

David S. Koffman

On The Importance of Basement Archives for Canadian Jewish Studies

In their 2018 essay, “The Ties that Bind: Materiality, Identity, and the Life Course in the ‘Things’ Families Keep,” British historians Liz Gloyd, Vicky Crewe, Laura King, and Anna Woodham – each of whom works on different periods, from ancient Rome to early 20th century England – make the case for why historians ought to expand the definition of “archives” beyond those intuitively established, professionalized repositories, to include and recognize domestic collecting practices of ordinary people.¹

They argue not only that paying attention to the family archive, broadly defined, encourages a more egalitarian approach to history, but that considering the ways that families have preserved, kept, and passed on items *in their own terms* opens a new vista on what I’d call everyday historiography. Rather than see family collecting and saving behaviours as a sub-standard poor cousin to formalized and professionalized institutional archive practice, these scholars suggest that family archives and archival practices are valuable precisely because of their fluid, chaotic, and informal nature (p.158). They teach us about the ways that we humans already do archival history. The study of these practices can then reveal many of the ways that we literally make, create and keep our intimate histories, and the ways that these history-making practices and meanings change over time and across cultures. Family archival practices are also deeply gendered; it is not a coincidence that the insight about and argument for elevating the status of these sorts of commemorative and archival practices emerge from the collaboration of four female scholars.

Gloyd et. al. also illustrate how objects held in family archives, alongside their curation practices and intergenerational narratives, reinforce a family’s sense of itself. The authors even go so far as to argue, following the Turkish scholar, author and 2006 Nobel Prize for Literature laureate, Orhan Pamuk’s “Modest Manifesto for Museums,” that *the future of museums is in our homes*, if only we could widen our archival aperture to accommodate more democratic, more egalitarian, more intimate, and more approachable modes of thinking about how we commemorate our pasts using things (not just documents), in the places we ourselves live, in homes and neighbourhoods (not just in state-led institutions). “Such an approach,” the authors claim, “would enable individuals’ stories to be told in place of a focus on the histories of nations. Indeed, families and individuals have long collected and, perhaps, even curated objects and stories relating to their own lives. Further, objects held in family archives play an important role within the wider landscape of memory and history” (p. 157).

Of course, in the case of Jewish Canada, the archives and museums that capture some portion of Canadian Jewish experiences have not, for the most part, been state-led. Rather, they have long been community-based enterprises (despite some efforts to tell a version of the national story at both Jewish and Canadian-public museums).² Canadian Jewish communities’ archive practices have largely split their collection efforts between communal activities (which are, arguably, state-within-a-state

communal self-governance matters) on the one hand, and the ordinary, lived experiences of Jewish individuals and families on the other. In this way, Canadian Jewish archives also share a porous border with genealogy, though platforms for historical information gathering, sharing and disseminating like ancestry.com or geni.com might be better thought of as great public and digital, market-mediated history enterprises. Genealogy and family history are not, in other words, distinct disciplines as much as they are methodological cousins.³ Canadian Jewish archives do the work of archiving from below; Canadian Jewish fonds and collections include not just the documentation of organized and everyday life, but photos, artwork, and *material objects from below*.

Indeed, the institutional habits of Canadian Jewish archiving, now into their sixth decade, have been fairly consistent in expanding the range of sources they acquire, continuing a long-term trend of *from below* social historiography. Canadian Jewish archives took their earliest shape in the context of a 1970s history-democratization ethos, of a shift of focus from elites of the nation to the diverse and ordinary non-elites' experiences of the great trends in history (immigration, industrialization, war) rather than the men who were said to direct such events and processes. The mere existence of community-run archives or even Jewish fonds in larger provincial archives was a statement *from below*: that Jews, like Indigenous peoples, people of colour, immigrants, workers, women, and others whose own voices were largely absent from municipal, provincial, and federal archives, were as important to the larger project of understanding history as were policy makers. And as Amir Lavie, our journal's Associate Editor, showed in his 2019 PhD dissertation, Jewish archives took different institutional shapes and had distinct collecting priorities or narratives depending on the region and ideology of the founding archivists.⁴ Of course, they all shared a fundamental impulse: to save, store, commemorate, and curate Jewish experiences in Canada. Jewish collections in Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal all were part of a rescue or salvage mission to retrain the voices of the ordinary. This "Basement Archives" installment of *The Archives Matter* offers a humble extension to this impulse.

