept in 29 containers. Their original provenance obscured by previous handling by Szajkowski, they are listed in three thematic groups: The first one (boxes 1-11) contains 18th-19th century documents arranged alphabetically by box.

The second one (boxes 12-17 and folder 23/8) refers to French Jewry during World War II and contains documents which, most probably, originate from the UGIF archives and from the archives of the Central Consistory and the third one (boxes 18-20) has documents from 1905-1906 on the conflict between the Orthodoxy and the Reform. There is a fourth group as well which has no common denominator (boxes 21-28 and an oversize box).²⁶ It is interesting to notice that the first group, although very heterogeneous, contains many items relating to different Jewish communities in Alsace and to the communities of Bordeaux, Bayonne, Metz, Carpentras and St. Esprit.

Apart from the collection listed in the Inventory, the JTS Archives also have five organic record groups of French provenance which were, most probably, also acquired from Szajkowski. They are: the Marseilles Consistory Records, the Algeria Consistory Records, Consistory Correspondence, the Zadoc Kahn Collection and the Eugene Manuel Papers.²⁷

The Jewish Division of the Brandeis University Library²⁸ has a small manuscript collection which holds seven boxes of the Central Consistory records from the last decades of the 19th century. The material contains correspondence with local Jewish communities in France (including Paris itself), North Africa and Palestine. The Jewish Division of the the Harvard University Library in Cambridge, which does not collect records, acquired from Szajkowski a number of printed items pertaining to the history of French Jewry. Some of the items carry on their margin Szajkowski's Yiddish stamp.²⁹

The Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Manuscript Library³⁰ in Cincinnati has an important collection of French-Jewish records dating from the last decades of the 18th century.³¹ Most of the documents seem to originate from the archives of the Jewish communities of Metz, Bayonne, Bordeaux and Paris. It also holds "a collection of over one hundred 18th century inventories of the property of estates of Alsatian Jews".³² Additional Alsatian Jewish material, mainly from Metz, is to be found in the Leo Baeck Institute in New York.³³

In his obituary of Szajkowski,³⁴ Richard I. Cohen credited him with saving entire Jewish archives by removing them from the turmoil of post-war Europe. This, indeed, could be an important motive behind Szajkowski's action but it hardly explains his later handling of the material and, most of all, its piecemeal sale to different archives. It seems that one should turn elsewhere for a full explanation of Szajkowski's behavior. This author finds the novel

"The Last Opus of Leon Solomon" by the late Jerome Badanes³⁵ most illuminating in this context. Although a work of fiction, a large part of the novel seems to be based on Szajkowski's post-war biography.³⁶ In one of the opening passages of the book, Leon Solomon explains why he trimmed with scissors an important historical document so that it would fit into a display case:

They [young researchers] think that there is a door between now and then - a cellar door - and they descend, these captains of scholarship, to bring back artifacts to examine closely, but from a safe distance, as they say, and in order to write illuminating articles about our rich Diaspora heritage. Where do they think we are living now? They are like stupid rabbis declaring the Talmud ended. The commentary goes on as long as history goes on. When I cut out pages of commentary from a sixteen-century manuscriptand sell them for sixty-five dollars a page ..., or when I take one to my apartment to look at it by a single light at 3 a.m., and touch it carefully but with firmness, mingling my fingertips with the prints of scribes and rabbis, scholars and poets - these removals are in their way a commentary to be kept from death documents must be handled by living hands.³⁷

What this quotation seems to tell us is that for Solomon/Szajkowski removing, handling, relocating and selling Jewish documents meant keeping them alive after they had lost their original custodians during the Holocaust who would otherwise have seen to it that they continued to thrive.³⁸

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1. The best known occurrence of this kind seems to be the famous "Special Archives" in Moscow where archival material removed by the Nazis from different locations in occupied Europe is kept. The material, recovered by the Red Army in 1945, was sent to Moscow and thus displaced for the second time.
 2. Unless otherwise stated, the following short biography of Szajkowski is based on: Richard I. Cohen, *The late Zosa Szajkowski, Zion (Jerusalem)*, vol. 43, no. 3-4, 1978, p.367-369 [in Hebrew] and on information released from Szajkowski's military service record under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). I am most grateful to Henry Mayer for his guidance in obtaining information under the FOIA.
 3. The available military records indicate that although he studied for three years he never graduated.
 4. Z. Szajkowski. *Jews and the French Foreign Legion*. New York, 1975, p.62.
 5. *Ibid.*
 6. An extensive bibliography of Szajkowski's works on French Jewry is to be found in: B. Blumenkranz. *Bibliographie des Juifs en France*. Toulouse, 1974, p. 319-320. On Szajkowski's contribution to the historiography of French Jewry during the Holocaust see: Richard I. Cohen. *The Fate of French Jewry in WWII in Historical Writing*. In: Y. Gutman and G. Greif (editors). *The Historiography of the Holocaust Period*. Jerusalem, 1988, p. 180-182.
 7. Szajkowski committed suicide in September 1978 shortly after he had been charged with removing precious Jewish manuscripts from the New York Public Library.
 8. *Jews and the French Foreign Legion*, p. 74. In another publication ("*Jews in the Foreign Legion*", *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1966-67, p. 22-34) Szajkowski gives Point-sur l'Ain as a location of the fighting.

