



ACCESSING HOLOCAUST-ERA ARCHIVES

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An initiative of jMUSE, **The Jewish Museums Project** explores how archives, libraries, and museums use their unique strengths and collections to spotlight Jewish history and culture, combat antisemitism, and create lasting change.

The Jewish Museums Project experiments with new ways to present important ideas and innovative content; supports the dissemination of knowledge; and works to ensure that Jewish museums and Holocaust museums can serve as the backbone of Jewish cultural engagement in communities around the world.

ACCESSING HOLOCAUST-ERA ARCHIVES

This publication features an analysis of selected institutions around the world which provide access to Holocaust resources. The work presented is not intended to be comprehensive, but to provide different perspectives on wartime documentation practices and consider the ways these archives have since been presented to the public.

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ACCESSING HOLOCAUST-ERA ARCHIVES

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Several institutions hold archives established during the Second World War and the Holocaust. They provide useful resources for contemporary Holocaust education and awareness, not simply because of the extraordinary wealth of information held within, but because of the wide-ranging stories they might tell about Jewish resilience and survival, and about Jewish attempts to document legislated intolerance, persecution, and mass murder during the Holocaust.

The case studies in this report are not intended to be definitive. They have been selected to provide five alternate perspectives on wartime documentation practices, and to consider the ways these archives have since been presented to the public.

The Arolsen Archives were founded by a non-Jewish governmental body. The Contemporary Jewish Documentation Centre (CDJC), the Underground Archives of the Warsaw Ghetto, and The Wiener Library were established by Jewish individuals or communities during the war. The Beit Lohamei Haghetatot Archives were collected in Israel post-war. However, they have been included, as the project was originally conceptualized in the Polish Ghettos, and as it presents an early example of survivors self-consciously documenting experiences of the Holocaust.

Unless otherwise specified, information has been sourced from the official website of the archive or its hosting institution, or alternatively from the [EHRI portal](#), a project that collates information on Holocaust-related archival material held in institutions in Europe.

AROLSEN ARCHIVES: INTERNATIONAL CENTER ON NAZI PERSECUTION

Location: Bad Arolsen, Germany

Date Established: c. 1943

Alternative Names: Central Tracing Bureau / International Tracing Service (ITS)

Official Website: <https://arolsen-archives.org/en/>

Accessibility Provided:

Collection Digitization

Permanent Exhibition(s)

Searchable Catalogue

Public Programming

Traveling Exhibition(s)

In 1943, the Allied Forces formed the Tracing Bureau to locate missing persons from the war. The project was formalised in February 1944, when the Central Tracing Bureau was established under SHEAF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces). This organisation eventually moved to Bad Arolsen and in 1948, it was renamed the International Tracing Service (ITS).

Its institutional structure has changed since the 1940s, but its central objectives remain: clarifying the fates of missing persons, finding information about victims of persecution, and educating the public about crimes perpetrated in Nazi-occupied Europe.

The archive of 30 million original documents is arranged by documents (1) created by Nazi administration in concentration camps, ghettos, and detention facilities, (2) retrieved from public authorities, companies, and local firms about the deployment of forced laborers, and (3) compiled by the Allied Forces about Displaced Persons after 1945.

The Central Name Index holds 50 million index cards with information on the fates of 17.5 million people. An additional building houses a supplementary archive of correspondence between the tracing service, public authorities and victims of Nazi persecution and their relatives.

AROLSEN ARCHIVES: INTERNATIONAL CENTER ON NAZI PERSECUTION

The archive operates a publicly searchable online catalogue with access to a significant quantity of its digitized collection, focused primarily on displaced persons, concentration camps, ghettos and penal institutions, and special collections. There is an on-site permanent exhibition at the archive, "A Paper Monument," but this is closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (as of March 2023).

The archive also organizes a travelling exhibition, "#StolenMemory," installed inside a shipping container and deposited in public spaces around Europe. The website additionally hosts Matterport 3D virtual tours of the archive building and the on-site exhibition, as well as three digital exhibitions related to "#StolenMemory."



Photo: Arolsen Archives, Displaced Persons card file with photo.

