



THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE
AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

Preserving American Jewish History

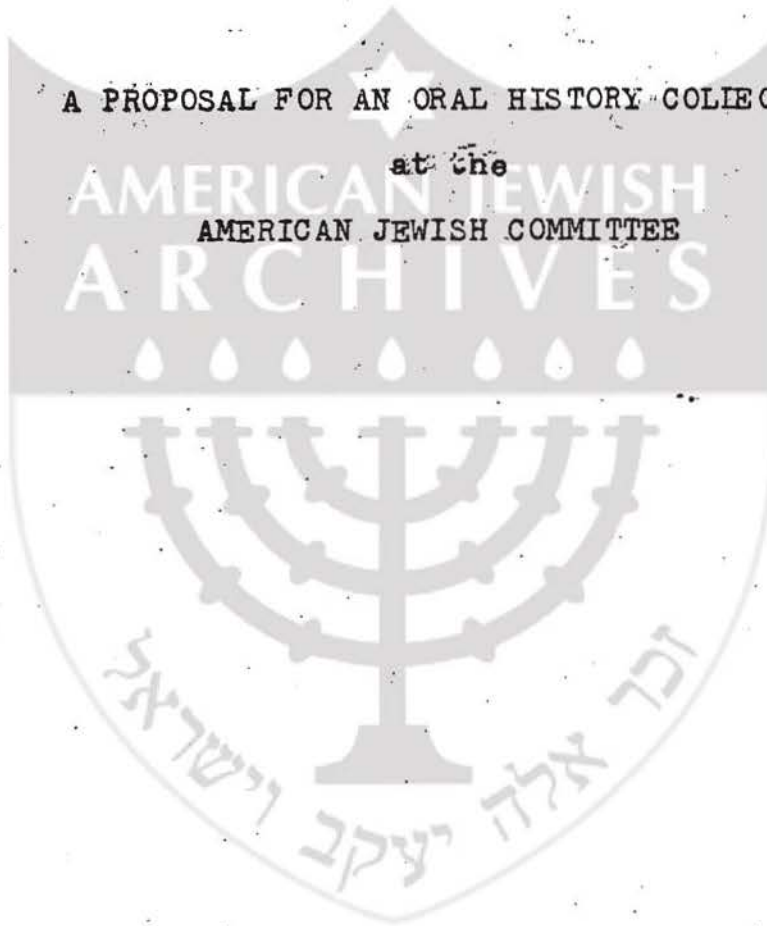
MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series E: General Alphabetical Files. 1960-1992

Box 78, Folder 6, American Jewish Committee - oral history collection, Undated.

A PROPOSAL FOR AN ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

at the
AMERICAN JEWISH
ARCHIVES



We've often heard it said of an outstanding human being:
"He passed our way once; we will not see his like again."

These words, which so aptly describe the unique life of a single individual, are even more meaningful in relation to an entire group. Dimmed by time and the relentless flow of social change, significant events in the history of a people often fade beyond recall as the men and women who experienced them pass from the scene.

Such may be the fate of the American Jewish experience of the last seven decades, unless steps are taken quickly to keep this vast, rich, and unique history from slipping away. Many of the colorful figures of those decades are no longer with us; we must depend on written accounts and other secondary sources for our knowledge of their life and work. But others are still active and vital participants on the American Jewish scene. And through the medium of the American Jewish Committee's Oral History Library, their experiences, recounted in their own words and their own voices, can be shared and understood by generations yet unborn:

The reminiscences of writers, artists and poets, statesmen and philanthropists, scientists, and social revolutionaries -- the men and women who have shaped and altered our physical and spiritual world:

The wisdom of the giants of the law, and their impact on American jurisprudence and government:

The memoirs of those pioneers who left the great centers of American Jewish life to make a place for themselves and those who followed in the once-remote and unsettled hinterlands of the nation:

The trials and triumphs of those masters of commerce and industry whose genius and drive have shaped business empires -- pioneer film makers, men who revolutionized merchandising, leaders in petroleum, transportation, real estate, scrap and steel, fashion, finance, publishing the mass media, and many more.

We must not permit this awesome wealth of historical data to be lost to us forever.

We can no longer capture the voice of Albert Einstein but we can record descriptions of the Manhattan Project by men who were vital to its success.

We can, before it is too late, record the personal reactions of the first representative of a Jewish organization to discuss with a high Soviet official the plight of Soviet Jews, or to meet with Pope Paul VI on anti-Semitism.

