



## **NOT YOUR GRANDPARENTS' ARCHIVES (WELL, ACTUALLY, THEY ARE)**

(Begin audio)

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to The College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball Campus, and your host.

JH: Welcome to this edition of The College Commons Podcast, where I look forward to a conversation with Dr. Jason Lustig. Jason Lustig is a lecturer and Israel Institute Teaching Fellow at the Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. His first book, "A Time to Gather: Archives and the Control of Jewish culture", which came out from Oxford University Press in 2021, traces the 20th century struggle over who might "own" Jewish history. Especially after the Nazi looting of Jewish archives. Dr. Lustig is also the host and creator of the Jewish History Matters podcast, which is online at [jewishhistory.fm](http://jewishhistory.fm). Jason Lustig, thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Jason Lustig: Thank you so much for having me.

JH: I wanna start with our shared endeavor of podcasting. You produce and host a great podcast of your own called Jewish History Matter's, which by the way, had me eating from your hand on the basis of the title alone [laughter] I love the fact that you get into the weeds and the long-form discussions, but I wanna ask you a short form question, what has surprised you and delighted you, you a traditionally trained academic historian, most in launching into a popular oral medium such as podcasting?

JL: I'm always happy to be in conversation with people, which for me is one of the most exciting things about doing a project like 'Jewish History Matters'. What is really exciting about working with such a project that reaches an audience is that most scholarship doesn't reach a broad audience in a lot of ways. I think that the structures of the university system, as it exists, erects kind of a gigantic paywall in terms of getting access to the most recent scholarship. You have to pay to get access to articles if you're not affiliated with the university, books can be expensive, and so on and so forth. Forget about... Say in the pre-COVID world, parking on campus, there

are all these barriers to entry to getting access to the latest and greatest of what's going on in terms of the intellectual spheres of Jewish studies and beyond that as well. And it's just been really exciting to see the response to the project, that there are people who are reaching out to me and saying that they're learning a lot from the podcast. Because it really is, I think, exciting to see the ways in which the public, I think really it does care and does think that these historical and intellectual issues do matter. I think it's really just exciting to see people engaging with it.

JH: One of the major hacking scandals in the past, I don't know, 20 years, was hacking into JSTOR, which is one of the providers of academic articles. And the reason I delve into your comment, Jason, is because this guy named Aaron Swartz broke into JSTOR and tried to make it available to all, because the costs of these articles and books is really high.

JL: Yeah, and one thing that a lot of people don't know about the story of Aaron Swartz, which is really interesting in the context of podcasting, all these kind of pieces actually come together because Swartz was actually one of the inventors of the format known as RSS, or Really Simple Syndication, which is actually the technical basis for how podcasts function even up until today. So I think part of what's interesting about that whole story, and maybe that also provides a segue into thinking about this question of archives and access to the path, but it's this question of, what does it mean to give access, to make things accessible when we're talking about information and knowledge and so on and so forth.

JH: Right. And when it's not accessible, who's mediating it? And we'll talk about that. So let's dive into this topic. In your book, 'A Time To Gather', you make an important and frankly, very surprising claim. And it is this, that one of the mightiest power struggles of the Jewish community is the struggle to control archives. Musty, impenetrable rows of ledgers, minutes, business letters, and God knows what. Why on earth would those dust-filled stacks be the source of a communal tug-of-war?

JL: Yeah, I think that when people think about archives in the popular sense, this image that you just brought up of the archives as this kind of dusty store room that nobody goes to, is very widely sort of viewed that's what an archive is. And sometimes that's the case, and so the question is, why is it that archives are sort of exciting? What is it about it that, as you said, becomes this power struggle over who gets to control Jewish culture as a whole? And I think that the reason why this is the case, especially when you're looking at 20th century Jewish culture, is that historical archives, they have a very powerful symbolic meaning. In as much as they represent the past at a time when so much is changing so rapidly, and this is really amplified in the context of the Nazi looting of Jewish archives alongside libraries, art work, all sorts of other kinds of cultural property and other property as well. The Nazis are these huge looter all across the board. When we're looking at Jewish life and culture. So I think that, that history of the 1930s and '40s really puts this in a particular kind of light, where we see that this question of Jewish archives.

