

Discover

Re: Collecting My Life and Work

by Blu Greenberg

JWA is pleased by the addition of Blu Greenberg's collected papers to the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and is proud to have served as an advisor as she considered how to preserve the record of her achievements. In a departure from our usual practice, for this issue of Re://collections (Fall 2005, Vol: VII, Issue: 2) we invited Blu Greenberg to reflect upon the experience of gathering, sorting, and contributing her papers.

It all began with my daughter-in-law Abbie. After spending several days at our house, she quietly decided that I could use the services of a professional organizer. My study is upstairs, and except for Shabbat, my door is always open. You cannot miss the clutter: book shelves lined two deep; cartons stacked in the corner, each labeled with a different overdue project; two large, crowded file cabinets; more files on top; my six-foot long oak desk covered with papers and equipment—it is a space that cries out for help.

Two weeks later, on Hanukkah, Abbie presented me with a handwritten gift certificate: four hours of consultation time with a professional organizer. The consultation forced me to face what I already knew: I would have to clean up the clutter to get on with my writing. Yet I did not want to sweep out my treasured papers, nor create more cartons. I needed help and called the Jewish Women's Archive.

In truth, this was not my first call. A year earlier, a Christian seminary had solicited my papers for their religious women's collection. Since my work largely concerned Jews and Judaism, I felt that my papers should find their place in a Jewish institution, and declined the gracious invitation. Yet an idea had taken root, so I called JWA, the most logical address for my papers. However, Gail Reimer, JWA's executive director, explained that JWA does not house physical collections. She offered to help in other ways, but I got busy and let the matter drop.

Now, a year later, I called again. Gail, and Karla Goldman, JWA's historian in residence, offered to help me to identify an institution that would be a good match, and to serve as broker for my collection. Karla recommended four institutions: Yeshiva University, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the American Jewish Historical Society, and the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

I settled on the Schlesinger. I knew I could be faulted for choosing a secular institution over a Jewish one, contradicting my earlier response to the Christian librarian. Nevertheless, I decided to follow desire, not propriety or consistency. The Schlesinger served the widest and largest population. My papers would be placed among those of other female writers and activists. Propinquity would invite inquiry and would add Jewish feminism to the larger mix.

Karla worked quickly. The next day, Kathy Jacob, Curator of Manuscripts of the Schlesinger Library, called to invite me to send my papers. In a millisecond, I accepted. It was December 2002,

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and I realized that it was the first glimmer of joy I had felt in many months.

What was that rush of feeling? Pride that my work was considered to have merit and my papers to have some historic value? Yes, immodestly, I'll admit to pride. And to a sense of privilege, that I live in a time of the unfolding of feminism and interfaith dialogue, and was able to participate in these significant cultural movements. Vindication, that while some still think of Orthodox feminism as an oxymoron or a fringe movement, a respected library takes it seriously. Relief, that I could clear out my papers without being forced to dump them or burden my children later. Fantasy, that at some future date, when gender inequity would be a dim memory and feminist organizations an anachronism, a curious graduate student would study Jewish feminism through my papers. More fantasy, that in a decade or two, my adult grandchildren would come upon my name in the collections and say, 'Hey, Savta, cool!'

Kathy Jacob offered two options: organize the papers myself, and send them filed, catalogued, and immediately accessible, or send all the cartons and the library staff would eventually sort, select, and return to me whatever was of no interest. I learned that the Schlesinger would soon be relocating, and archival work would slow down. I envisioned my boxes gathering dust, unopened for decades, and said I would do the work myself. Within the hour, I did a quick survey and realized it would take forever to deal with my old papers. In the six years since I had moved into my new house, I had not cracked a single one of the 30 cartons stacked beneath the ping pong table. The very thought of opening one now made me want to flee the basement.

Kathy and Karla each offered to help find an archivist. Overhearing our conversations, my assistant Joanna recalled that she once worked with an archivist on the papers of a British landscaper, and made several calls. A week later Francesca Pitaro phoned. We discussed time and fees, and I hired her and her professional partner, Donna Lewi, on the spot.

I scheduled our meeting for the following month, thinking this would allow me to pre-screen the boxes before turning my life over to these two strangers. In those few weeks, all of my anxieties surfaced: How could they possibly know what was of value? The boxes contained thousands of slips of paper with handwritten notes—how would they know what went with what? How could they do this without knowing my Jewish universe? Would they toss something of no significance to the collection, but of great meaning to me?

Deeper anxieties: What about private papers, financial matters, drafts of love and hate letters never sent, a negative evaluation from a program chairman? In those boxes, these two strangers, and then the world, would discover my failings, my idiosyncrasies.

