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Narrating the archive? Family collections, the archive, and the historian

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Abstract

This article seeks to open a discursive space in which to reflect on issues of Holocaust historiography arising from emerging research on personal archives collected by 'ordinary' people in relation to the Holocaust. The explorations, intended as a discussion piece, are anchored in a specific context, namely that of the Dorrith Sim Collection (DMSC) which is held in the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre (SJAC) in Glasgow. This collection offers a focus to concretize the historiographical discussion in a largely un-researched collection, while enabling consideration of a range of related collections and publications. The article investigates the historiographical practices of those involved in the collection, preservation, presentation, and publication processes, and considers the inherent ethical choices: choices that highlight the agency of the family, the archivist and the scholar. Ethical choices, here, the investment of specific meanings and claims to significance, are amplified in this context because of their connection to genocide. I suggest that a 'transparent historiography' which accounts for the research process within the published narrative could address the challenges arising from the necessity to be selective about what to collect, preserve, and, write about, and how to do so. I borrow from other fields of research and professional practice to highlight possible avenues along which to advance historiographical discussion.

The history of the archive is the recognition of loss. For archives to collect the past, the past has to come to mind as something imperiled and distinctive.¹

You should work on the Dorrith Sim Collection, says my friend and colleague Mia Spiro. We are standing in front of the shelves holding more than twenty archive boxes in the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre (SJAC) in Glasgow. It is autumn 2015 and our joint project on Jewish migration to Scotland in partnership with the SJAC has just begun. The opening phase of our work is a mapping exercise of the SJAC's collections in relation to a broad set of research areas, and making decisions on which aspects of the archive we will focus. Religion, the arts,

refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe and questions of identity and its expression through documents, objects and the Scottish landscape are at the forefront of our inquiry. Standing in the store room, I am intrigued by the size of the collection named after the woman who came to Scotland at the age of seven and a half on a *Kindertransport* in July 1939. Dorrith Sim, who died in 2012, was the last guardian of a collection initially curated by her grandparents and uncle, added to by her aunt, and then by herself. At last, the collection, completed with the end of Dorrith's life, was donated for research and teaching purposes to the SJAC. As I begin to leaf through the boxes, I am captivated. What does it mean to research personal documents of those whose lives were changed irrevocably through the Holocaust? The focus on individuals contains the possibility of a change of perspective on history, away from grand narratives to personal experiences and individual agency. Such a shift of historical perspective also draws attention to historiographical practices. These related concerns are the focus of this article, which is conceptualized as a discussion piece, seeking to create a discursive space to engage professions and academic disciplines that shape the sources of the past in our present. The Dorrith Sim Collection (DMSC) and the SJAC function as context in which to reflect on the practices of families, archivists, and researchers, of individuals and of institutions engaged in collecting historical material. I will then bring the practices and concerns of these 'stakeholders' in the preservation and presentation of documents and artefacts into one discursive space to probe their impact on and contribution to Holocaust historiography.

The context

In 2015 the Dorrith Sim Collection (DMSC) had not yet fully been acquired by the SJAC. Dorrith's daughter Susan was still in the process of sorting and packing the collection, so that the last boxes only arrived in spring 2016. Dorrith Marianne Sim née Oppenheim was an only child who arrived late in her parents' life. She had made the journey from the central German town of Kassel to Scotland without her parents, fleeing Nazi Germany on a *Kindertransport* in 1939, and, as an adult, made her permanent home in Scotland. Both her parents were murdered in Auschwitz, while her paternal grandparents, uncle and aunt were able to flee to the safety of Canada and the United States. In the last twenty-five years of her life, Dorrith had been involved in giving testimony about her childhood. In 1990, she founded the Scottish Annual Reunion of Kinder (SAROK), which sought to locate and bring

together Scots who had arrived as child refugees from Nazi Germany. She connected with the SJAC and asked to deposit her family's papers and some objects which had travelled with her grandparents or herself out of Germany, and including post-1945 family correspondence, thus chronicling aspects of her life from cradle to grave.

For the past two decades or so, and with increasing frequency, scholars are alerted to the existence of collections that originate with 'ordinary' individuals whose lives were impacted by the persecution and genocide of Jews in Europe. Such personal archives range from a bundle of letters to collections encompassing a variety of documents, writings, photographs, objects, and art works. Ordinary lives, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, take on extraordinary significance as traces or remains of the dead are considered a legacy for the living.² Social historian Leora Auslander succinctly captures the way in which the genocide changed our relationship to what remains of any life touched by the events:

Being the victim, or survivor, of a world-historical cataclysm changed that relation to history; it both generated far more detailed documentary traces than would otherwise have existed and made people, who would otherwise have gone unnoticed, noticeable.³

The drive to rescue objects and documents related to those persecuted starts with the victims and their extended circle of family and friends. Whether purposefully initiated family collections or accidentally surviving artefacts and papers, the remains of otherwise unremarkable lives have acquired importance beyond the immediate family. Survivor testimony has become a prominent vehicle for encountering the past over the last forty years. Much more recently we see the materiality of the past surviving both – those who were murdered and those who were able to create a post-war life – and thus generate points of access to pre- and post-war contexts through explorations of family and local social history. The material witnesses to the past create a demand on archives at a number of different levels, and this demand gives rise to questions about what is collected and how and by whom. The questions are different, depending on the institution in question, and they are impacted by changes in the profession, in technology, and in politics; they are dependent on resources, both professional and financial.

Here, we may think in the first instance about archives founded with very different aims, aims which determine what the institution collects, preserves, and makes accessible, and how. National archives provide a foundation for the articulation of a nation's shared past as the basis underpinning the present *raison d'être* of the nation. As such, national archives are not merely storing 'the past', but rather are offering a platform for relating to the past in order to sustain present and future national narratives of origin and identity.⁴ And this remit prescribes what can be accepted. While not excluding genealogical and family history pursuits, national archives are unlikely to accommodate sprawling collections of material relating to private individuals of minority ethnic groups recently arrived in the country.