JL: Yes, they have this powerful symbolic importance, but it's also very practical. I think that it's important for us to understand what is taking place in this time period of the 1930s and '40s, as not only the Nazi attempt to murder millions upon millions, upon millions of Jews. But also to control and destroy Jewish culture as a whole. And so the archives play an important role here, both in terms of the practical control of Jewish culture, and then also that the Nazis are actually taking hold of these things and literally resting them from Jewish communities around Europe. And then, of course, it's this question of, well, what's gonna happen to them after the Holocaust? Who's going to get them? What it's going to represent in terms of the rebuilding of Jewish life in a Post-1945 World?

JH: So we take the archives at their word, that they are indeed repositories of the story, of the experience of the Jewish people. One of the compelling aspects of your book is that you bring it precisely where you just ended your comments now to the post-war period, and it brings therefore the nascent State of Israel into the question, and so I'd like you to think out loud with us a little bit about the Zionist angle on this question of gathering and owning archives.

JL: In the early 20th century in the Yishuv and the Jewish settlement in Palestine, later on in the State of Israel, there is this broad impulse to gather together Jewish culture. This manifests itself in a number of different ways. There are a whole bunch of Zionist cultural figures who were involved in a project known in Hebrew as Kinus, which is this idea of gathering together and even curating Jewish culture and the process of constructing new Jewish culture in Palestine as part of the Zionist movement. Later on you have the idea of the Kibbutz Galuyot, the ingathering of the exiles, which is of course an idea which draws from the Jewish liturgy and from a certain kind of a messianic vision of a future time when all of the Jews would come back together in the land of Israel, and which manifests itself in the early '50s and beyond, in the mass immigration of Jews from around the world to the newly established Jewish state.

JL: So, there are a whole bunch of different ways in which we can see the history of Zionism and the Zionist project later on in the State of Israel being deeply tied in with this idea of gathering together Jewishness, gathering together Jews, gathering together Jewish culture, and this manifests itself in the archives in a particular way, which is that in the aftermath of the holocaust, the Western allies created in conjunction, especially with Jewish leaders in the United States and elsewhere, a process of restitution to try to help to return to Jews property of all kinds that had been looted in the course of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. And so there's this big question which is being dealt with in the late '40s of what do you do with things like libraries and archives and all sorts of other things which have been stolen, and in many cases, there may or may not be heirs to whom it could be returned. And this is part of the building up of the Hebrew University, this is part of the creation of art museums, like what would eventually become the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and so on and so forth, but it's also a story about archives.

JL: And so the gathering together of archives was part of this bigger process of the movement of Jewish cultural goods to the newly established Jewish state, and I would argue that actually

the process of gathering these archives to Jerusalem was a parallel to the broader political process that was taking place at the time and it's also part of the effort for Israel to try to demonstrate itself as a Jewish state, so to speak. And I'll say two very brief words about what I mean by this. The first thing is that I've already indicated the mass migration of Jews to the newly established State of Israel. So between 1948 and 1953, you have somewhere in the range of 700,000 to 750,000 Jews who immigrate to Israel, more than doubling the Jewish population, which was about 600,000 Jews in May of 1948. So you have this mass migration of Jews under the heading of what many Israeli political leaders like David Ben-Gurion, he called it the *Kibbutz Galuyot*, like the ingathering of the exiles. And you have Israeli archivist figures like Alex Bein, who would become Israel's first state archivist in 1956. He was one of the leaders of this restitution effort to try to bring Jewish historical archives to Israel, and he called it the *Kibbutz Galuyot* of the past, the ingathering of the exiles of the past.