Through the Oral History Library, one century will speak to another. The voices of the past will forever be the voices of the present. Those who have lived history, those who have created history and those who have been acted upon by history, will link their remembrances in a sweep of time and events never before imagined.

The American Jewish Committee Oral History Library is proposed not only to document what has happened but to preserve forever the flavor of our times and those unique sights and sounds that pass our way but once.

1. What is Oral History?

Oral history is the preservation of the spoken word for the historical record. Oral "documents" are interviews, speeches, reminiscences, conversations, poems, and sermons. The advent of the tape recorder made oral history feasible on a large scale. Pioneer in the collection of oral history documents is the distinguished American historian, Professor Allan Nevins of Columbia University.

Oral history is, in essence, the creation and accumulation of historical records. Its basic form is the old-fashioned interview, whose conventional value has been enhanced by the tape recorder's exactness and fidelity to the original. The tape recorder preserves the interview in all its wholeness and genuineness, without the lapses of the interviewer's memory, without the distortion of his particular prejudices or predilections. Oral history allows for more spontaneity and openness than a person will ordinarily permit himself in a written memoir. The oral-history interview can be an informal one, the interviewer encouraging the subject to speak freely and without inhibition, reminiscing about himself, the people he has known, and the events he has participated in. On the other hand, the interview may be firmly structured. This often occurs when the interviewer is seeking from the subject specific information to confirm or corroborate historical events and is in search of material to fill important lacunae in a historical narrative.

Besides the interview, tightly organized or free-flowing reminiscences, tapes of formal addresses, meetings, conferences, debates, public exchanges -- all these can be considered as oral history.

Most material is transcribed, to ensure the survival of the data in the event of damage or destruction of the tape.

Subjects often set a time restriction on their material. They may withhold permission for public use of the data for so long as they wish. They may also choose to restrict the material to bona-fide scholars.

2. Examples of Oral History Collections

Nowadays, institutions interested in preserving records of the present and the recent past launch oral-history collections. Many college and university libraries have, in recent years, begun to accumulate oral records. Some business and industrial corporations and some private non-profit associations are collecting oral-history documents in the areas of their competence. Columbia University's Oral History Collection began modestly in 1948 and now contains the equivalent of some 200,000 pages of source material.

Here are a few examples to illustrate the variety of oral-history collections in the United States.

(a) The Hollywood Museum in Los Angeles has assembled over 200 taped interviews with performers, producers, technicians, and others connected with the motion-picture industry.

(b) The Library at the University of Idaho specializes in Idaho state and local history.

(c) The archives of the Ford Motor Company at Dearborn, Michigan has collected oral-history materials on the life and times of Henry Ford, the history of the Ford Motor Company, and the development of the automobile industry.

(d) The American Ethical Union has assembled sixty interviews as the basis for its collection on the history of the American Ethical Culture movement and the New York Society of Ethical Culture.

(e) Radio Liberty has 73 reels of reminiscences of men who played key roles in the Russian Revolution of 1917.

3. Jewish Collections

The collection of oral-history documents about American Jews and about the role of Jews in American society has not yet been undertaken by any organization on any substantial scale. The American Jewish Archives at Cincinnati appears to have only twenty-two reels of oral-history material. The Yivo Institute of Jewish research has limited its oral-history collection to the Jewish labor movement and to Yiddish-speaking institutions in the United States.

The American Jewish Committee, therefore, can make an important contribution by establishing an Oral History Collection, relevant to AJC's purposes, programs, and activities.

4. Scope of Proposed Collection

It would be most fitting that the Oral History Collection at the American Jewish Committee concentrate on American Jewish biography and autobiography and on subjects related to its program: anti-Semitism, discrimination and prejudice; civil rights and civil liberties; Jewish community organization and philanthropy;

Jewish identity and relationships with Jews in Israel and elsewhere; interreligious and intergroup relations and tensions in education, housing, and politics.

(a) Autobiography and Biography

Autobiography and biography are the essence of history.

Wilhelm Dilthey, philosopher of history, described autobiography as, "the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life confronts us." Thomas Carlyle has said that, "in a certain sense all men are historians" and that knowledge is, "but record Experience, and a product of History."

