

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Lisa Moses Leff. *The Archive Thief: The Man Who Salvaged French Jewish History in the Wake of the Holocaust.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 304 pp. \$31.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-938095-4.

Reviewed by Geraldine Guddefin (Brandeis University)

Published on H-Judaic (November, 2017)

Commissioned by Katja Vehlow

Lisa Moses Leff's most recent book, *The Archive Thief* provides both a riveting portrait of an enigmatic scholar and a reflection about the construction of archives. The book centers around the figure of Zosa Szajkowski (1911-78), an archivist and researcher for the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research in New York, who wrote extensively about the history of Jews in France.

Leff, a history professor at American University, has unraveled the mystery of why the archives of French Jews are dispersed across three continents, even though the vast majority of Jews in France remained in that country after the Holocaust. At the heart of this puzzle is none other than Zosa Szajkowski himself. Between 1940 and 1961, Szajkowski illegally procured tens of thousands of documents from French public archives and Jewish institutions, including the Paris Consistory and the Library of the Alliance Israélite Universelle—France's largest Jewish library. Over the course of three decades, Szajkowski's incremental thefts and sales to libraries, dealers, and private collectors resulted in several collections of French Judaica outside of France, particularly at American university libraries. The obsessive collector was caught red-handed twice: at the Strasbourg Municipal Archives in 1961, and at the New York Public Library seventeen years later. Shortly after that incident, he took his own life.

How and why did Zosa Szajkowski become an "archive thief"? To answer these questions, Leff has painstakingly reconstructed Szajkowski motivations, while situating his thefts within postwar debates about Jewish cultural property. "The ambiguity at the heart of

his story," she argues, "provides an interesting vantage point from which to rethink certain assumptions we still have about Jewish resistance in the Holocaust and Jewish reconstruction in its wake, because it unfolds in the same context and was shaped in large part by the same cultural, political, and economic factors" (p. 6).

After a stage-setting first chapter about Szajkowski's postwar thefts in French archives, in chapter 2 Leff turns to Szajkowski's childhood in Poland and his formative years in Paris. Szajkowski nurtured a passion for Jewish books from very early on. At age 10, for example, he campaigned for his secular Polish school to acquire Yiddish books. In Paris, where he immigrated at age 16, Szajkowski worked as a journalist for the Yiddish press until he met Ilya and Riva Tcherikower, a Jewish couple from Ukraine, who had a long-lasting impact on the young émigré. The Tcherikowers introduced Szajkowski, who hailed from a poor family, to the East European Jewish cultural elite in interwar Paris. Furthermore, under their mentorship, Szajkowski transitioned from journalism to scholarly writing and archival collecting. Active members of YIVO, the Tcherikowers had amassed an impressive archive about the Ukrainian pogroms, which they brought along with them in their migrations. In Leff's assessment, Ilya Tcherikower conceived of collecting as a project of self-defense: "for this nation without a state, an archive, used by those trained in scientific methods, was a portable tool that could be used in their struggle to achieve recognition and perhaps even justice from the world community, even as they themselves migrated from one country to another" (p. 41). Tcherikower's sense of mission strongly resonated with

Szajkowski, who shared the former's self-identification as a diaspora nationalist. Szajkowski thus came to view the study of the past as a tool for improving the lot of the Jewish people.

Chapter 3 chronicles Szajkowski's trials during the first years of the war. Before leaving France in the spring of 1941, Szajkowski—a stateless Jew at that point, and therefore exposed to great dangers—busied himself researching the history of Provençal Jewry and collecting French Judaica in the unoccupied southern zone of France, which he sent to YIVO in New York. “Salvaging those archives remained burned in his memory a the noble and brave act of a hero, a sign of his devotion to scholarship and the Jewish people,” Leff writes on page 64. Szajkowski's wartime collecting was both ideological (traces of the Jewish past should be moved to the new center of the diaspora) and practical: Szajkowski understood that ingratiating himself with the Yiddish cultural elite in New York would increase his chances of obtaining a visa to the United States (it did).

In the next chapter, Szajkowski, who had finally reached American shores in the fall of 1941, returns to Europe, as a soldier in the US army. Leff recounts in poignant details Szajkowski's shock at encountering the scale of Jewish destruction—including the murder of several of his siblings—and fraught encounters with the remaining French Jewish community. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Szajkowski became further convinced that there was no possibility of authentic Jewish life in Europe upon witnessing the plight of Jewish DPs in Germany and internal struggles within the Jewish community of France. Fearing the destruction of wartime documents about Jews in France, Szajkowski illegally amassed a large collection of records.

Chapter 5 documents Szajkowski's stay in postwar Berlin. As a translator for the US occupation forces in the summer of 1945, Szajkowski pursued his unlawful collecting, gathering a wealth of Jewish periodicals and Nazi documents. In his mind, this was an act of revenge for the wartime suffering of the Jewish people. As Leff persuasively shows, there was nothing unusual about Szajkowski's activities: many American Jews, animated by a similar belief that these documents were the collective property of the Jewish people, illegally collected documents, with the tacit agreement of American authorities.

The next chapter focuses on Szajkowski's return to the United States, and his precarious position as a prolific Jewish scholar lacking academic credentials. Severed from the wartime and immediate postwar contexts, Sza-

jkowski's collecting took on new meaning. In Leff's estimation, his thieving in French archives was motivated by both research and economic purposes: Szajkowski used stolen documents for his own research projects before selling them, thereby supplementing his meager salary. Yet, as Leff intimates, psychological factors were at play too: in the decades following the war, Szajkowski, feeling abandoned by Jewish institutions, had grown bitter and disillusioned.

Finally, the last two chapters examine Szajkowski's thefts from the French and American perspectives: Leff successively analyzes French Jewish responses and the role of American Jewish librarians in the 1950s and 1960s. French and American Jewish librarians were motivated by diverging desires and concerns, yet both groups enabled Szajkowski's behavior. Jewish librarians in France chose to monitor Szajkowski, rather than to confront him or report him to the authorities, for fear of reviving French antisemitism and alienating American Jews. On the other side of the Atlantic, Jewish librarians were animated by a strong sense of mission: a “shared belief in reuniting the scattered, orphaned remnants of the Jews' diasporic past” (p. 197). The desire to build great Jewish libraries in the United States led to fierce competitions between university libraries, thereby fueling Szajkowski's sales.

The Archive Thief is a richly researched, lucidly written and, ultimately, deeply moving book. The global refugee crisis makes it impossible not to think of Zosa Szajkowski's story through the lens of refugeehood. Twice uprooted, Szajkowski, like so many of his coreligionists, had to cope with manifold economic and psychological hardships in the aftermath of a genocide of unfathomable magnitude. In so many ways, then, his thefts cannot be understood apart from the losses, and subsequent trauma, that Szajkowski underwent. The book is all the more engaging that its author is able to situate Szajkowski's actions within the context of postwar discussions about the rightful ownership of archives. Finally, Leff makes a very persuasive argument about the ambiguous legacy of Szajkowski's collecting and sales. On the one hand, by making a wealth of materials available to scholars, Szajkowski spearheaded the field of French Jewish history in the United States. On the other hand, by scattering French Jewish documents across France, Israel, and the United States, he left behind documents that are severed from their source, thus making it exceedingly difficult for scholars to understand the context of their production. Conspicuously missing—even though Leff alludes to American power in chapter