By contrast, an institution such as YIVO has a work and collection strategy which since its inception focused on the breadth of Jewish cultural expression and was instrumental in establishing Jewish ethnography and a wide archival base for research into Jewish cultures. The destruction of its archives as part of the Holocaust, YIVO's re-establishment in New York, and the partial recovery of its holdings required a constant re-examination of YIVO's aims, and the embrace of the collection of everyday material and written documents in place of active ethnographical work in Europe. In comparison, we can observe the transformation of the Leo Baeck Institute archives in New York from a community institution serving the preservation of social memory among German Jewish immigrants to an archive relevant to scholars of German and Jewish history as well as contemporary identity politics.⁵

Archives which were established by a private or a charitable organization, and are rooted in local communities, offer opportunities to deposit papers which currently would have difficulty being acquired by a municipal or national archive. Such community archives, in their turn, formulate a relationship to the powerfully hegemonic narratives of national institutions through collecting, exhibiting, and making accessible their own, divergent, stories of origin and belonging. Situated in the past and in the present within an international framework of cultural and historical reference, they thus enable the collection of materials which are deemed unsuitable at state institutions.

By their very nature, archives arise out of specific needs and are set up with defined aims,

and both are subject to continual change. Archives are also spaces in which various professions and interests converge, creating an interdependent network of those who curate, preserve, present materials, of those who finance these activities, and of those who use the archive to conduct their own inquiries into some of the archival holdings. Indeed, the practical as well as the ideological reality of archival work is a crucial determining factor in the preservation of material, and in the discovery of collections by and for archives and their users. The relationship between archives and their users is increasingly a research topic in its own right, not least in regard to the key role the presentation of archival resources has for historical research and, therefore, the resulting historical analysis.⁶ Such research cuts across professional and disciplinary boundaries and provides an insight into the complexities of making sense of the past. It also shows the need for cross-disciplinary and cross-professional interaction, attesting to the lack of a sustained discursive space that brings together archivists and historians. Richard Cox states that '[t]he good archivist is as much a destroyer as a preserver', constantly having to make choices about what to keep and what to discard and why.⁷ Cox continues to demonstrate that '[t]he selection / destruction framework is not well understood by those outside our museums, libraries, and archives'. The discussion he cites between a historian and an archivist is a key example in which 'the historian expressed outrage that someone, especially an archivist, had selected the records residing in the archives. We might ask, with incredulity, just how the historian thought the historical records had been accumulated'.⁸ Contrary to that historian's perception, a large part of the historiographical enterprise rests in the hands of those who curate collections; this includes professional or lay archivists in public, communal, and private repositories, but also, by extension, families and individuals themselves. Even as we find ourselves in a time obsessed with collecting and preserving, it is helpful to remind us that access to 'the past' is always curated and never direct.

For the purposes of this article, thinking about the archiving of personal collections, the decision where to store these, how to curate them, and how to make them accessible is linked to the aims and agendas of national, local, and community archives, and to the social and political context in which such institutions exist. Writing about the drive to store community history within and for the community Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens posit that community archives and the activists involved in their establishment can be understood as

social movements campaigning for a broader and more inclusive understanding of (national) history.⁹ While the article by Flinn and Stevens examines archives established by more recent immigrant groups to the United Kingdom, the findings also apply to Jewish archives established locally by communities.¹⁰ Indeed, it may be possible to draw a link between the founding of archives within the Afro-Caribbean community and the Jewish community in Britain, perhaps in regard to a model of empowerment. Like the Afro-Caribbean community archives, the number of Jewish archives established since the 1980s are key in articulating a sense of pride in one's immigrant roots and the documentary and material heritage brought to and created in Britain following the arrival of more than 120,000 Jewish immigrants, primarily from Eastern Europe, since the late nineteenth century. Previous archiving and investigation of Jewish history concentrated on the period from the Middle Ages to the height of the Victorian era, and constructed a version of English Jewishness which aligned with the established Jewish community and contrasted with the trajectories of Eastern European migrants.¹¹ The drive to save, systematically collect and store documents relating to nineteenth and twentieth century local, 'provincial' British Jewish history took off with new urgency from the 1980s. This new wave of collecting and preserving Jewish heritage connected the ideas of 'history from below' with a recognition of the fast disappearance of built Jewish heritage and with it the pulping of many synagogue records.¹² Indeed, as Flinn and Stevens have argued, these processes can even take on the urgency of rescue missions or acts of resistance:

documenting often difficult or traumatic histories, the archival act can be highly charged and loaded with emotion as well as political significance - especially when those acts of recovery rescue personal and social, collective histories from deliberate physical erasure.¹³

The SJAC, founded by members of the Glasgow Jewish community in 1987, constitutes such a 'highly charged' context. The SJAC has the purpose of 'preserving Scotland's Jewish heritage' and of 'collecting historic material relating to the experiences of Jewish people in Scotland'; it strives to 'document, preserve, exhibit and publish aspects of the collections and make the collections available'.¹⁴ From the preservation of the material remains of the Gorbals synagogues, namely those houses of prayer and assembly of the former immigrant

district of Glasgow just south of the river Clyde (destroyed when the slums were razed to the ground in the 1960s and 1970s in a sweep to regenerate the area), the SJAC steadily grew as the impulse to collect and preserve took off. Soon, the collections expanded to include records from defunct synagogues across Scotland, alongside personal papers of persons connected with the Jewish community. The SJAC offers the opportunity to explore the complex relationship between preserving the fast disappearing materiality of the Scottish Jewish past and curating these historical traces for the present. Far from being a 'warehouse' of the past, the SJAC is both a historical and a historiographical space.