For my part, as the editor-in-chief of *Canadian Jewish Studies*, I have been honoured to be involved in aiding the creation and regular featuring of this subsection under Janice Rosen's superlative leadership. Archivists from coast to coast to coast regularly use these pages to gather sources in theme-and-variation meditations or exhibitions on a given theme, offering the archivists – professionals who work behind the scenes of research dissemination – a platform for showcasing their own voices. As the guest editor for this installment of *The Archives Matter*, I am particularly interested in signalling one way of expanding the boundaries and range of texts that our field's scholars might consider suitable for study, even beyond our innovative and valuable archives and collections. We humans, I'd argue, have always kept and curat-

ed *things* that come to stand in for who we are – for our families, tribes, and histories – and we have done so in ways that sometimes diverge quite dramatically from the ways that professional historians and archives use traces of the past to reconstruct it. We all have some objects, some material physicality that captures something otherwise uncapturable of our own family (and communities’) histories: documents, narratives, photos, and of course, *things*, with their tactile and textural presence and the invariably invisible memories and meanings that inhere in them inside the stories we tell. I cherish a pocketknife from my exceedingly quiet maternal grandfather, Robert Elkin, ז”ל, an electrician by profession.

In this spirit, I asked five Canadian Jews to contribute to the “Basement Archives” installment of *The Archives Matter* by selecting an artefact from their own family homes, to offer some reflections on what these objects mean to them or their families, and to reflect on how these things are a part of the Canadian Jewish experience. Each of the authors are contributors to one or another larger conversation about Canadian Jewish life and letters. Dara Solomon is the Executive Director of the Ontario Jewish Archives Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, and the Sarah and Chaim Neuberger Holocaust Education Centre. Leora Schaefer is the executive director of Facing History and Ourselves Canada, a Jewish non-profit educational organization that think deeply about Jewish history and politics. Gerald Stone is Canadian Jewry’s greatest bibliographer. Yoni Goldstein is the CEO and Editor-in-Chief at the *Canadian Jewish News*. And Yolande Cohen is a historian of the modern Sephardi experience at UQAM. But in this section, I have turned them, temporarily, into unconventional archivists, and I’ve asked them to write in first-person voice.

The results are fascinating. About half of the contributors chose objects that explicitly index religiosity. The other half are “secular,” for lack of a better word – objects or documents from everyday life, imbued with deep meaning. Too: while roughly half of the objects travelled their distances and came to be treasured as salvage from war, displacement or violence, the other batch consist in meaning derived from the intimacies of ordinary circumstance. Dara Solomon’s text and photos are a meditation on her grandfather’s soft drink business in Kirkland Lake, in northern, rural Ontario and the legacy of Coca-Cola through the generations. Gerald Stone writes of his Hungarian-born survivor / D.P. parents, his mother’s diaries, and the writings of his childhood’s pediatrician. Leora Schaefer’s contribution focuses on her maternal grandparents’ set of heirloom china, which somehow made it out of Nazi Germany, and were used for the first time in years at her *pesach* seder in Toronto. Her reflections are intercut by those of her father, Stephen Schaefer, making their contribution a dialogue – or a negotiation – about the familial meaning of these usable heirlooms. Yoni Goldstein offers reflections on his grandfather’s *tallis’ attarah* and *tallis* bag, his cuff links, electric shaver, and wooden horses. Scraps from a *sefer Torah* that Yolande Cohen’s father brought with him to Canada from Méknès, Morocco in 1974 – four

generations old by that time – are the basis for her contribution. These fragments, along with an oral history with Aaron Cohen were put on display at Montreal's McCord Museum's "Shalom Montreal" exhibition in 2018.

This installment of *The Archives Matter* is also born from my experience teaching an upper-level undergraduate workshop at York University called *History of Me: The Genealogy Seminar*. The course draws students from the Greater Toronto Area's wide variety of immigrant and ethnic family backgrounds and asks students to put some aspect of their family history at the centre of a larger scholarly conversation. It aims to stir students to think about how their own families have been shaped by multiple and intersecting histories, but also asks them to think about their own lives (or family members' lives) as subjects who shape history on their own terms.

I hope that this installment of *The Archives Matter* will inspire our readers to record oral histories with their ancestors and elders, to expand their collections of objects, documents, photos and whatever else has made their histories Jewish and/or Canadian, and – above all – to value these objects and peculiar family practices of remembering and archiving as meaningful contributions to the shared enterprise of Canadian Jewish studies.

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Gloyn, Liz, Vicky Crewe, Laura King, and Anna Woodham. "The Ties that Bind: Materiality, Identity, and the Life Course in the "Things" Families Keep." *Journal of Family History*. 2018. 43 (2): 157-176

2

Menkis, Richard, "In From the Margins: Museums and Narratives of the Canadian Jewish Experience" in Koffman, David S., *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020, pp. 177-188.

3

Jerome de Groot, "Ancestry.com and the Evolving Nature of Historical Information Companies," *The Public Historian* 42, no 1 (2020): 828.

4

Lavie, Amir. "The Past Is Not a Foreign Country: Archival Mentalities and the Development of the Canadian-Jewish Community's Archival Landscape During the Nineteen Seventies." Faculty of Information, University of Toronto. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2019.