BEIT LOHAMEI HAGHETAOT ARCHIVES

Location: Ghetto Fighters' House Museum, Western Galilee, Israel

Date Established: c. 1949

Alternative Name: Ghetto Fighters' House Archives

Official Website(s): <https://www.gfh.org.il/eng>;
<https://www.gfh.org.il/eng/Archive>

Accessibility Provided:

Collection Digitization

Permanent Exhibition(s)

Searchable Catalogue

On-site Temporary Exhibition(s)

Public Programming

Beit Lohamei Haghetaot Archives were established alongside Kibbutz Lohamei Haghetaot in 1949. The Kibbutz's founders had been fighters with the Jewish Underground in the ghettos of Poland and settled in Israel after the war. It was likely one of the earliest archive and memorial museum spaces established by Holocaust survivors and Jewish partisan fighters.

It holds letters, personal and official documents, diaries, written and oral testimonies, films, and photographs, as well as collections of artworks and artifacts. It documents Jewish cultural and religious life in inter-war Europe, the fate of the Jewish people during WWII, and the Holocaust survivor community post-war.

There are approximately 2,500,000 archival items in the collection, including 60,000 photographs, 3,000 artworks, 2,000 films and 60,000 library titles.

The archive is open to the public by appointment, and there is a searchable online catalogue with access to a significant portion of its digitized collection. It is also used as a resource for educational programs, and for the museum's permanent and temporary exhibitions.

CONTEMPORARY JEWISH DOCUMENTATION CENTER (CDJC)

Location: Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris, France

Date Established: April 28, 1943

Alternative Name: Mémorial de la Shoah Archive

Official Website: <https://www.memorialdelashoah.org/en>

Accessibility Provided:

Collection Digitization

Permanent Exhibition(s)

Searchable Catalogue

On-site Temporary Exhibition(s)

Public Programming

Traveling Exhibition(s)

The idea for the Contemporary Jewish Documentation Center (CDJC) started with a clandestine meeting of forty Jewish activists and community leaders, who gathered in the apartment of the rabbi and industrialist Isaac Schneersohn on April 28, 1943. With Grenoble under Italian occupation, they discussed the necessity of an archive, to collect evidence on the persecution of France's Jewish population and to demand justice after the war.

Although the work of the CDJC was temporarily halted in September 1943, Schneersohn went to Paris after D-Day, and successfully retrieved documentation abandoned by the Nazi occupiers and their Vichy collaborators. French prosecutors at the Nuremberg Trials would later use these archives to build their case against representatives of the defeated Nazi Germany.

The collection totals more than 30 million documents. This includes the archives of the German military and administrative command in occupied France (MBF), records from the German Embassy in Paris, 20,000 files from the General Commission on Jewish Affairs (CGQJ), and letters, telegrams, and reports from the Anti-Jewish division of the Gestapo. It also holds documentation from the Nuremberg Trials, alongside private archival material.

CONTEMPORARY JEWISH DOCUMENTATION CENTER (CDJC)

In the 1950s, Schneersohn planned and built a tomb-memorial in Paris, to honor victims of the Holocaust. An expanded Shoah Memorial opened in 2005, with a museum, exhibition spaces, an auditorium, and a multimedia center. Material from the CDJC archive is displayed in the museum's permanent, temporary, and virtual exhibitions, as well as in educational events and programming. The archive maintains a publicly searchable online catalogue with access to its digitized collection of documents, photography, and audio-visual assets.



Photo UNESCO, Memorial de la Shoah, Paris, France.

UNDERGROUND ARCHIVES OF THE WARSAW GHETTO

Location: Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, Poland

Date Established: c. September 1939

Alternative Names: Oneg Shabbat Archives / Ringelblum Archives

Official Website(s): <https://www.jhi.pl/en> / <https://www.jhi.pl/en/oneg-shabbat>

Accessibility Provided:

Collection Digitization

Permanent Exhibition(s)

Public Programming

Traveling Exhibition(s)

The Underground Archive was established in the Warsaw Ghetto under the supervision of Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, and with support from the Oneg Shabbat committee and the ZSS Self-Help Organization. It was compiled in secret, initially with the remit of detailing the Nazi occupation. However, when reports of deportation and mass murder reached Warsaw in early 1942, the group started systematically collecting evidence and documentation of the genocide.

The archive was used to relay information to inhabitants of the Ghetto, to support Polish Resistance efforts, and to attempt to communicate the ongoing genocide to the rest of Europe. It was buried across 3 locations in July 1942 and February 1943, before most of the archivists were either deported or later killed during the Warsaw Uprising. Dr. Ringelblum was murdered alongside his family in 1944. Although two parts of the archive were recovered at the end of the war, the third cache of documents was never found.