Comprising two rooms crammed full of 'stuff' and a display and meeting room in the lower level of Scotland's oldest purpose-built synagogue in the Garnethill neighbourhood of Glasgow, the Centre occupies a crucial link between Scotland's Jewish past and its numerically diminishing Jewish present. The SJAC is a labor of love of a small team of three, led by the Centre's energetic director Harvey Kaplan. A wider group of volunteers, many of whom are retired, sit on the Centre's Board, and volunteer to sort and catalogue the collections; none has training as a professional archivist, though the SJAC is linked to archival associations which offer professional development opportunities. As a community institution, the Centre's collections blur the line between archive and library, past and present. Archival practices are as idiosyncratic as the classification system, which relies on volunteers being able to pick relevant keywords and provide short descriptions. An MS Access database is the only finding aid beyond the close to photographic memory of the SJAC's director. As a charity which, since its inception, has been mainly sustained by many small donors, the SJAC just covers its operating costs, but rarely has funds for preservation work.¹⁵ In its archival practice, the SJAC is an archive of the community and for the community. This is evident in the outreach work, which nourishes the SJAC's relationships in the Jewish community through events that open the Centre's doors to its local supporters. It is further visible in the SJAC's acquisitions methods, which involve soliciting donations from individuals and community organizations, and conducting oral history interviews, in a drive to preserve what surfaces and is linked to Jewish history in Scotland. Material arrives at the Centre almost on a weekly basis, and as long as there is a Jewish connection, the SJAC accepts deposits, largely without engaging in a process of 'select / destroy'.

Indeed, alongside historical documentary and material remains of institutions and individuals, the SJAC also files Wikipedia articles, student and scholarly research papers, printouts of email correspondence between SJAC volunteers and interlocutors across the world in its archive, and holds copies of documents deemed important to its collections and held in other archives.¹⁶ In addition, the SJAC curates an expanding library of books relevant to local and wider Jewish history. The SJAC is thus deliberately preserving materials other repositories would 'destroy' in line with their acquisitions policy and collections management. The Centre's historiographical practice is intentionally inclusive, and it is based on the materiality of its collections, so that a hard copy of documents is preferred to digital files, even when a file originated in digital form, such as, for example, an email or a Wikipedia entry. Furthermore, the SJAC's archival practices do not distinguish between historical artefacts and documents, and contemporary interpretations of these, preserving objects together with their evaluations, so that meaning is generated both, through the Centre's acquisitions strategy and system of classification, and through the layering of interpretations of collection items derived from other sources.

The above practices anchor the SJAC firmly in its supporter community. At the same time the SJAC wishes and needs to reach out to an audience beyond Glasgow's or Scotland's Jewish population, partly in order to raise funds to guarantee its continuity, and also to promote its core purpose of 'preserving, exhibiting, and publishing' from its collections to a wider, largely local, public. The SJAC does this through a focus on the Holocaust and capitalizes on the collections which detail the Jewish community's engagement with refugees from pre-war Europe and with survivors of the Shoah. While the SJAC's *raison d'être* lies with the preservation of Scottish Jewish history, which peaked culturally and numerically in the early twentieth century, its economic basis depends on the Centre's promotion of its holdings related to World War II and its aftermath as this is where interest in Jewish history among the non-Jewish population is strongest. This is evident in the substantial amount of funding obtained for the establishment of a 'Holocaust Era Study Centre' in the SJAC.¹⁷

The DMSC fits into the outward-facing activities of the SJAC. The rising awareness around Holocaust testimony and the memories of refugees to Britain since the late 1980s

contributes to a focus in the work of the SJAC on the oral history of migrants, refugees, and survivors who have become significant to the local Jewish community. Two added targets for the collection of documents enabled the SJAC to establish an education program about the Holocaust: material related to 1930s hostels for young refugees in Glasgow and to training opportunities for youth *aliyah* in the central belt of Scotland; and the collection of papers and testimonies of Holocaust survivors, which linked to the support given nationally for talks by survivors and refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe in the community and in schools. Indeed, while school groups visit the SJAC and view Garnethill synagogue, the lessons associated are primarily about the Holocaust and Scotland offering a safe haven from persecution, rather than about local Jewish history. Given this focus on the Holocaust, the acquisition of a collection of documents of a Jewish child refugee who remained in Scotland all her life offered an ideal opportunity for the SJAC to expand on its education program and 'Dorrith's story' became central to the planned 'Holocaust Era Study Centre'.¹⁸

The Dorrith Sim Collection

The DMSC Collection is vast. There are more than 3,000 paper documents, mainly letters, postcards and official documents, but also diaries, pages of testimony, and family memorabilia, as well as Dorrith's library of Holocaust-related publications. What is intriguing about the DMSC is its expansion chronologically from a beginning in the late eighteenth century on Dorrith's mother's side, with a residence permit granted to the 'protected Jew' (*Schutzjude*) Mendel Meyer by the Duke of Hesse, to a conclusion virtually in the present with condolence cards received following Dorrith's death in 2012. While the reason the collection is in the SJAC is to do with Dorrith's journey to Scotland as a child refugee and her position in the community of survivors and refugees, the collection extends well beyond the 1930s and 1940s and includes materials speaking to different historical periods and themes, including the courtship and marriage of Dorrith Oppenheim with Andrew Sim.

