

Connecting Collections: The Importance of Scholarship for the Special Collections Librarian

My name is Melanie Meyers, and I am the Senior Manager for Reference and Outreach at The Center for Jewish History. Which is a vague and somewhat unhelpful title, because my job is the combination of two special collections positions- the first is what most people would call Head of Reader Services, and second is Outreach or Instructional Librarian. So, the duties of my job include supervision of all public services to readers and scholars, including three reading rooms and eight staff members, but I also coordinate and supervise all library based instruction and outreach, which includes K-12 visits, GS troops, genealogy workshops, library social events, you name it. But one thing that you don't see in the way I articulate my core job duties is I'm a scholar. Because I'm not a scholar in the traditional sense- I don't have an advanced degree in Jewish studies or Yiddish or Hebrew (my graduate work in history was in a completely different field), nor do I spend my days writing papers about Judaica or painstakingly compiling bibliographies. I am not a traditional scholar-librarian. What I am, however, is relentlessly and sometimes annoyingly curious- I love to interrogate objects and assumptions, and think about new ways to conceptualize objects and materials. So, if you asked me to boil down what I do into one thing- what is my primary job function, what cuts across all these duties and expectations, what is the most critical thing, I would say my job is storyteller. Every day, in every encounter, in every interaction in the reading room, I am telling the stories of The Center for Jewish History. And I love to do it, and frankly, I'm good at it. I love the collections and stories at the Center, and I tell people in just about every session I give that I have the best job in the entire building, because I learn the stories of the collections and share them with other people.

I recently attended a conference at the Smithsonian (we are part of the Smithsonian network of museums and cultural heritage institutions) where the keynote was on storytelling and museums, and it was astonishing. It gave me a lot of food for thought in terms of my role, which I see as library storyteller. It also made me wonder- do other teaching librarians think of themselves in this way? And, if not, why not? I believe that the nature of librarianship is such that we are a helping profession, we spend our days helping people, so a lot of us that work in public services or instruction spend so much time doing the work of helping other people tell stories we forget that we are storytellers too, and effective ones. But in order to tell the best stories, you need to be able to do the scholarship that uncovers the stories, and those opportunities are not always available to librarians.

There are two other issues at play here, in my opinion. First, I think the work that is critical to storytelling is unduly conflated with scholarship as a status marker *or* as a means of producing something- you pursue scholarship in order to get a degree or a publication out of it. The second issue is that we as a profession often view scholarship as something that *other* people do, something we *help* others to accomplish, not as something we explore unless there is some sort of benefit (like tenure, or a raise, or faculty status). But doing research and scholarship is also not supported in many libraries- benefits like writing leave or sabbaticals are offered to people preparing for tenure, but that kind of support for intellectual discovery is not available everywhere. For the most part, those who research or publish are those who have the support to engage in those acts. Non-tenured positions, or librarians working in public libraries, government libraries or archives, or independent research institutions, often don't have that kind of research support because the acts of scholarship and research for the sake of personal growth is not seen as a critical function of the core job. I am fortunate- I have gotten a great deal of research and publishing support over the years, which is unusual for working in an independent research library/archives. But in my case, CJH is a relatively young organization, so we don't have decades of institutional bureaucracy and/or inertia to overcome, and as a younger establishment the administration encourages staff to publish, speak, and pursue professional development. But *we* as librarians need to center scholarship as an important aspect of our core job, because doing research in your own collection and other collections will greatly improve your ability to tell the story of your own institutions.

I received this fellowship based on research I have done in regards to the Offenbach archival depot and mapping of looted libraries during WWII. In 2013, the reference department at CJH created a map of provenance marks that were documented as part of the process of inventorying and returning the millions of books that were looted by the various Nazi forces during WWII. The depot was a collecting point for the mountains of books that were looted by the Nazis- the books were brought there, and sorted by country using provenance marks. They were

then returned to their libraries or, if that was not feasible, to a comparable and appropriate institution. The depot was the intermediate stop on their journey home. As part of the process, provenance marks were documented in large scrapbook sized books, with tabs sorting the countries. These books were kept to document the restitution efforts, and a set is contained in the personal papers of Col. S Pomrenze, who was a *Monuments Man* and the first director of Offenbach. Our digital lab digitized the scrapbooks; we then translated the provenance marks, and linked the images of the stamps to a geographic location on a map which then linked to information about the library itself. (Or the town where the library was located or the Jewish community in the town- we tried to tell the library stories as broadly as possible). The map is a great teaching tool and it was a labor of love for all of us, but it also gave us the opportunity to tell a story. We were able to learn a story about the collections, which was a complex and interesting tale, and to tell it in a novel fashion. It also allowed us the agency to tell a story in the format that we determined was the best one, which was an interactive format with context and depth. We were able to tell a story that was essentially about the theft of information by the Nazis, who wanted to rewrite and control the historical narrative of the Jewish people. So, when I was told me about the fellowship, and that Kiev had books with markings from the depot, I was so excited to get to come here and view them. I thought they would give me some more insight into Offenbach, and the players involved in restitution process. Kiev was deeply involved with an organization called JCR (Jewish Cultural Reconstruction), which was the successor to Offenbach- after the depot closed, JCR kept sorting books and finding them homes. So, I was excited to learn more about relationship, and how these processes linked together, and what Kiev's role was and how he ended up with books with the Offenbach marks. These were some of the things I had hoped to learn.