And what about time? Amidst the projects to which I was already committed, I could barely find the time or emotional energy to complete the many tasks related to the end of life of JJ, my precious son who had been killed in an accident several months earlier. I should be working on JJ's papers first, I thought; my own could wait.

In the end, I took on the project with relish and family encouragement. I threw caution to the winds and decided not to monitor or pre-select; the whole record would be open, the lumps along with the accolades. The project began easily enough, with our joint search through file cabinets in the study and the garage. What could I part with? After the tenth time hearing myself say about a decades-old folder, "Oh, this I plan to work on someday," I relaxed. "Take it," I said, "I can always visit myself in Cambridge." As my file cabinets became luxuriously roomy, I thought to myself I might even enjoy this process.

Next, they turned to the major work, box by box. They read every slip of paper, every letter, every folder. Throughout, they made judgments that I largely corroborated; they did not guess, but always asked questions, for which I was grateful.

They possessed remarkable memories, which must be requisite for archivists. They would find a loose paper with a scribble on it, or an untitled speech, and quickly connect it to documents they had handled weeks or months ago. At some point, I sensed they actually knew more about my life during the past 35 years than I did, an oddly comforting thought. And I was reassured when Francesca and Donna raised the issue of the privacy of others. They would screen out any document that might compromise the sender.

I had long known that conferences, lectures and organizations were a large part of my life, but the boxes offered scale: several conferences, a score of lectures, and dozens of meetings each year,

for 40 years. Seeing it all together, I reflected on how significant these conferences and organizations were in shaping my thought, how vital in making change in the world, and how precious to me in creating personal friendships that I continue to savor. My mother was wrong: all those meetings and 'running around' were not a waste of my time.

I now regretted the boxes of organizational material discarded along the way. In the 1970s, I helped establish the Jewish Women's Task Force of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. As a lay person without a professional office, I worked mostly at home and accumulated boxes of papers on the Task Force. A dozen years later, when my family moved, I sent these to the Federation, all boldly labeled "Historical Documents of" But several years later, a staff person without a sense of history dumped everything during renovations. Thank heavens I had a big basement, and a husband who looked past cartons...and didn't mind parking our car in the driveway. And I could now archive, with its blessing, the creation and first seven years of JOFA, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance.

I had hoped the archivists would find a historic correspondence with Shoshana Klebanoff, who organized the Israeli Feminist Organization in 1973, well before the "first feminist organization of Israel," founded in 1988. It never turned up. Yet there were many exciting moments of discovery, such as the writings and organizational materials of my friend Esther Farber, of blessed memory, director of the New York-based Jewish Feminist Organization of the 1970's. These papers document an important stage of Jewish feminism, and reminded me of years of close friendship and shared work.

An unpublished article entitled "Diary of an Ambivalent Housewife" turned up, written some 30 years ago, when my children were all under ten and I was in the early throes (not over yet) of tension between career and family. It began with 19 anecdotes, long since forgotten. Several were about my son JJ, whose life story we are all trying to hold onto. Others will provide my grandchildren with funny stories of their parents, and my children with embarrassing ones about me and my husband—but they will have to visit Cambridge to read them.

I was prodded to change some self-serving 'memories.' All these years I pouted that I was not invited by the Orthodox establishment, yet the archivists dug up lectures I had given to the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations Conference (1974), Yeshiva University Wives (1974 and '76), and others.

The archivists reconstructed my haphazard bibliography, adding missing references, including some of recent vintage. Maybe that plague of writer's block did not have as total a grip on me as I thought. Too bad I had not begun to archive a dozen years ago, when the recurring night-dream of trying to run down the street but being unable to lift my legs began to haunt me.

Yet even as pride grew, so did dismay. I had to look squarely at the facts of my life: inadequate records, ad hoc filing, the poor habit of throwing things into boxes to clear my desk, Shabbat menus penned to the top of speeches, memory failing to identify or recall the work of my own hand, deadlines missed, old invitations for which I still owed gifts, a folder marked 'answer immediately,' with letters all dated 1979, never answered; another folder, marked 'urgent,' with a long list of phone calls to make and only two checked off. There were dozens of handwritten research papers and speeches I had never bothered to type. How much time I had wasted re-inventing the wheel because I could not put my hands on something I had already worked on for months! I wondered, what if I had worked in an office, with support staff, like a real person?

A particularly low point came one morning as I sat with Francesca and Donna, responding to their queries. They showed me an unidentified manuscript. Suddenly I had a sinking feeling, almost a palpable blow. I had spent several months at the Hebrew University library researching this piece. It was written for a festschrift on Deuteronomy honoring a rabbinic friend. It wasn't a breakthrough piece, but it had some merit. I realized that no one I knew had ever mentioned the article to me. Moreover, it was not listed in my bibliography, nor did I possess the published version. (I do now.) Similarly wearying scenes of recalling professional efforts that seemed to be for naught were to be repeated over the months.