The DMSC is a family collection. It began its life, as far as I can tell, with Dorrith's grandfather Julius Oppenheim who, like many of his German Jewish (and non-Jewish) contemporaries, became interested in genealogy and researched a family tree. The collection also speaks of a sense of rootedness in region and culture, strongly identifying the Oppenheims with Kassel and its surroundings, narrating Julius' and his eldest son's

belonging through service in World War I. Of lower middle-class origin (bakers by trade), Julius appears to have been the first to attend university and train as a general practitioner with a specialization in urology. This social ascent was paired with an interest in poetry and he chronicled his own life experiences in verse, while his wife kept a diary that detailed her children's development and demonstrated her house-keeping skills in a handwritten collection of her recipes. Until the late 1930s, this collection existed in the private spaces of the Oppenheim residence in Kassel. The decision to seek refuge in Canada by joining their youngest son Ernst shifted the collection's focus away from its certainty of place into a traumatic frenzy of preserving and discarding. What was brought to Canada had to be carefully chosen, even within the rather substantial 'lift' of the family's household, space was limited and the significance of objects without an obvious use had to be justified. Joachim Schlör explores the change of meaning of everyday objects that are transferred from one cultural sphere to another through migration.¹⁹ Describing one refugee's preparations to emigrate to Palestine and the endless lists which accompanied leaving Germany he states:

The historical situation is crystallized, symbolized in the things he takes with him and those he leaves behind, and in the lists of them that he draws up. The things become embodiments of conditions and circumstances – bearers of memories, of hopes. And these mediators of memory lead a life of their own. They change their nature, that is to say they change the *meanings* they bear: over the years; and with each new generation; and of course (...) through the work of the researcher who finds them and tries to understand them.²⁰

Indeed, the Oppenheim family also produced lists that inventoried their household, and the accompanying exchange of letters with their son Ernst in Canada demonstrate the difficult decisions about what to take and what to discard. Schlör's work on objects of everyday use mirrors the work of the archivist faced with decisions of 'destroy / preserve'. These practices of choosing and discarding also operate in the assembly of the family collection of documents and artefacts which Julius and Alma Oppenheim take with them to Canada and which form one aspect of the DMSC we now find in the SJAC. While we are not able to establish what papers were left behind, we can surmise that much correspondence did not

make the final cut, that objects without a future use-value did not enter the removal crates. And so, we see that Julius' medical instruments, all documents detailing professional qualifications, and the medals accumulated during World War I survive, testifying to their continuing, albeit changing, meaning. Similarly, the parts of the collection assembled by Ernst Oppenheim in Canada demonstrate a strong sense of curation; that is, of choosing the correspondences that he adds to the family archive. These concern the exchanges with his family; the letters seeking support for his relatives trapped in Kassel; and post-war correspondence with Dorrith and her growing family in Scotland. Dorrith's aunt Alice, who found refuge in New York, kept her personal documents in a file entitled 'Restitution', a curatorial decision with drive and purpose. In Scotland, Dorrith and her children curated the archive inherited after the deaths of Ernst and Alice with a focus on Dorrith's life in relation to the traumatic impact of the Holocaust on family history. This focus made it possible to donate the collection in its entirety to the SJAC, where it is kept intact and is made meaningful to the Centre's outreach aims. It is significant, however, to recall that one thing the DMSC is not: a collection significant to Scottish Jewish history, in keeping with the SJAC's mission statement. Dorrith did not become part of the Jewish community of Scotland; she was raised by a non-Jewish foster family, and as a young adult she converted to Christianity. Her main Jewish connection in Scotland was with other refugees, primarily through her initiation of the Scottish Annual Reunion of Kinder (SAROK), her involvement in giving testimony and writing about her childhood experiences, and through traveling back to her city of birth.

Here I want to draw attention to the activities of collecting and archiving which purposefully influence what is kept and discarded even before world historical events impact what survives. The meaning-making practices of various collectors, hosts, and interpreters shape the materials in the DMSC and other personal collections from their inception through to the present. The purpose of outlining some of these choices is to focus our attention on the historiographical contribution of these activities. In short, I suggest that considering the curatorial practices of private individuals needs to become part of historiographical discourse, and not only form the historical backdrop to our scholarly interpretive moves.

Similarly, the DMSC's acquisition by the SJAC serves as an example through which the

following section seeks to discuss the historiographical practices at work in a community archive. An archive, as Cox reminded us, is a historiographical space which impacts the researcher's engagement with its collections. What belongs in an archive, and what does not, as we have seen, depends on the choices made by family members and on archive policies about what to acquire and what to refuse or discard. Such decisions depend on what is determined to hold 'historical value', a malleable category, dependent on present-day values and institutional purposes, policies, agendas and status. These decisions appear amplified in relation to family papers offered to archives because of an individual's biographical connection to the genocide of Jews in Europe.²¹ What is it that an archive needs from ordinary private individuals and families, and why do we need it?²² What is the relationship between the survivor and /or the survivor's family and the archive? Who has a duty of care and to whom?²³ The SJAC as a local institution of and for the Jewish community is positioned both as a store of the community's history and memories, and as a representative of Jewish history and culture to wider society, the latter often taking the experience of genocide as an access point to the engagement with Scottish Jewish history. As a historiographical actor, the SJAC's staff is keen to preserve the Centre's independence from other local archives. This opens possibilities for its collection strategy, enabling it to be more embracing than other archives. Other Jewish communities in Britain have entrusted their collections to municipal and university archives, thereby integrating local and national Jewish history with local and national British history at the point of access.²⁴ Yet, these repositories would have difficulty accepting a large, unruly collection such as the DMSC.²⁵ In Britain, beyond local Jewish archives, and the Wiener Library in London, the Imperial War Museum is the only national, public, archive which would potentially consider taking such a collection, and yet it is doubtful that such a large collection as the DMSC could be taken in its current state or that it would be kept intact.²⁶ Alternative repositories, which would suit such a collection, but which would need to make choices about what materials to take and which to return to the family would be a university with an active research program on German Jewish history such as the Centre for German-Jewish Studies at the University of Sussex;²⁷ or a national archive abroad open to receiving a large personal collection such as the Jewish Museum Berlin,²⁸ Yad Vashem,²⁹ or other repositories in Israel, or a local repository in Kassel, Dorrith's birthplace and home in her early childhood.³⁰ In a sense, the SJAC's strategy of taking collections in the form in which they are offered as long as there is

a connection to Jewish history may be understood as a historiographical choice and as resistance to the interpretive choices made by acquisitions policies of other repositories. Indeed, as archives place collections immediately into an interpretive context, simply because of what they collect and where they are located, and because of how they present their holdings to the researcher, archives are historiographical agents, shaping our access to the past.

