

GERMAN JEWS IN THE UNITED STATES: A GUIDE TO RESEARCH RESOURCES

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The history of German-speaking Jews in the United States was one of the German Historical Institute's earliest research interests. It is therefore only appropriate that the GHI should produce a guide on this subject in its series of reference guides. The GHI is currently working with the Department for Jewish History and Culture at the University of Munich and the Academic Working Group of the Leo Baeck Institute in Germany to prepare such a publication. The project will present archives, libraries, and special collections of central interest for this field in order to stimulate a new transatlantic perspective for research on German-speaking Jews. The main goal of the publication is to provide researchers with a comprehensive overview of the existence, distribution, and contents of relevant sources. The individual collections will be listed by country, state, and locality, and the research guide's entries for each collection will list the extent of the collections, record numbers, and the time period covered. The guide will also provide contact information for the individual archives and organizations, references to printed and online finding aids, and, where applicable, information regarding fellowships provided by the institutions for the analysis of their materials.

The project, supported by a grant from the Gerda Henkel Foundation, aims to provide new impulses to research on the history of German-speaking Jews in the United States. The guide will not be limited to the history of Jewish emigration from Nazi Germany, which has been at the center of research until recently. Instead, it will expand its perspective in terms of territory, content, and time period. It will not only include sources on the lives of German-speaking Jews in the United States, but also sources documenting the nearly two-hundred-year history of the relationship between the diaspora on both sides of the Atlantic.

The project begins with the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*), which provided an important foundation for the formation of a new, pluralistic, and decidedly modern Judaism. This development had its origins and early center in the German cultural and linguistic sphere. Transmitted and borne by a growing number of German-Jewish immigrants, this

modern understanding of Jewish existence spread quickly, intensively, and very effectively to the New World. This was true not only of religious and cultural aspects, but also of the social success of German-Jewish immigrants, whose impressive paths from poverty to wealth had already astounded contemporary observers. In this sense, the approximately 280,000 Jews who came to the United States between 1830 and 1914 had a lasting impact on the resulting American Jewish community.¹

Research has often emphasized the fact that German-Jewish emigrant groups formed a collective identity despite their great willingness to acculturate, while at the same time maintaining numerous connections and relationships to Germany and Europe. This German-Jewish community of values was stabilized not only by religion—a cosmopolitan, bourgeois, reformed, and critical Judaism—but also by the continued use of the German language, the passing-down of a bourgeois way of life, corresponding “cultural codes,” and the creation of networks at the intellectual-historical and philosophical, social, and family levels.

Building on this foundation, American Jewish communities and institutions developed a particular vitality, which in turn affected Europe in the iconic form of a “Jewish-American identity,” a classic example of a transatlantic transfer operating in both directions. This transfer also continued during the first third of the twentieth century, mostly in the context of religious, familial, cultural, or economic contacts, helping to make the United States one of the most desirable places of refuge when tens of thousands of Jews wished to emigrate from Nazi Germany beginning in 1933.² Clearly this continued to be the case during the decade following the end of the Second World War, as more liberal American immigration legislation helped encourage another “relocation” of German-Jewish emigrants who had initially fled to other countries during the Nazi era.

While these developments are familiar and have been relatively well researched, the history of German-speaking Jews in the United States has barely been addressed from the transatlantic perspective. There are many reasons for this. Specialists in German-Jewish history have not shown much interest in Jews overseas, or in American or American Jewish history. Empirical studies of the changeability of identity, its persistence or its hybridity, thus remain rare. Above all, researchers have so far had only very rudimentary insights into the contacts and relationships between “German Jews” in the United States and their Central European relatives.

American Jewish history and American ethnic history also show similar research deficits. Like American history as a whole, these fields long demonstrated little interest in transnational research questions or in differences within individual ethnic groups. Researchers have seldom

looked for the origins of Jewish-American identity in a complex web of relationships between German, Jewish, and American identities. This is true not only of research on the nineteenth century. Another good example of the lack of communication among the disciplines is the research on German-speaking emigration after 1933, only recently begun in the field of American Jewish history. Such research seldom considers the relevant German publications, and the contributions made by émigré German-Jewish historians are largely missing.³

Finally, research on the diverse population of German Americans has only occasionally been concerned with the Jews. Although they were clearly part of the large group of German-speaking immigrant groups in the United States, we know little about the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish German Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and how this relationship was shaped by class, education, and political background, or to what extent German Jews formed their own cultural profile separate not only from other Jews but also from other Germans.