I tell readers every day; the thing about doing scholarship is that you just never know what you will find. You might find the perfect thing, the document that explains it all perfectly in the first box. Or you might find it in the 20th box. Or you might not find it at all, or you might find something totally different that sets you off on a different path. I give this lecture on a near constant basis, and until I started doing work for this fellowship I had forgotten how true this is.

Because I didn't really find what I wanted to find, at least, not in the collection, and not how I thought. In fact, I found the answer in a footnote in Amy Stempler's fine MA thesis about Kiev and his collection- which was that he ended up with books from Offenbach because they were duplicate copies sent to Hebrew Union College where he was a librarian. So, my primary question was answered, not with a bang of archival *œureka!*, but with a whimper. Kiev's personal papers were not very illuminating in terms of his interactions with JCR and Offenbach- in fact, most of the correspondence of interest is held at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, or, in the personal collections of people like Salo Baron. But Kiev had a long standing personal and mentorship with Stephen Wise (whose collection were have on microfilm at the Center, and I could see at any time), which made me wonder, *What else is in our collections that may be relevant?* So, I started searching the collections at CJH, and lo and behold, Kiev is all over the catalog, due to both his contributions to bibliography but also through his correspondence with people and organizations whose collections are housed here. So, while I didn't find exactly what I intended to find, that absence led me down a slightly different path, which made me start thinking about Kiev himself and how his career intersected with the materials I work with every day.

But I also started to get a sense of him, of Kiev, after working with the collection and examining the inventories, and the collection itself is unusual. It's not the collection of a scholar, not really- usually when you receive a collection that is someone's personal library, you see the specific threads of intellectual content- you can see how the collection supported the research and the scholarship of the creator. The collections tend to be focused, narrow, and deep. But the Kiev collection is a bit all over the place- it has a little touch of everything, from bestiaries to reprints of *The Dearborn Independent* to the modern Jewish novel. But I would find as I wandered through the stacks and browsed through the inventories, there was something that seemed familiar about the collection, there was an organizing principle and I wasn't quite seeing it. And then I read a line from the Stempler article that explained it for me: *Kiev was a first rate reference librarian and excelled in the capacity of librarian-teacher.* That's why the collection felt familiar- it's the collection of a reference and teaching librarian, not a scholar. It spans genres and forms because it needs to- it's filled with objects that are materially interesting as

objects, but also a wide spectrum of sometimes disparate aspects of Jewish history and literature. It's what my object lists for teaching look like, but on a much grander scale.

The collection reflects his self-defined role as a teaching librarian, not a scholar. All curators shape their collections, this collection is no exception. But what I kept coming back to is that he built this collection to tell stories. And also explains why the Offenbach books in his collection are not really super interesting or even relate to the thematic content of the collection as a whole. In fact, they are kind of underwhelming, but they are an artifact from a very specific place and time, that tells a story as an object and also tells the story of a process. My speculation would be that knowing where those books came from, and what that journey signified, he just couldn't let them go. Working with this collection has been a window into the mind of one of the finest teaching and reference librarians in Jewish librarianship, and it has taught me a great deal about my own process by understanding his collection.

Since I work in a public institution, I collaborate with a wide variety of researchers, and one of the things the reference department at the Center puts forth very forcefully is that we do not make distinctions between readers. Genealogist, undergraduate, high school student, senior citizen, doctoral candidate, or anyone in between- if you are in any of the reading rooms, you are a scholar. Scholarship is a process, not just a product, and it is something you only learn by doing. Moreover, scholarship is doing the active work of history, to work as a student of the humanities and show dedication to improving your understanding of complex events. Scholarship is not just writing a paper, or giving a talk. It's a process, and it's a process that you can only learn by doing- and what gets lost in the final analysis sometimes is that it is the process, not the facts uncovered that teaches you. We focus too much on the end product, and not the work- we overvalue scholarship that culminates in some lofty publication, rather than learning for learning's sake which is, in my opinion, really doing the heavy lifting of the humanities. That's the scholarship more special collections professionals need support and time to engage with. Kiev, I believe, focused on the process, and on the heavy lifting- he was a very modest man who shied away from taking credit, stood in the back of every picture, and kept very little of his own correspondence because he was not focused on the end product for his own glory. He created a collection to teach, primarily to teach himself, and that is why I also believe that it is very fitting that this fellowship this year was given to a librarian who is following in his professional footsteps.

Thank you.