JL: So they are drawing upon this broader idea of what's taking place and saying, You know what, the process of creating a Jewish state is not just about bringing all of the Jews or as many as possible to the State of Israel, but it's also about bringing Jewish culture and Jewish history to the State of Israel, and this ties in with the second point, which is that the effort to gather archives was not just about creating a research institution and so on and so forth, but it is about the State of Israel trying to indicate both for itself and also for the wider world that in some ways it represented a successor to European Jewry, which had been destroyed in the Holocaust, and now who's gonna take up the mantle of the construction of a new Jewish culture post-1945. Well, Israel is in a very strange situation. It's a much smaller Jewish community than the American Jewish community. They're trying to demonstrate and indicate symbolically and practically that they are taking on the mantle of European Jewry.

JH: You've considered the question of German restitution of cultural patrimony to Israel, as you indicated just now, and you argue that this restitution represents something much bigger than the return of property such as we usually understand Holocaust reparations in the popular discourse. In this case, the return of archives extricates the sources from their native Germany, and it seems at least potentially to cast dispersions on the German-ness of the Jewish identity in favor of something like the Israeli project that you described, and instead, it tells a different story. Elaborate on that if you would.

JL: I think that one way to start here is to think about the title of the book itself, what does it mean to talk about a time to gather? If you open the book and you look at the very first page, I explain the way in which you look at this post World War II moment, and there's this debate about what's going to happen to these archives. And Judah Magnes who was the President of Hebrew University at the time, he was an American-born reform rabbi, he wanted to bring the archives of the Jewish communities of Italy at the time to British Palestine. And Cecil Roth, who was a scholar of Italian Jewry based in Cambridge, he writes back and forth with Magnes. Roth is deeply connected with the Hebrew University, his brother at the time is a professor there.

JL: And so that they're corresponding back and forth, and Roth writes to him and say, "I heard about what you wanna do. We shouldn't do this. We should not send these archives to Jerusalem." And he writes, "This is a time to gather, not the reverse." And so part of what we see there is that this process of gathering, to some people, it's bringing things together, to other people, it's a process of scattering. And the same thing can be said about the idea of return. What does it mean to return the stolen property which had been taken by the Nazis from Jews in Germany and also throughout Europe? What does it mean to return it to the Jews? To whom should it go? Does sending archives from Germany to the State of Israel, is that really returning it? 'Cause it's actually taking it away from where they were created and their historical location and sending them to a new place.

JL: And so there's a lot going on here in terms of thinking about what is the nature of these communities, both before World War II and also afterwards. You have Jews in Israel who are saying, like, "Look, we are from a city like Hamburg." There's a whole group of Jews who were born there and end up in the state of Israel, and say, "We support the removal of the archives of the Hamburg Jews and sending them to Israel because we're all here right now." Of course, there were still Jews in Hamburg in the 1950s, but many of them were themselves refugees actually from Eastern Europe who had been forcibly moved to Germany towards the end of World War II as part of the death marches, and so on and so forth. And so there's this huge debate where the archives, I think, indicate the internal tensions about what is going to happen in the post-World War II moment, what does it mean to gather together Jewish culture? To some people, gathering is scattering, and to some people, returning is actually removing. And then there's this whole debate as well about the nature of Jewish communities in Germany post-World War II, the nature of Jewish community in Israel, the nature of Jewish community in America, and so on and so forth.

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JH: The College Commons Podcast is proud to be part of HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. HUC Connect features four programs: Webinars, live conversations with social and cultural influencers on topics of civil society, arts and culture, religion, and redefining allyship; Community Connect, ready-made lesson plans for synagogue and community learning; the Masterclass, live sessions of Judaica with HUC faculty exclusively for our alumni, enroll soon because seats are limited; and, of course, the College Commons Podcast, in-depth conversations with Judaism's leading thinkers. For more information about HUC Connect and all it has to offer, visit [huc.edu/hucconnect](http://huc.edu/hucconnect). And now, back to our program.

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JH: With some irony, keeping on the theme of German Judaism, let's talk about the Hebrew Union College, which, of course, was a German-Jewish creation in the United States in many, many ways. And I want you to tell us about this curious thing from the lore of my institution,

Hebrew Union College, called Gotthard Deutsch's card index of Jewish history. Tell us about that.