The surviving section of the archive includes 6,000 documents and collects data about daily life in the ghetto, forced labor, Judenrat policy, the work of social welfare institutions, the fate of children, and religious life. It also documents forms of resistance, including cultural work, underground schools, the underground press, smuggling and armed resistance. It includes a varied range of material, such as documents, printed ephemera (tram tickets, ration cards, posters, menus, etc.), photographs, literature, and drawings and artworks.

UNDERGROUND ARCHIVES OF THE WARSAW GHETTO

The archive is held at the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI) in Warsaw, Poland. It is in the process of digitization, transcription, and translation. There are 38 volumes published in its original languages (Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew) but only the first 3 are presently available in English. Scans are available through the JHI's DELET web portal. Excerpts from the archive were shown at YIVO in New York City in spring 1983 (Margolick 1983), and the exhibition "Scream the Truth at the World" which travelled to several North American venues through the 2000s (Sakowska and Bergman 2006). In 2017, the Jewish Historical Institute opened "What we've been unable to shout out to the world," a permanent exhibition organized by JHI's *Oneg Szabat* Program.



Unearthing of the first part of the Ringelblum Archive. In the picture: Michal Borwicz and Hersz Wasser / Photo: PAP

THE WIENER HOLOCAUST LIBRARY

Location: London, United Kingdom

Date Established: c. 1920s

Previous Name: Jewish Central Information Office (JCIO)

Official Website: <https://wienerholocaustlibrary.org/>

Accessibility Provided:

Collection Digitization

Searchable Catalogue

On-site Temporary Exhibition(s)

Public Programming

Traveling Exhibition(s)

The Wiener Holocaust Library is the world's oldest collection of original archival material on the Nazi era and the Holocaust. Dr. Alfred Wiener protested Nazism during the 1920s and 30s, and documented increases in antisemitism and the persecution of Jews in Germany. Dr. Wiener left Germany for Amsterdam in 1933 but continued gathering evidence and organising anti-Nazi campaigns under the Jewish Central Information Office (JCIO). In summer 1939, Dr. Wiener left Amsterdam and moved the archive to London, where the JCIO supported the British Government and the Allied Forces during the war.

The archive holds some of the earliest testimonies produced by Holocaust survivors, alongside unique collections documenting the varied experiences of Jewish refugee families who arrived in Britain in the 1930s and 40s. Its holdings include approximately 70,000 books and pamphlets, 2,000 physical document collections, 45,000 photographs, 3,000 periodical titles, and 1 million press cuttings. It also collects posters, objects, artworks, digital collections, and audio-visual materials. It maintains the UK's digital copy of the ITS archive (see Arolsen Archives for more information).

The library is open to the public for research, educational and recreational visits. It organizes temporary exhibitions in the library space, as well as several traveling exhibits that are available for public institutions. It is possible to search an online catalogue but only a limited amount has been digitized. The library develops digital materials and exhibits, accessible through its website. These materials include "The Holocaust Explained," an educational website that illustrates the essential facts of the Holocaust, its causes, and its consequences.

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CONCLUSION

Although these collections provide digital access either via scanned materials, searchable online catalogues, or virtual educational resources, they are generally more challenging to visit and study in person, particularly for museum audiences in the United States.