Researchers ask yet a different set of questions, depending on their interest, and agenda: what documents to look for? What to do with such documents, what kind of history to tell with these? Who to tell it to? And why?³¹ These questions all point to another layer of historiographical concerns in relation to the writing of Holocaust history.

Personal history, the Holocaust, and the historian

Collections like the DMSC may not alter what we know about the mechanics of the unfolding of the genocide, they may not shatter our established larger historical frames for understanding how a state turned murderous, and they do not directly address how various social groups were co-opted to carry out the deportations and murder, or how these were financed. Indeed, the dominance of positivist historical inquiry into the genocide based on thorough archival research of documentation generated by the perpetrators has provided a solid foundation for the interpretation of the Holocaust.³² However, as Amos Goldberg and Dan Michman observe, this state of affairs gives rise to historiographical discussions that may prompt a degree of self-reflexivity within Holocaust history.³³ It is into this historiographical discussion that I would like to interject some thoughts on working with personal collections.

Personal collections may be understood as raw material for microhistories of specific people or places. They allow us to zoom into one location or social group as do, for example, emerging studies of specific ghettos.³⁴ It nevertheless seems to me that the personal materials amassed by families and acquired by archives offer more than illustrative footnotes to the grand narrative(s) of Holocaust historiography. Individually and cumulatively, they shift our perspective from the explanatory superstructures to the experience of historical events as they unfolded, and instead emphasize individual and local

agency. Equally, they turn our attention to the practices of writing history, which appear amplified when dealing with the lives of individuals. There are various approaches to writing with and about personal collections. One context which we may consider is the expanding public fascination with genealogy and family history. Some work is intensely personal and never crosses a publisher's desk. The manuscripts that do end up with an editor are those which stake a claim to a larger audience, and thus also contribute to public understandings of what it means to write history. Alison Light in her 2014 book *Common People* states: 'Since the 1970s, family history has boomed; it's now the third most popular activity on the Internet in Britain after shopping and porn – and equally addictive, some would say.'³⁵ Indeed, the massive popularity of family history has made this private pursuit part of public history. TV programs such as *Who do you think you are?* give a public profile to this popular pastime, suggesting that almost everyone is bound to make exciting discoveries in their family's past. From foreign spies to illegitimate children, anything seems possible, and on the telly historians are readily produced to find just the appropriate documents to narrate an appealingly shapely story. Family historians work backwards from memory, seeking roots in a past to create a sense of belonging and a promise of continuity and a future. For the majority, there are no television-worthy highlights to report, most of us don't have 'ancestral homes', plots of land or other visible markers in the landscape that suggest that our family is associated with a place since time immemorial. Light's family is peripatetic, and migrates across the Midlands and the West Country, leaving few traces, but offering a fascinating social history of the early Industrial Revolution. While not rooted in a particular spot, and poor, Light's family nonetheless belongs to this country. Migration is local and regional, following the ebb and flow of employment; here, accents rather than languages vary.

Family historians insist on the value of every single life, which in itself is reason enough to tell a story. Not immune to the selectivity of the historian's gaze, 'selecting this fact, not that, this, not that life',³⁶ family historians nonetheless give voice to lives otherwise forgotten. But what happens to this popular pastime when we place it in the context of violent destruction, of war and genocide, where the possibility of connecting with places, things, and local archives is minimal to non-existent, where there is no possibility of inserting continuity which links a family's past with its future? What remains of the lives of

Holocaust survivors and refugees from Nazi Germany, and what their children and grandchildren don't know about their pre-war families and the questions this raises is being explored in a growing number of books, films, and exhibitions. All pursue different paths that link the lives of individuals and families to larger themes and historical topics, seeking to make the pursuit of family history less naval-gazingly myopic, and instead contribute to social history 'from below'.

And so, we find creative non-fiction works which engage with archival materials and ponder similar questions as do research projects situated at universities. While different in intent, approach, and audience, I would argue that professional historians can glean helpful insights from the approaches taken by writers in other genres. For example, memoirs such as Lisa Appignanensi's *Losing the Dead*, and Nick Barlay's *Scattered Ghosts*, pursue a 'bottom up' perspective on history, compelling because refugee history is unraveled in retrospect and ordinary people connect with world historical events. The writers confront questions of identity and belonging as their survivor and refugee parents' age and their own children grow, all the while forging connections between a settled life in the West and the troubled European continent. It is the prism of the Holocaust that draws family history of ordinary people into the limelight of historical inquiry, family history here is anything but light, suffused as it is with victimhood and survival. Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost*, Sarah Wildman's *Paper Love*, and Joachim Schlör's *Liesel, it's time for you to leave*, ask the reader to mourn the murdered vicariously, and in Mark Roseman's *The Past in Hiding*, and Philippe Sands' *East West Street*, we read social-political and legal history intertwined with the search for individuals connected to specific places, the deceased giving us a personalised glimpse into a world no longer accessible. Arnon Goldfinger's documentary *The Flat* and Shirli Gilbert's *From Things Lost* ask viewers and readers to confront the complexities of belonging, and friendship during and in the aftermath of genocide. The purpose of this whistle-stop tour of a few recent books is to highlight two aspects which, I would argue, are relevant to a historiographical discussion on the potential of personal archives within and for Holocaust historiography.