I also had to confront other ghosts, such as how much time I spent sweating the small things. My boxes offered proof that the perfect is the enemy of the good. Here was an elegant thank you note, never sent

Blu Greenberg's Advice

- Women in general do not properly value their time and work. The message of JWA and The Schlesinger is that we must save selectively, with posterity in mind. Reflect on what you have done through the years. An adult life that doesn't have the equivalent of three inches of a file cabinet or carton per year does not do justice to itself.
- As you begin your professional career, treat

because it needed a final sentence or the husband's first name. While I had no copy of several published pieces, I had twenty versions of an agenda for a simple committee meeting. I have always defended my deliberative tendencies, justifying my need to do things slowly and to perfection. But as I looked back I realized how inconsequential so many of these small things were.

Yet, as the struggle to define my past work unfolded, I began to think that maybe guilt and self-flagellation were small-minded responses to the considerable honor of archiving extended to me. Maybe I was being too hard on myself. Perhaps most people are like me, plodding along as best as possible, never keeping up with all the demands, creating some things, losing others, moving forward without ever really closing all the gates behind. Perhaps if I had been better organized, if I had finished all of my work, if I had worked in an office without the luxury of saving paper, there would be nothing of interest or vulnerability to archive, beyond what a Google search might produce.

Then, too, perhaps I didn't finish one project because I was profoundly fortunate to have another conference or meeting or speech right behind it. Perhaps I should look at the disorder as a parallel to and reflective of the incredible movements that were unfolding with great speed in my lifetime, ideologies that were in the process of coming to a clearer self-understanding and more sophisticated focus. Indeed, through my own papers I could see how the movements had changed over the years, my views along with them.

Finally, nine months after the archivists began, the materials were ready to ship. On a snowy Friday afternoon, the FedEx driver arrived. With his hand truck and ridged-rubber boots, he carted out 28 neatly coded boxes, and trekked in clumps of muddy snow onto the new basement carpeting. But I did not mind at all, on my knees one hour before Shabbat, scrubbing pale mauve carpet.

As I lit my candles that evening, I felt the indescribable lightness that comes with a sense of order. Later I said to my husband Yitz, "I have a great idea for you...." Francesca and Donna are again ensconced in our basement, archiving his voluminous papers for Harvard's Widener Library.

The process is not yet over for me either. I must sort through current work and computer files to add to the collection. I continue to be surrounded by clutter in my study, albeit more controlled. Sixteen boxes still await me in the basement, pared down from 23 left by Francesca and Donna over a year ago.

As I have slowly worked my way through these remaining boxes and have seen what the professional archivists chose not to send to the Schlesinger, I realize this: although much personal material was included in the collection—even my original birth certificate, footprint and all, saved by my mother—it was less about me than about my take on the historic times in which I live. The records and papers I kept, while looming large in my life, add but one tiny speck to an understanding of the significant movements of the 20th century: feminism and other heady liberation movements, a new ethos of tradition and change, religious pluralism and interfaith relations, and the opening of society to multi-cultural influences.

In the future, those specks will multiply by the thousands. Young people today will build the record of their entire lives on a few small discs or chips. What this means for archivists of the future I do not know. All I can think of is how fortunate I am to have been a participant, observer—and saver—in the era of the coming of age of women.

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yourself to a good file cabinet. I wish I'd had one. It also makes a unique wedding gift. Bulky steel may not seem romantic, but the rush that comes from quick retrieval is a gift the couple will enjoy many times over.

- There is time to delete later. The urge to zap old files and clean up the hard drive is strong, but you can store old stuff in virtual 'boxes' on your computer.
- Save your calendars (and make a hard copy of your electronic one). They will tell how the years went by. At the very least, they will become family treasures, a gift to a particular grandchild who has a special interest in the story of your life.
- If your papers are a mess, treat yourself to an organizer or archivist. It is money better spent than on a new wardrobe or vacation in Hawaii. It, too, makes a great gift.
- Create your own list of criteria for saving. Are you saving for the children? For a fledgling organization that has not yet had the luxury of thinking about creating its own historical record? For someone else's nostalgic moment? Will you want to remember?
- As regards getting lost in the small things, the answer is prioritizing; all the more important when one's personal style tends to perfection or procrastination. There are many techniques to prioritizing, and one should experiment, but the process must be a continuous one of reevaluation.
- Space is tight everywhere, and clutter is deadly. But if space is forcing you to discard what you really desire to save, professional storage for a few cartons is relatively cheap. There is surely greater value to storing memorabilia than warehousing old furniture and mattresses.
- Finally, if you are not a saver, hone your memory, for that is what it is all about.

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