If one examines the main research topics of the history of the German-American relationship, it is apparent that the general history of migration and emigration has been exhaustively researched.⁴ There is, however, a dearth of studies that use a broader definition of a “transatlantic relational history” of German Jews and that pursue new lines of inquiry. Among the neglected subjects is the development of a cultural “transatlantic modernity,” as reflected for example in the history of the entertainment industry—in theater, film, music, publishing, and in the new popular culture. Equally under-researched are cultural-historical aspects of trade, international banking, economic innovation, and the modernization of various economic sectors along “American” lines. All of these topics are closely connected to industrialization and the development of economic and communications networks in the Atlantic sphere. Especially in the nineteenth century, these developments were only possible due to the stabilizing influence of close family contacts in so-called “brothers businesses.”⁵

Subjects involving relationships between Jews, such as the organization of transatlantic Jewish solidarity through secular Jewish organizations like B’nai B’rith, the American Jewish Committee, or the Joint Distribution Committee, as well as their cooperation with German organizations such as the Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden or the Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens, have also been little investigated. It is precisely these topics, however, that raise new questions regarding the organization of modern Jewish solidarity and identity in Europe and overseas. The interplay, areas of conflict, and model character of these volunteer secular associations, as well as this

transatlantic community's search for its place in civil society, provide rich material for research.

When searching for the reasons that have hampered transnational approaches to German-Jewish historiography, one has to note the highly dispersed, not to say chaotic state of the sources, caused by Nazism and the Holocaust, which has only worsened after the opening of several Eastern European archives after 1990 and the exchange of archival materials with American institutions. In part, the systematic collection and preservation of source material on the history of German Jews overseas has lagged because these "recent" Jewish communities did not view themselves as subjects of Jewish historical research, which concentrated on Europe and the Mediterranean sphere. Even in the United States, home to one of the largest Jewish diaspora communities, systematic collection efforts within the framework of American Jewish history did not begin until the middle of the twentieth century. Therefore sources on the history of German Jews are found in collections that focus on German non-Jewish migration.

With this in mind, it seems absolutely essential first of all to establish a sound basis for the systematic study of German Jews in transnational perspective. Scholars wishing to pursue research projects in this field require information about sources that provide a new perspective on the history of German Jews and that could foster international communication in this area of research. To be sure, a few key reference works already exist in the form of the biographical handbook on German-speaking emigrants and the archival guide published by John Spalek and Herbert Strauss.⁶ Nevertheless, the planned guide will open up a multitude of new sources to researchers. This is not only due to our guide's broader temporal and spatial scope: In the recent past, numerous members of the generation that emigrated after 1933 have died, resulting in the transfer of numerous private documents into archives. These documents could not possibly have been listed in the reference guides now available, as most of these guides are over two decades old. Thus these sources have been and continue to be either largely unknown or exceptionally difficult to access. In this respect, the planned reference guide will close a serious gap in documentation and lay the groundwork for further research efforts regarding the history of German-speaking Jews in the United States and the transatlantic character of the Jewish diaspora. Not only do German and German-Jewish history stand to gain from this project: It is hoped that the research guide will also benefit American history, especially American ethnic and religious history as well as the field of Jewish Studies.

Translated by Keith D. Alexander

Notes

¹ Avraham Barkai, *Branching Out: German Jewish Immigration to the United States, 1820–1914* (New York/London, 1994); Naomi W. Cohen, *Encounter With Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States, 1830–1914* (Philadelphia, 1984); Hasia Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration* (Baltimore/London, 1994).

² Werner Röder and Jan Foitzik, eds., *Biographisches Handbuch der deutschsprachigen Emigration* (Munich, 1980).

³ Anita Kassof and Avi Y. Decter, eds., *Lives Lost, Lives Found: Baltimore's German Jewish Refugees, 1933–1945* (Baltimore, 2005); Herbert Strauss, ed., *Jewish Immigrants of the Nazi Period in the USA*, 7 vols. (New York and Munich, 1979). Herbert Strauss also worked intensively on the handbook on German-speaking emigration.

⁴ Diner, *A Time for Gathering*; Henry Feingold, *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920–1945* (Baltimore, 1992); Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration 1880–1920* (Baltimore, 1992).

⁵ Ron Chernow, *Die Warburgs: Odysee einer Familie* (Munich, 1994); Barkai, *Branching Out*, 55ff.

⁶ John M. Spalek, *Guide to the Archival Materials of the German-speaking Emigration to the United States after 1933* (Charlottesville, 1978).