JL: HUC tended to hire professors who were coming from Europe, European professors, especially Central European, German-speaking regions. And this is kind of parallel to the broader process of higher education in the US at the time, actually. There was no PhD program in history, for instance, in the United States. The first one was in 1870 in Johns Hopkins University. But anyway, essentially, the US was importing professors in the same way that American Jewry was importing rabbis, which is part of the reason why Isaac Mayer Wise established HUC in the 1870s. And so, just the same way, to get professors to teach at his college, he brought in professors from Europe, figures like Moses Bittenwieser, the professor of Hebrew Bible, for instance. Gotthard Deutsch, the professor of history, is another one. And so Deutsch is this really fascinating figure because he had this idea to collect and catalog essentially every single individual piece of information about modern Jewish history and also contemporary Jewish events into one place.

JL: And so this is kind of a preface to the American Jewish Archives in some respect, because Jacob Rader Marcus, who was a student in the 1910s and his successor as the professor of history at HUC, continues not the specific card catalog project but this idea of collecting, and so on and so forth. So starting in the early 1900s, Deutsch starts reading the newspapers, reading all sorts of books, going through them, and sort of picking out individual facts. There was a pogrom in this city, five people were killed, and something like that, or there was an article in such and such a publication where somebody said some antisemitic thing about the Jews, or there was a Jewish person who flew an airplane. It wasn't just about deep things about what's happening in terms of Jewish history; it's also a lot of things about Jews who were hunters or Jews who were in business and all these, all sorts of different facts. And he organized them based on country, based on time and theme, and so on and so forth. And over the years, he generates this tremendously encyclopedic inventory of, "Jewish facts", as it were, spanning about 70,000 index cards. So this is still there in the reading room, but part of what's interesting about this project is this vision of monumental collecting.

JH: Tell us a little bit more about Jacob Rader Marcus and the place of the American Jewish Archives in American Judaism.

JL: The American Jewish Archives is one of the most significant Jewish archival institutions and projects of the 20th century. It represents, I think, a really important element of the history of HUC itself and also of the development of American Jewish culture and history on a broader scale. So Jacob Rader Marcus creates the American Jewish archives both for his own research purposes, he's a historian and not an archivist, which is really an important distinction. He is interested in creating a place where historians can get things done. So Marcus is doing this for research purposes, but I think it also represents his vision, again, not just about the past, which is I think the crucial element of the book and my research here as a whole, that the archives are not just about the past, but they're also about the future. Marcus sees American Jewry as the

future in a post-Holocaust age. One of his books, which actually I think has the greatest legacy of his, is a collection of sources, 'The Jew in the Medieval World,' which is still used by many professors today as a source book when you're teaching medieval and early modern Jewish history.

JL: So Marcus gets to start in medieval Jewish history and he shifts gears somewhat dramatically in the course of the years of World War II to study American Jewish history. And he frames this as that he sees that European Jewish history is over, this is his view, and that American Jewry is the future, and so he wants to study American Jewish life and culture as a result. And this really manifests itself in the American Jewish archives, which I think really represents this total reorientation that he has as a scholar and also his vision for Hebrew Union College itself. Marcus was part of this... And Marcus believed in gathering everything together in a single place so it could be useful for researchers, but he also believed, especially in the context of the Cold War, that basically bringing everything together in one place also has certain disadvantages. Like what would happen in the nightmare world of a nuclear exchange with the Soviets. And so for him, he basically advocated that everybody should create multiple copies of their archives and store them off as a backup as it were.