An AJC Oral History Collection of the autobiographies, recollections, and reminiscences of leading American Jews and AJC members would have immense significance for American and Jewish social and cultural history. The autobiographies of these eminent men are invaluable historical and social documents for what they tell about themselves and the events of their time. From each autobiography we learn to know the man, his family background and origins, his parents and his home, his early childhood and education, his Jewish upbringing and his earliest encounters with Jewish life, the circle of his family and friends, his marriage and children, his choice of career, the disappointments and obstacles he encountered, the achievements and successes he won, his social life and communal involvement, his assessments of the great men of his time and their accomplishments. Such richly textured biographies and autobiographies will notably contribute to the writings of American history and add lustre to the history of Jews in America.

(b) Subject Projects

These oral biographies and autobiographies will also yield raw and processed data for many subjects. They can form the nucleus of data about the place of Jews in the social, economic, and political life of the United States and how American Jews have tried to preserve their religion and culture in a free and pluralistic society.

Of primary institutional importance is the history of the American Jewish Committee; the collection of these oral-history documents should perhaps take precedence over all others. Another area in which the AJC, through its laity, has especial competence is the Jewish role in the development of American business and industry (merchandising, steel, oil, real estate, electronics, plastics, transportation), the encounters of Jews with anti-Semitism and discrimination in their business worlds; similarly, the place of Jews in the professions (law, medicine, engineering), how they attained that place and their relations with non-Jews.

A project of great dimensions would be the collection of oral-history materials on the role of Jews and Jewish organizations in the civil-rights movement, combating discrimination against all religious, ethnic, and racial groups. This would include Jews as influential factors in the National Urban League, NAACP, CORE, and other groups, besides the Jewish ones. Similarly important is the role of Jews and Jewish organizations in the defense and expansion of civil liberties, in the ACLU and other associations.

Oral-history materials should be accumulated on the growth of Jewish institutions in the United States: communal, educational and cultural, religious and congregational, social and philanthropic. Of particular interest to AJC is the creation of data on the rise of Jewish community-relations councils in the Thirties to combat anti-Semitism and Nazi propaganda in the United States. Other subject projects of relevance to AJC might include oral materials on Jewish philanthropies and Jewish involvement in non-sectarian philanthropies; the policies and activities of American Jews on behalf of Jews overseas during and after World War II; the role of Jews as individuals and as a group in the political life of America; the attitudes of Jews toward Israel.

AJC's program on Jewish identity may be enriched by a collection of autobiographies dealing with attitudes toward being Jewish. Such oral material may be planned to include a description of the subject's Jewish education and of the Jewish education he is giving his children; a comparison of the subject's attitudes toward Judaism and religion in general, as compared with those of his parents and those of his children (and grandchildren), of his interest in Jewish religious and communal organizations. Finally, these autobiographical interviews could elicit the subject's views on the future of Jewish life in America as he sees it and as he would wish it to be.

The latest kinds of listening devices now make it possible surreptitiously to record anti-Semitic speeches and meetings. These may now be preserved in their original form and thus be more

valuable to social psychologists and political scientists than the rough summaries made by undercover agents. Often the expressive character and symbolic meanings of much of these speeches are lost and it is difficult to evaluate the impact they make on their listeners. Tapes of George Lincoln Rockwell, Ku Klux Klan rallies, John Birch Society discussions, for example, can be preserved and studied in their authentic and undiluted form.

5. Organizing An Oral History Collection

An American historian, familiar with Jewish history, should be invited to draw up a basic plan for the collection as envisaged in this paper. He should be assisted by an expert committee from several academic disciplines. A joint lay and staff committee should function as liaison. Working at first on a part-time basis, the consultant historian can design a general plan of biographical and subject projects to be undertaken, work out a list of eminent American Jews to be interviewed (based on research to justify their inclusion), assign, or himself engage in, preliminary research to prepare for the interviews. It will also be important to develop contacts with colleges and universities for possible cooperation in these projects.

(a) Interviewers

Some subjects are men of such intellectual and political stature that they require interviewers who are not only knowledgeable and experienced, but are themselves eminent personalities. Such outstanding interviewers may elicit greater accuracy and detail, more frankness and openness than if the subject were interviewed by someone stricken with awe and unable to stimulate the subject.

But for the most part, graduate students (doctoral candidates) can be trained to conduct oral-history interviews. Through his university contacts the consultant historian may encourage graduate students to specialize in American Jewish studies in history, sociology, or political science. In working for their academic degrees, these students can at the same time fulfill, in a scholarly way, their own sense of Jewish identity. (Subjects of Jewish interest are nowadays popular at colleges and universities. In 1966, Columbia University gave its Bancroft Award in American History to a doctoral dissertation on the history of the New York Kehillah.)

