

Lisa Moses Leff, *The Archive Thief: The Man Who Salvaged French History in the Wake of the Holocaust*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 304.

by *Elissa Bemporad*

On April 13, 1961, a world-renowned scholar of French Jewish history, Zosa Szajkowski, was caught red-handed in the process of stealing documents from the municipal archives of the city of Strasbourg. He had lacerated precious archival collections. One of the items Szajkowski had been about to carry away was a 14th-century parchment which he had ripped out of the archival registers' binding. Besides constituting a legal crime, the theft represented a disavowal of the rules of the historian's craft, as well as an act of deception against the archivists, the historian's comrades-in-arms who had guarded the primary sources, entrusting them briefly to the bona fide researcher for reverent, painstaking use. And what about the work of future scholars? How would they ever be able to write history without having access to documentary sources known and recorded as extant?

In a gripping tour de force which at times reads like a detective story, Lisa Leff captures the deep ambiguity at the heart of the work of a man who, while devoted to the preservation of Jewish historical sources, also engaged in looting these very same documents. Pillaging documents from archival collections in Europe and selling them across the US and Israel to special collections and university libraries at Harvard, Brandeis, UTS, JTS, YIVO, and the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem, Szajkowski became one of the most significant and problematic figures in the history of twentieth-century Jewish archives. Acting both as a rescuer and as a destructive force in the preservation of Jewish sources, he removed unique originals from state archives to create new collections. Based on a detailed study of Szajkowski's heroic – as well as criminal – life and work, Leff strings together the emotional stages of his involvement with documents and archives. Always a compulsive collector, Szajkowski reclaimed Jewish documents across Europe during and after World War II, reshaping entire archival collections. He exploited these materials for his own research, publishing, in just a few years, more books and academic articles than most scholars do in a lifetime. In the wake of the Holocaust, Szajkowski experienced taking possession of these documents as a heroic act of revenge against European anti-Semitism. He thus “rescued” Jewish documents from France, a country where the local authorities had facilitated the deportation of tens of thousands of Jews. Secretly trading the stolen documents with the best buyers on the market was also Szajkowski's way of supporting himself: his extraordinary erudition and talent

notwithstanding, his lack of formal education and academic degrees made it impossible for him to obtain a university employment.

One of the many virtues of Leff's book is that it never loses sight of the context and the way this impacted Szajkowski's actions and choices. Chapters Two and Eight in particular are exemplary of the art of history writing. Chapter Two examines the origins of Szajkowski's uncontrollable passion for books and collecting. This obsession grew out of the Yiddish-speaking East European diaspora in Paris of the 1920s and '30s. Growing up here among immigrant scholars, activists and intellectuals, the future history burglar forged a lasting friendship with Elias and Riva Tcherikower, who are to this day credited with preserving the records of anti-Jewish violence unleashed during the Civil War in Ukraine. In their Paris apartment the couple had amassed the monumental record group 81 of the YIVO archives, detailing the Ukrainian pogroms of 1918-1921 and a sine qua non for the study of the events of 1918-1921 today. The Tcherikowers became Szajkowski's mentors and family, passing on to him the fixation to collect in the wake of destruction. Chapters Three and Four chronicle the continued impact of recent history on Szajkowski's shifting passions and obsessions. With the outbreak of World War II, Szajkowski enlisted in the French Foreign Legion, and went on to collect materials on behalf of YIVO, salvaging archives and sending the materials he had obtained to America in a desperate act of devotion to scholarship and to Jewish history. The deaths of his family members in Auschwitz and his awareness of the part that neighbors had played in the Holocaust made Szajkowski bitterly resentful of the French state. He remained convinced that Europe would never be a safe place for Jews or for their cultural treasures: "Saving those books amounts to saving the People of the Book", wrote Szajkowski (p. 127).

But Szajkowski went on collecting and looting even when it was no longer an issue of salvaging historical record and testimony from persecution or destruction; committing larceny and fraud against institutions of the post-WWII West would no longer be accepted as moral. YIVO research director Max Weinreich, who had initially encouraged Szajkowski to remain in Europe to pursue the hunt for Jewish books and surviving documents, later reprimanded him for doing so; in the 1950s he called Szajkowski's ethics into question. Chapter Eight, one of Leff's most compelling, focuses on the buyers of the looted treasure. The author reminds us that Szajkowski was not the only one to operate in the postwar chaos of Judaica rescue, amid the emotional trauma and the absence of the murdered people. The archivists and cultural activists in America and Israel who purchased from Szajkowski, without keeping any acquisition records, hundreds of thousands of

pages of rare documents and stolen books and periodicals, were equally responsible for the violation of law and ethics they were jointly committing with their illicit vendor. They, too, chose to disregard the moral questions involved in the sale of the looted collections. We might believe the buyers to have been driven by a sense of mission to (re)gain possession of Jewish cultural treasures lost during the war and to (re)constitute their own initiatives into new centers of Jewish lore and learning. Granting this, the archive thief might find justification by blaming the Jewish world for not having supported him as a scholar, thus implicating world Jewry in his crimes. The dealer and the buyers formed two sides of the same coin, a coin tossed by history and caught between destruction and preservation at all costs.

*Elissa Bemporad, Queens College of the City University of New York*