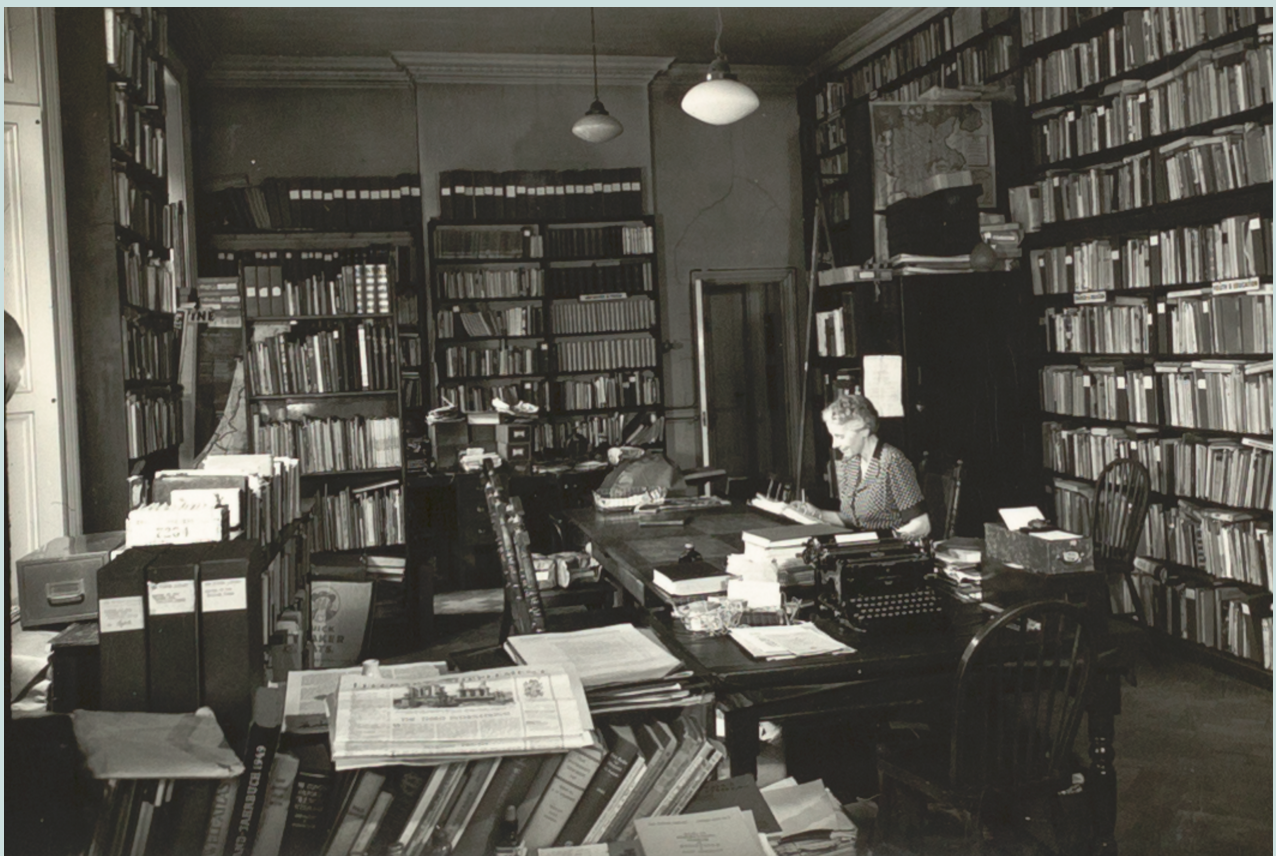
The Underground Archive is a revealing case study in this regard: it has been the subject of varied international projects since the early 21st century -- including traveling exhibitions to North America -- but these projects have only left a partial digital footprint, which makes it especially hard to evaluate their long-term impact on the local Jewish and Holocaust museum field. Further research might be able to synthesize public engagement and critical reception to these traveling exhibitions, so that their lasting influence can be measured and better understood.

On a narrative level, each of these archives provides a unique perspective on cultures of wartime collection and documentation, as both Jewish and non-Jewish organizations attempted to comprehend and then document the horrors of the Holocaust.

On the one hand, the Beit Lohamei Haghetot Archives, the CDJC, the Underground Archives and the Wiener Library all speak to the bravery of individual Jewish people who risked their lives to document Nazi crimes against humanity in the hope that the perpetrators might eventually be held to account. On the other hand, the Arolsen Archives are a comprehensive resource that, eighty years after the foundation of the ITS, continues to highlight the importance of international collaboration in identifying and memorializing victims of genocide.

At the same time, these archives raise difficult questions about how early the Allied Forces might have known about the Holocaust, and about why, for example, unoccupied countries refused to raise immigration quotas for Jewish populations fleeing Nazi persecution.

While complex and often difficult to wrestle with, these stories offer valuable contributions to contemporary Holocaust awareness and education, and to conceptions of the Holocaust that afford agency to how Jewish communities documented, resisted, and survived the Nazi regime. This feels particularly vital in the United States and other places beyond mainland Europe, where significant diasporic populations settled post-Holocaust, and yet where knowledge about the Holocaust is reaching an all-time low (Sherwood 2020).



Librarian in the Reading Room at The Wiener Library in Devonshire Street, c. 1950-1959. Wiener Holocaust Library Collections.

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