The preparatory stage in organizing the collection and interviewing may take several months. The program of interviewing should proceed cautiously, while consultant and interviewers experiment with various methods in preparing interviews and conducting them.

(b) Other Staff

The consultant historian will require secretarial assistance and, in time, typists will be needed to transcribe the oral materials.

6. Housing

The project will require extensive space: storage space for the tapes, facilities for transcribing and filing, staff for cataloguing and cross-indexing, and, finally, equipment and facilities for listening and reading by scholars who wish to use the Oral History Collection at the American Jewish Committee.

7. Budget

The costs of the proposal, as they appear in the detailed budget analysis, reflect anticipated expenditures for an initial three-year period. They do not take into consideration the eventual need for considerably more space than is now available at the Institute of Human Relations. Projected growth of the Collection should pose no housing problem for at least three years.

The ultimate aim of the Oral History Collection is to be self-sustaining. On the basis of the experience of university oral-history libraries, subsequent contributions should be forthcoming from participating individuals as well as their friends and family. In addition, various collections dealing with specific aspects of our program (i.e. Russian anti-Semitism) can be collated, separated, and named after the donor.

In a program of this magnitude, the ultimate success is in direct ratio to the careful planning in the initial stages. Therefore, special conferences of historians, directors of oral-history libraries at major universities and prominent sociologists, will be convened to analyze our needs and chart meaningful direction. Each of the attendees will receive a consultant fee. This prominent group will then serve as the faculty (ex-officio) of this educational venture.

All tapes and transcripts in the Collection, while retained by the Library, will remain the property of those interviewed. These will be released, wholly or in part, only with their consent.

It is anticipated that there will be a minimum of two publications per year. One will be a yearly report of the contents of the Library, indexed according to individuals (biographies) and program subject matter, which will receive a wide distribution among universities, seminaries, religious organizations, human relations agencies, etc. The second will deal directly with programmatic material in the Collection, exclusive of biographies.

8. Source of Support

We are seeking a \$250,000 contribution to establish and support the Oral History Library. \$35,000 per annum will be used from this contribution to offset the costs of operating the Library. Based upon an assumed 5% per annum interest rate on the remaining principal balance, the \$250,000 will help to maintain the Library for a period of 8½ years.

Expenditures above the \$35,000 annual support from this fund, or approximately \$30,000, will be met by contributions from other sources.

The attached budget has been prepared for an initial three-year period. Based upon this budget, continuing operating costs are anticipated at \$65,000 per year.

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY LIBRARY

PROJECTED BUDGET

	<u>FIRST YEAR</u>	<u>SECOND YEAR</u>	<u>THIRD YEAR</u>
I. LIBRARY FACILITIES			
Office of the Historian:			
Furniture and Fixtures	1,500		
Dictaphone and Transcriber	650		
Electric Typewriter	450		
Interview Room:			
Furniture and Fixtures	2,000		
Special Room-Temperature Control	1,500		
Tape Recorder	700		
Portable Tape Recorder	500		
Total	<u>7,300</u>		
II. STAFF			
Historian	13,500	14,000	14,500
Secretary	5,000	5,250	5,500
Transcriber	2,250 (1)	4,650	4,900
Interviewers	5,000 (2)	10,000	10,000
Total	<u>25,750</u>	<u>33,900</u>	<u>34,900</u>
III. ORGANIZATIONAL EXPENSES			
Conferences, Consultation fees, etc.	6,000	3,000	3,000
IV. PUBLICATIONS			
Annual Report of Library Contents	2,500	2,500	2,500
Program Publications	-	10,000 (3)	10,000 (3)
Total	<u>2,500</u>	<u>12,500</u>	<u>12,500</u>
V. OTHER DIRECT EXPENSES			
Travel	1,500	2,000	2,500
Supplies	750	750	750
Total	<u>2,250</u>	<u>2,750</u>	<u>3,250</u>
TOTAL DIRECT EXPENSES	<u>43,800</u>	<u>52,150</u>	<u>53,650</u>
VI. INDIRECT EXPENSES			
AJC coordinating assistance, AJC facilities, staff fringe benefits (estimated at 20% of direct expenses)	<u>8,760</u>	<u>10,430</u>	<u>10,730</u>
TOTAL EXPENSES	<u>\$52,560</u>	<u>\$62,580</u>	<u>\$64,380</u>