

The Archive Thief: The Man Who Salvaged French Jewish History in the Wake of the Holocaust, by Lisa Moses Leff, New York, Oxford University Press, 2015, 304 pp., GBP£17.99 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 199380 95 4

The Archive Thief: The Man Who Salvaged French Jewish History in the Wake of the Holocaust is an enthralling account of the life and times of Zosa Szajkowski, a researcher who is acknowledged as being a major contributor to French Jewish history, but who was actively stealing archives from state and private collections.

Szajkowski is described as being a peculiar individual (p. 2); that adjective barely does him justice. Author Lisa Leff notes the difficulty in evaluating Szajkowski's activities, in deciding whether he should be regarded as an opportunistic thief taking advantage of the post-Second World War disorder and chaos, or regarded as a hero, rescuing Jewish papers from a country with a history of persecuting Jews.

The context of Szajkowski's life and times is vividly and painstakingly detailed. He was born Yehoshua Frydman in the province of Masovia in Poland in 1911, moving to Paris at the age of 16 to join three older siblings. It was in Paris that he became involved in the work of the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (YIVO). YIVO was a scientific institution founded in order to conduct research of Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe. Leff describes YIVO as being committed to the idea of the Jews being a national group. Collecting documents ('communal archives, special collections, and any other documentation relevant to Jewish life in these regions') was an essential component of developing the national culture necessary to face twentieth-century challenges to Jewish identity and survival.¹

Szajkowski's passion for the documents recording the Jewish past was undoubtedly inspired by YIVO intellectuals Elias and Rebecca Tcherikower, whose Paris apartment contained a massive archive which was eventually transferred to the YIVO archives in New York.² 'The collection made a great impression on the young Szajkowski, reaffirming his sense that ... he had found the true caretakers of the Jewish people' (p. 33). The core of the Tcherikower archives was documentation recording the horrors of the Ukrainian pogroms in the period 1918–21, and the Tcherikowers' methodology provided the model for subsequent Holocaust and post-Holocaust documentation projects. Leff refers to these historian-created archives as archives of catastrophe, designed to be portable in the case of forced migration, and to be hidden if necessary (p. 40).

In 1939, Szajkowski volunteered for military service, which for non-French nationals meant joining the Foreign Legion. He was badly wounded but managed to avoid internment and eventually obtained a visa to travel to the United States in 1941. Once in the US his connections with YIVO were strengthened but Szajkowski once again volunteered for military service, eventually returning to Europe as a paratrooper, landing in Normandy the day before the D-Day landings.

His experiences of the consequences of the war on the Jewish people and their culture were instrumental in motivating his collecting activities. 'For Szajkowski ... reconstruction could not simply be materials; it had to have a foundation in scholarship, for which libraries and archives were the cornerstone' (p. 101). He did not regard France as a safe place for Jewish libraries and archives.

The realities of the enormous challenges faced by the occupying forces in attempting the restitution of property looted by the Nazis are carefully detailed. Leff describes the situation as being one which was 'conducive to unauthorised solutions' (p. 129) and Szajkowski certainly made the most of it. He was stationed in Berlin and, contrary to Army regulations, collected documents and publications on a massive scale for YIVO in New York.

The transition from collecting to stealing is convincingly related. Collecting, for Szajkowski, represented a source of comfort in a time of danger and a heroic act, but Leff notes the obsessiveness that becomes clearly apparent in Berlin in 1945. By 1949, concerns were being voiced at YIVO about his unorthodox and unethical practices, much to Szajkowski's anger and dismay.

It seemed that it was not possible for Szajkowski to renounce the opportunities realised in 1945. Obsessive collecting, including theft, continued until 1961 when he was caught red-handed in the Strasbourg city archives ripping pages out of bound volumes. Leff explains, 'It was not so much the man who had changed as the world around him' (p. 147).

The final chapter of the book draws our attention to the buyers that eventually became active participants in these archival thefts. Although the initial motivation for collecting seems to have been altruistic, by the time of his death in 1978, dire financial circumstances saw Szajkowski selling hundreds of thousands of pages of rare documents directly to research libraries and collectors worldwide. Leff describes these sales activities as quite simply being about making ends meet, and thus devoid of any ideological motivation or justification. Ironically, the acquisition records of the archives concerned seem to be generally incomplete and lacking in any detail, thus helping ensure that provenance would be impossible to establish.

Ultimately, *The Archive Thief* is a tragedy in more ways than one. Zosa Szajkowski's adventurous life had many twists and turns, his ultimately ignoble end casting long shadows over his many positive achievements and contributions. Leff has succeeded admirably in conveying Szajkowski's complex nature and often contradictory motivations. Her writing is accessible and engaging, meticulously supported with references to the many archival sources, as well as publications, consulted. A bonus for the archival community is her epilogue, which discusses the implications for understanding the nature of archives and their inherent ambiguity.

Highly recommended, this book is well worth reading for insight into pre- and post-Holocaust European Jewry, the nature of scholarship and motivation for archival crimes. Pre-conceptions are likely to be challenged, and the reader may well come away with much more nuanced perspectives surrounding rights of custody, ownership and community.

Endnotes

1. Silvia Schenkolewski-Kroll, 'Jewish Archives and Archival Documents: Israel and the Diaspora', *Archival Science*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2016, p. 313.
2. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 'Elias Tcherikower, 1903–1963, RG81', *Guide to the YIVO Archives*, available at <<https://yivoarchives.org/index.php?p=collections/controlcard&id=32538>>, accessed 3 July 2017.

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