JL: Part of the story here is there's this deep contrast between the Israeli archivists and with Marcus. They're both interested in gathering things together, but the Israelis are much more invested in this idea of physical originals so they can get their hands on them through restitution, if they wanted to own them as it were. Marcus also likes originals if he can get them, but he is also really interested in photocopies and this is really how he builds his archive in the manner that he does. So I think that part of what is happening here is the different meanings of gathering together Jewish culture in the post-war era. Part of what I'm arguing here is that the story of the archives is... To go back to one of your initial points, it's not just kind of this question of dusty files that come from the past and that don't really matter anymore, but actually that it represents some of the vital forces of what's taking place basically in modern Jewish history and in contemporary issues as well.

JH: Your response together with some of our previous points in the conversation raise really important themes about access, duplicates, especially in the digital age as increasingly archives are online and the content is readily available to everyone often and it raises the question of what the archive actually does. And it does seem like Jacob Rader Marcus was perhaps a bit of a prescient collector as it were. So good food for thought.

JL: In some ways. [chuckle]

JH: I wanna close this conversation, which I'm enjoying so much, by eliciting a personal story from you. You refer in your book to individual scholars archive stories by which I think, and maybe you'll correct me, I think you mean those great moments of discovery that the archival scholar, at least the artful one, packages into great dinner conversation and by means of which

they forge a professional identity. I was hoping maybe you would tell us one of your archive stories.

JL: One of the best stories that I can kind of refer to, I was sitting in the archives in Worms. Worms is a small city in Western Germany not that far from the border with France and it's a site of one of the longest Jewish settlements in Europe, going back about a thousand years if not more. And so a couple of the cases of restitution I talk about in the book are the archives in Hamburg, which I mentioned before briefly, and also the archives in Worms. And in Worms there's a whole story about the archivist Friedrich Illert, who was the city's municipal archivist, who stole the archives actually not from the Jews, but from the Nazis, and he hid them in the city's archives during the war in order to protect them and he wanted to give them back to Jews who would resettle in Worms.

JL: When we are accessing digital archives, yes, it's very, very practical. You don't have to travel across the world and it's better in terms of our carbon footprint. Certainly during COVID times, it's not really easy to travel by any means, but being in the location, of being in Worms and spending some time there really helped me to understand the broader context of what's taking place in this debate over the future of Jewish life in Germany and the question of who should these archives be returned to. 'Cause Illert, he believed that the history of Jews in Worms was essential to the history of Worms itself. What I understood by being there and this kind of archive story is that if you go to this... If you go to the municipal archive of Worms today, it's a really rich archive of the history of the city, but the location is really critical because it is in... It's the second floor of what is known as the Rossi House.

JL: And so what is really interesting is that Illert and then his son, Georg, takes over for him in the 1960s. Basically they see Jewish history as being part of the city's history itself, to the extent that when the Jewish Museum is created, they put the City Archive on top of it so there's this kind of overlap as it was between the Jewish history and the local history. And this to me was a revelation and I think that if I had just had access to these things online, I never would have understood this in the same way as actually being there. But the broader story here is about the connection between archives and identity, how it is that people's self-identity...

JL: I think today we sometimes talk about how your identity is bound up in the document. It's like, "Are you what your passport says? Is your name what is written on your driver's license? Or what if you wanna change it or questions about gender identity. Are you a man because that's what it says on your birth certificate or..." There's all these different aspects to it. But in so many ways in modern and contemporary society, identity is bound up with paper individually. The people who were in these restitution battles in the 1950s were asking to what extent do archives as a whole, archival collections, offer a kind of birth certificate to different Jewish communities in the aftermath of World War II. Collecting archives is not just about creating research institutions or about preserving the past, but it's bound up with questions of Jewish self-identity in a really broad sense.



JH: I love that image of a document, or in this case, we might extrapolate to an archive as being a collective birth certificate of a people and what they do with that and then how they shape the future. And with that thought, I wanna thank you, Jason Lustig, for taking the time and to congratulate you on the publication of 'A Time To Gather.' Thanks so much for joining us.

JL: Thank you so much for having me.

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JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts. And check out HUC Connect. Compelling conversations at the forefront of Jewish learning. For more information about all that HUC Connect has to offer, visit [huc.edu/hucconnect](http://huc.edu/hucconnect).

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