9. All of these are today in the custody of the YIVO Archives in New York. "The Tcherikowers" were Szajkowski's good friends, the historian Elias Tcherikower and his wife Rebecca.
10. Jews and the French Foreign Legion, p. 79-80.
11. Z. Szajkowski, The Decline and Fall of Provençal Jewry, Jewish Social Studies, vol.6, no.1, January 1944, p. 31. For the description of the documents in question see the following Szajkowski's articles in Yiddish: "Eighteenth Century Documents from the Four Communities", In: Yiden in Frankreich. New York, 1942 and "Eighteenth Century Pinkasim >from Carpantras", YIVO Bletter, vol. 21, 1943.
12. Szajko Frydman's "Separation Qualification Record", 20.12.1945, National Personnel Records Center, Saint Louis.
13. Jews and the French Foreign Legion, p.80.
14. See below.
15. In his article "The Alliance Israelite Universelle and East European Jewry: a Postscript" (Jewish Social Studies, vol. 7, no. 2, April 1945) Szajkowski mentions that he "managed to lay hands on a copy [of a 1863 letter by the Polish National Government to AIU] while on military furlough in Paris."
16. YIVO Archives is a department of the YIVO Institute, an organization devoted to preservation of the East European Jewish heritage. See also footnote no. 18 and the Institute's site on Internet: .
17. The Jewish Theological Seminary of America is the academic and spiritual center of Conservative Judaism. For more information see the Seminary's site on Internet (which does not contain much information on the JTS Archives): .
18. F. Mohrer and Marek Web (compilers and editors). Guide to the YIVO Archives. New York, 1998.
19. Guide, p.286-287.
20. Some UGIF records are to be found at the JTS Archives as well (see below). Szajkowski wrote a number of important articles based on the UGIF records. See, inter alia: The Organization of the UGIF in Nazi-occupied France, Jewish Social Studies, vol. 9, no. 3, July 1947, p. 239-256. Considering the wealth of the UGIF material in the US it is little wonder that "only 20 boxes of the UGIF material are to be found in the Archives of the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine (CDJC) in Paris" (L. Steinberg, Les Archives du Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine, Archives Juives, vol. 3, no. 1, 1966-67, p. 7-9. The CDJC is the main repository in France for the material pertaining to the history of French Jewry during the Holocaust.
21. Guide, p. 6. For information on additional AIU material in American archives see below. Szajkowski used the AIU records now in YIVO in his article: The European Attitude to East European Jewish Immigration (1881-1893), American Jewish Historical Quarterly, 1951, p.127-162.
22. Guide, p. 238. Szajkowski wrote on the "Rue Amelot Committee" in his article on the UGIF (see footnote no. 20).
23. Guide, p. 151-152.
24. Roger S. Kohn (ed.). An Inventory to the French Jewish Communities Record Group (1648-1946). New York, 1991, p.1.
25. Ibid, ibid.
26. Ibid, p. 4.

27. The Inventory, p. 2.
28. Not to be confused with the American Jewish Historical Society which is also located on the Brandeis University campus.
29. I am most grateful to Dr. Charles Berlin, the Head of the Jewish Division, for his help in locating the ephemera in question.
30. The Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion is the academic, spiritual and professional center for Reform Judaism. On its Manuscript Library see: Philip P. Mason (ed.). *Directory of Jewish Archival Institutions*. Detroit, 1975. See also the Hebrew Union College site on Internet: .
31. E. Szapiro, "Le Fonds Judeo-Francais de Hebrew Union College", *Archives Juives*, vol.9, no 1, 1972-73, p.11-13.
32. Z. Szajkowski, *Alsatian Jewish Inventories in the Hebrew Union College Library*, *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore*, vol. 4, no.2, December 1959, p.96-97.
33. Max Kreutzberger (ed.). *Leo Baeck Institute New York; Bibliothek und Archiv. Katalog Band 1*. Tuebingen, 1970, p. 84-85. I am most grateful to Rachel O'Brien, the Institute's librarian, for helping me to identify the records acquired from Szajkowski and listed in this volume. The Leo Baeck Institute is an organization devoted to preservation of the German Jewish heritage.
34. See footnote 2.
35. New York, 1989. I am most grateful to Mr Marek Web, the director of the YIVO Archives, for bringing this book to my attention.
36. The two men, Szajkowski and Badanes, might have met at the YIVO Institute where Szajkowski used to work and Badanes came to research the documentary on Polish Jewry, "Image before My Eyes". The pre-war and the war-time life of the novel's hero, Leon Solomon, is completely different from Szajkowski's life.
37. *The Last Opus*, p. 9-10.
38. Completely different evaluation of Szajkowski's motives can be found in a recent article by Georges Weill. According to Weill, Szajkowski was "a professional American thief . . . who systematically pillaged French public and private archives in order to re-sell his spoil in the United States" (see: G. Weill, "Les Archives juives d'Alsace: un patrimoine ? pr?server", *Soci?t? d'histoire des isra?lites d'Alsace et de Lorraine. XXe Colloque*, Strasbourg, 1998, p. 37).

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