Firstly, it is often family members who pursue these projects, children or grandchildren who have access to the languages necessary to work with surviving historical documents, who

enjoy the thrill of archival detective work, and who know when to call in expert advice. They know their parent, uncle/aunt, grandparent from their own lives and from narratives, but not that which is found in their relative's boxes, suitcases, cupboards. Family members' search for meaning in their ancestors' lives focuses research on aspects that are personally relevant and which claim the attention of potential readers to make a link to their own lives. This direct link, of course, has its dangers as is powerfully illustrated by Laura Levitt's observations on the relationship between American Jews and the Holocaust--willing a connection can lead to very problematic identifications indeed.³⁷ Nevertheless, it is possible that family members recounting their encounters and meandering ways of making sense of their ancestors' lives signals a 'reflective turn' in the writing of history. In a professional context, by building in strategies gleaned from anthropology and ethnography, historians' can signal their accountability to their readers by revealing the process of their work not only in footnotes but directly in the main text. One significant aspect of historical inquiry into family collections and personal papers is the linking of the historiographical enterprise with a consideration on how historical documents and objects are made to mean something in the present, and why and for whom. As directly relevant here we may cite the work of 'Traces and Treasures of German-Jewish History in Israel', a project at the Franz Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.³⁸ Focused on 'scholars, writers, and artists', research engages with collections which are sprawling like the DMSC, locating them in private homes and in existing archives, exploring their contents, and describing them to make them accessible to scholars, and seeking to re-home the collections if necessary. The project is open to many different forms of inquiry, modeling an open-ended and transparent approach that engages individuals across disciplines and pushes lines of inquiry not dissimilar to the questions motivating this article. Schlör's work draws attention to the materiality of what we find in such collections, and how artefacts and documents change meaning depending on who engages with these.³⁹ Such work calls for methodological reflections which are as historiographical as they are hermeneutical: they concern 'the remains' of history and ways of relating to the past, and of bringing aspects of the past into the present, be this through direct engagement with historical objects and documents, or exhibitions, and memorializing strategies that direct our attention to individual experiences of historical events.

Secondly, taking the cue from family historians we may be well served to consider the practice of giving voice to people who would otherwise go unnoticed. If we wish to make their voices heard, their experiences to mean something to our understanding of the past, we need to engage in theoretical and methodological discussion about meaning-making in the context of Holocaust historiography. One aspect of this is, of course, the entry of the private into the public and the ethics of taking steps to expose that which remains usually hidden from public view.⁴⁰ In relation to the Holocaust, this urgency to ‘give voice to the voiceless’ and to rescue traces of people’s lives has expressed itself since the 1980s as the survivors became elderly and the passing into history of this generation moved into the near future. Then, the memories of those who witnessed events of the Holocaust themselves became a key access point for public memorialization of the Holocaust, and a crucial educational device, letting those born after ‘touch’ Holocaust history through encounters with eye witnesses. Now, that the majority of the generation who lived through the 1930s and 1940s has died, some seek to keep the notion of a direct encounter with the past alive through technology: the 3D survivor is one such project which simulates a real-life encounter in a desperate attempt to stave off the inevitable passing of this generation.⁴¹ In contrast to memoirs and testimony, personal documents and objects that were created during the first half of the twentieth century and in response to the Holocaust within the private lives of individuals, offer distinctive pathways to (re-)constructing and understanding aspects of the lived reality of past lives. Historians working with personal collections of documents and objects are offered a different opportunity to think and write about the lives of those who were murdered and of those who fled and those who survived.

The approach to personal collections I suggest here, expands our ethical obligations and includes a reflexive mode of engagement from archive to publication. ‘Giving voice to the voiceless’ may be thought of as a counterpoint to other practices which engage with personal history, such as oral history, history from below, community history, and work on the theme of learning empathy through history.⁴² Each of these practices signals an ethical obligation to their sources and subjects which is erased or sidelined by traditional historical and memory practices. Thinking about accessing aspects of the past with and through personal effects stakes out specific, mainly narrative, approaches to history that differ from the models of teaching and memorialization offered by survivor testimony, and by histories

of social groups, institutions, and states. These new works based on personal collections, then, are neither described well as biographies nor as microhistories, but may be better understood as multi-disciplinary hybrids, and come with their own set of ethical concerns and dilemmas. Such narratives begin long before a researcher enters an archive, and finds a collection. Moreover, I would suggest, the books and articles arising from engaging with this archival material are shaped by writers' professional backgrounds, their personal and professional connection to the material they are wrestling with, the relationship with the family and / or the archive where the collection is stored, and the potential audience to which their writing is addressed. Of course, the same may be said about any research project; namely, that the specific circumstances of its creation impact on its published shape. However, I would contend that in the context of a genocide such as the Holocaust, and specifically the engagement with the material and documentary remains of those who were murdered and those who survived, these considerations are amplified. On the one hand, we find more material that has survived than from other instances of mass atrocity; on the other hand, the material that is available puts into sharp relief all that which has not survived. In a sense, the great mass of available documents points to an even greater absence.

Private papers made publicly accessible through families, such as that of Dorrit Sim, calling on researchers or through archives making them available raise questions of interpretation which fundamentally differ from those asked of survivor testimony, memoirs, and other witnessing created after 1945. These are not documents of memory that articulate a relationship with the past and were composed for the attention of those born after, but they are written as events unfolded, and confronted and impacted individuals, families, and wider social groups. These are documents written, and objects created and used for private consumption or for a specific group of people, or in interaction with official institutions of state or community, but in their inception are not intended for a public audience. Thus, questions of privacy and voyeurism in relation to what we may write about such documents make us pause.⁴³ Documents and things that come to our attention because of the violence suffered by family members during the Holocaust, are given meaning in the aftermath of the genocide, having survived persecution, flight, and murder. They are kept safe as remnants and as traces of those who created them. As such they are the access point to

people's lives, even though, in many cases, these lives had a longer history either before or after the genocide. How closely must our engagement with these materials be tied to the Holocaust? In other words, even though the Holocaust is the reason such collections were assembled and are brought to the attention of archives and researchers, is it the case that the Holocaust must function as access point to the lives of their protagonists? Is the genocide the only or at least the primary reason why these lives matter for a public beyond the immediate circle of family and friends? In relation to this issue, similar concerns are raised by Leora Auslander who asks the following pertinent questions:

How can archivists and historians deal with the fact that while it is survivorship that makes an individual significant to history, that may neither be how they would wish to have been remembered nor what is actually most interesting or important about them?⁴⁴

Rather than seeing personal collections as an opportunity to footnote the established positivist frameworks of Holocaust history with illustrations 'from below',⁴⁵ we may instead view such archives as opportunities for an alternative historiography. Personal archives harbor the possibility of repositioning our perspective on historical events, not as microhistorical illustrations, but as new additions to the conversation about the historiography of the Holocaust. Indeed, alternative directions for the interpretation of family collections for Holocaust historiography are proposed by Atina Grossmann and Leora Auslander, and it may be that in developing these a sustained and complementary alternative to the reigning historiographical landscape of Holocaust history can emerge.⁴⁶

Increasingly, professional historians are entrusted by families to write about their relatives. Mark Roseman, Joachim Schlör, and Shirli Gilbert were invited by families to write about their relatives, not least because descendants were not able to access the historical material because of language barriers. The starting point for these historians' works were collections of letters and things that suggested a history to be uncovered, a story or many stories to be told. The involvement of professional historians, arguably, changes the context of interpretation, moving their works from family history into the academy, thus making a claim for a family's collection of documents and things to be relevant within this frame of

reference regarding historical value. Historiographical discussion, as indicated above, is warranted. Accessing larger historical frames through the private lives of individuals offers the opportunity to work at the intersection of the private with the public. It makes possible a transparent subversion of the sharp and necessary division between perpetrator and victim research in Holocaust studies by positioning both within one historical frame, alongside the historian re-creating fragments of the past.⁴⁷ This would also preclude any 'easy', 'comforting', or 'distancing' ways of interpreting the history of the genocide. Focusing on individuals and making transparent the research process, with its stops and starts, dead ends, decisions to include as well as to exclude and so on, in one's writing would immediately reveal the limitations of our work. Helen Freshwater reminds us that

the archive cannot offer direct access to the past, any reading of its contents will necessarily be a reinterpretation. It is for this reason that the archival researcher must foreground his or her own role in the process of the production of the past; responsibility to the dead requires a recognition that the reanimation of ghostly traces—in the process of writing the history of the dead—is a potentially violent act.⁴⁸

The 'reanimation of ghostly traces' pays attention to the force not only of the historical events encompassed within the term Holocaust, but also the power-dynamics of writing history. Acknowledging this would provide an important contribution to the historiography of the Holocaust, and stake a very public reminder of the fragmentary nature of any (re)construction of the past.

Conclusion

Arguably, the DMSC presents an opportunity to recover lives from erasure. The collection bears witness to a family torn apart by the impending Holocaust, and it is the task of the researcher to restore the family members' individuality in making their correspondence and context available to public audiences. Here, the personal, the individual, is not necessarily political, but assumes historical significance in its deepest, most intimate parts. And we find a family curating its archive, choosing what to include; a family wanting its personal correspondence with its intimate realities to be visible to a wider audience, making their

own contribution of rescuing the personal from the general, or at least inscribing it in the general. Thus the DMSC itself can be understood as a personal memorial strategy simply by having survived and been understood by Dorrith herself as a kind of 'time capsule' which can provide access to her family's past. Once researched, this past can then become the basis for a new kind of memory within her family and function as a personalized access point to Holocaust history for members of the public. The former is evident from my conversations with Dorrith's daughter, the latter is the stated aim of the SJAC.

And yet, such agreed and perhaps agreeable memorializing impulses, for me, are tempered immediately by the power held by the historian over their deceased subjects. While 'family letters allow one to see that each of the millions who perished represented a unique individual tragedy', the imperative to remember them 'is confounded by the transient and vulnerable natures of memory' which 'challenge and complicate the adequacy of remembrance efforts'.⁴⁹ This signals the power of the historian's gaze, her ability to direct the gaze of others, as well as her power in selecting. Writing about her engagement with her parents' letters, Esther Saraga observed that it was she who was 'choosing which story to tell, and on which of the multiple purposes to focus'.⁵⁰ It is therefore not only the tension between contribution to historiography and voyeurism which is bothering me. In addition, there is the reality of writing any kind of historical narrative that demands focusing on some to the exclusion of other perspectives and themes, the inevitable selection inherent in composing any piece of writing. Thematic choices aside, journal articles demand conformity to word-length and style guidelines, academic monographs are governed by a whole other set of rules, and creative non-fiction, while seemingly more free in its approach to presentation, also follows conventions publishers are unlikely to want to flaunt, being mindful of sales figures for trade books. Hence, the responsibility of the historian towards her subjects, is not only needing to hold the tension between personal and general history, but also has to respond to the 'market' in which she is presenting the fruits of her scholarship.

The historian as storyteller who relies on archives and their emplotment in narrative has a responsibility to uncover traces of lost selves, of lives interrupted, and to restore dignity. In this process, we need to account not only for the destruction waged in the past, but we also

need to account for the choices involved in archiving, and those occasioned by the need to construct a narrative from archival material. Onto materials that can be read and narrated in many different ways, the historian imposes their sense of order, sequence, and thematic orientation. Indeed, the fragmentariness of any historical narrative prompts the need to disrupt our writing to draw attention to and make transparent the challenges of picking out specific persons and voices over others, and the necessary incompleteness of any (historical) writing. However much we seek to bring to life the past, we cannot resurrect the person as they were. As Carolyn Steedman paraphrases Benedict Anderson: 'the resurrectionist historian creates the past he purports to restore'.⁵¹ It may well be that in the case of genocide, historians have an even greater responsibility to the lives and deaths of individuals than those writing about 'ordinary' times. To the extent that the choices we make in collecting, archiving, presenting, researching and publishing destroy as much as they preserve, we cannot aim at a neat ethical treatment justified by purpose or argument. Perhaps the best we can do is to involve ourselves consciously and transparently in the cruelty of time and memory.

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¹ Fritzsche, ‘The Archive and the Case of the German Nation’, 187. The author thanks Mia Spiro, Phil Alexander, George Wilkes, Shirli Gilbert, Joachim Schlör, and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on various drafts of this article.

² It is challenging to think of appropriate terminology for what remains of people’s lives and not immediately determine their meaning: archives, detritus, debris, memory objects already suggest relationships with what is left which. More neutral may be remains, traces, of things.

³ Auslander, ‘Archiving a Life’, 129f.

⁴ Fritzsche, *ibid.*, 186.

⁵ Grossmann, ‘Versions of Home’, 96f.

⁶ See, for example Links / Speck / Vanden Daelen, ‘Who holds the key’; and Cox, *No Innocent Deposits*.

⁷ Cox, *No Innocent Deposits*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹ Flinn & Stevens, “‘It Is No Mistri, We Mekin Histri’”, 4.

¹⁰ For example, the London Museum of Jewish Life was founded 1983 (though a Jewish Museum had been in existence in London since 1932), the Manchester Jewish Museum was established 1984, and the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre was created 1987.

¹¹ Cesarani, ‘Dual Heritage or Duel of Heritages’, 32 and the history of the Jewish Historical Society of England.

¹² Kushner, ‘A History of Jewish Archives in the United Kingdom’; Kushner, ‘Heritage and Ethnicity’.

¹³ Flinn & Stevens, *ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴ <https://www.sjac.org.uk/about/>; see also Kadish, ‘Jewish Heritage in Scotland’.

¹⁵ This has changed somewhat with the award of a large grant towards the establishment of a Jewish Heritage Centre at Garnethill Synagogue (see note 17).

¹⁶ In addition, SJAC also hosts open days and educational tours to school groups and individuals.

¹⁷ With Heritage Lottery funding granted, the space of the SJAC is changing to accommodate a much wider education and preservation remit: <https://www.sjac.org.uk/national-lottery-funding-approved-for-jewish-heritage-centre-at-garnethill-synagogue/>

¹⁸ <https://www.sjac.org.uk/holocaust/>

¹⁹ Schlör, ‘Take down Mezuzahs’, 140f.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 142, emphasis original.

²¹ See also Auslander, *ibid.*, 131; Grossmann, *ibid.*, 98, 102f.

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- ²² See also Schlör, *ibid.*, 143, where the question is about the purpose of engagement with such materials.
- ²³ See also Auslander, *ibid.*, 127, 131.
- ²⁴ Many documents relevant to British Jewish history are held at the Hartley Library in Southampton, London Metropolitan Archives holds the collections of the London Beth Din and other central community organisations of Ashkenazi and Sephardi institutions, as well as significant individuals, Hull, Leeds, and Sunderland community files are stored in local university and city repositories.
- ²⁵ Though they may accidentally come across a private collection while acquiring a professional archive, such as happened in the NHS Lothian Archives housed in the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research Collections. The papers of Ernst Levin (son of Willy Levin), a neurologist and refugee from Nazi Germany, were acquired and the archivist accessioning these found his private papers which contain large pre- and post-emigration correspondence related to the arts scene in Weimar Germany.
(<http://libraryblogs.is.ed.ac.uk/levin/>)
- ²⁶ <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/managing/offer-material/what-we-are-collecting> and <https://www.wienerlibrary.co.uk/Donate-Family-Papers>
- ²⁷ <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cgjs/archive>
- ²⁸ <https://www.jmberlin.de/en/frequently-asked-questions#faq-4225>
- ²⁹ <https://www.yadvashem.org/gathering-fragments/about.html>
- ³⁰ <http://www.kassel.de/stadt/stadtarchiv/>
- ³¹ See also Grossmann, *ibid.*, 103.
- ³² See Stone, 'Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History', 57ff.; Michman, 'Introducing more "Cultural History" into the Study of the Holocaust', 69f.
- ³³ Goldberg, 'Introduction', 45, 48; Michman, *ibid.*, 70.
- ³⁴ Stone, 'The Memory of the Archive', 83.
- ³⁵ Light, *Common People*, xxi.
- ³⁶ Light, *ibid.*, 253.
- ³⁷ Levitt, *American Jewish Loss*, 14ff.
- ³⁸ <https://rosenzweig.huji.ac.il/book/traces-german-jewish-history>. Related to this is research on exile and transnationalism conducted at the University of Hamburg. Here the focus is on the impact of migration on the self, exemplified through publicly significant individuals and literature.
- ³⁹ Schlör, *ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ See also Baron 2014 on the 'archival voyeurism'.
- ⁴¹ <https://www.holocaust.org.uk/foreverproject1>
- ⁴² See also Riall, 'The Shallow End of History', 381.
- ⁴³ See also Grossmann, *ibid.*, 103.
- ⁴⁴ Auslander, *ibid.*, 131.
- ⁴⁵ Stone, 'The Memory of the Archive', 83.
- ⁴⁶ See Grossmann *ibid.*; Auslander *ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ See Freshwater, 'The Allure of the Archive', 756.
- ⁴⁸ Freshwater, *ibid.*, 739.
- ⁴⁹ Wallace, 'Introduction', 5.
- ⁵⁰ Saraga, "'Personal Letters to Keep'", 30.
- ⁵¹ Steedman 2001, 38.