In this issue of the Jewish Public Library Archives Magazine

From the Archivist’s Desk

The Smithsonian at the JPL-A

Yozep from Berezovka

Author Chava Shapiro
Good Things Come in Small Packages

Over the years, the JPL-A has received donations of very large archival collections, impressive sometimes not just for the content but for the sheer reams of paper representing decades of work and collection. Not to be overlooked though are the smaller collections, often just one folder of material that sometimes arrives on our doorstep in a plastic bag with little indication from whence it came. These are the Small Collections of the JPL-Archives. They do not take up a great deal of room on the shelves but they capture great moments of the community, as evident from even just a selection of examples.

“I want to thank all the people of Montreal for sticking by me…”

In the summer of 1946 the Montreal Royals broke records for attendance, batting averages and also witnessed the breaking of the colour barrier. Jackie Robinson arrived in the city after being signed by Branch Rickey Jr., the “Brooklyn Mahatma”, president, part owner and manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers. After withstanding the not-unexpected obstacles in training camp and in exhibition games, Robinson debuted in his first home game in Montreal on May 1, 1946 at Delormier Stadium. On October 5, 1946, the Montreal Royals won the Junior World Series title. In an article written some years after Robinson’s historic Montreal season, sports journalist Sam Maltin recalled the pandemonium in the stadium, “Here was a mob ready to riot, demanding the appearance of their favourite…As soon as the crowd spied [sic] they surged on him. Men and women of all ages threw their arms around him.”

That journalist, Sam Maltin, struck up a friendship with Jackie Robinson and his wife Rachel during and after their time in Montreal. During his years as a reporter, Maltin wrote sports and bridge columns for the Montreal Herald and later the Montreal Gazette. He was also a correspondent for several American newspapers. In his small archives, donated by his wife Belle, Maltin preserved four personal letters from Robinson and his wife, including one describing the joy of the birth of the Robinson’s first son, Jack Jr. That same letter refers to Jackie’s appreciation of his acceptance in Montreal, a major event in the narrative of the city captured on unassuming stationary.

A connection to Albert Einstein

Ariel Benson was born in Jerusalem in 1887 into a prominent Sephardic family. He was educated for the rabbinate in his grandfather’s Yeshiva and also in Germany and Switzerland. His work in the Zionist movement took Benson further around the world. In 1920, Benson began work for Keren Hayesod and visited the major Sephardic communities in countries such as: Egypt, Iraq, India, Spain, Portugal, China, Japan, Mexico, Columbia, and many more.

In addition to his Zionist activism, Benson was a well-respected author on topics of mysticism, philosophy and poetry. In 1932 he published *The Zohar in Moslem and Christian Spain*, a much-acclaimed work. Through his writing and work, Benson corresponded with numerous personalities – which is why his collection contains handwritten letters from Albert Einstein. His collection made it to Montreal and to the Jewish Public Library via his wife, Ida Siegler, a Montrealer whom he married in 1925.

In one letter Einstein congratulates Benson on his “great success in the matter of building up Palestine.” In another letter, unfortunately missing Benson’s original missive to Einstein, the scientist wonders at Canada’s immigration policy: “Frankly, I do not understand why a country, so sparsely populated such as Canada, makes such a big deal to decide to receive hard-working and useful people.” Written during the late 1920s or early 1930s, Einstein’s statement reflects the struggle over Jewish immigration to Canada.

I’m having the time of my life…

Born to Romanian immigrant parents in Montreal in 1908, Tressa (née Schwartz) Jacobson grew up to be an active member of the Montreal Jewish community. She was a founding member of the Ein Kerem chapter of Montreal Hadassah, a lifetime member of Canadian Hadassah-WIZO and a member of the National Council of Jewish Women. She also served

---

1 Translated from the original German.
**Brainin’s Dark Secret**

*By Naomi Caruso*

We all have secrets; some we reveal in our lifetime and some go down with us to our grave. When the secret is very serious we make sure that no evidence remains after we are gone.

Reuben Brainin too had a secret, which he took with him to the grave but intriguingly left the incriminating evidence behind. He was asked to destroy it repeatedly yet carried it with him for years from one place to another, through the various displacements of his life. After his death, in 1939 in New York, the evidence unbeknownst to his heirs was embedded amid thousands of pieces of paper, which together with the rest of his literary archives came to rest at the Jewish Public Library of Montreal.

What the archivist found that fateful day was a packet of yellowing letters together with 3 photographs of a woman, bound with a blue silk ribbon. Upon closer inspection it turned out that the packet contained 184 handwritten, Hebrew letters written by one, Chava Shapiro, the woman whose photos lay on top, revealing her side of a love affair with Reuben Brainin, which lasted over a period of 29 years.

Who was this woman? When Brainin first met her in 1899, Chava Shapiro was a wealthy, young woman of 23, vacationing with her mother at a fashionable spa in Germany. She was married to a banker with whom she had a son and lived in Warsaw. Brainin at this time was 37 years old, an established journalist and Zionist activist, also married and a father of 4 children.

For Chava the encounter proved to be a life-transforming event. Ever since her marriage three years earlier, she had been struggling with feelings of boredom and dissatisfaction with her life among the Jewish bourgeoisie of Warsaw, searching for a way out. She was a bright and literate woman who prior to her marriage had acquired an excellent education for the...
times by being privately tutored at home and so was very aware that there was more to the world than the stifling mediocrity of the milieu in which she lived.

Brainin provided the catalyst that she needed. She fell madly in love with him and began writing him letters gushing with emotion and expressing her wish to cut her ties with her old life and start a new one. He basked in her hero worship and did nothing to discourage her.

But the goal that Chava set for herself was anything but simple. There were huge obstacles to overcome. First she had to convince her parents because she needed their financial support, then she had to fight for legal separation from her husband who was adamantly opposed to any such thing. When he finally consented it was with the condition that she must leave her son with him. It took her four years to reach this point. During this time she and Brainin nurtured their romance by meeting surreptitiously in various places, which were conveniently located on the railway line between her home in Warsaw and his in Berlin. Brainin at first was very enthusiastic and supportive of Chava's plans but he failed to realize the extent of the storm that he had unleashed. He had always liked women and enjoyed flirting with them but had no intention of ever leaving his wife. When Chava realized that divorce for Brainin was out of the question she was upset but undeterred in her quest to acquire an education and start a new life no matter what.

By 1904 she was on her way. With her parents' support, Shapiro left her husband and son, eventually obtaining a divorce as well as regaining custody of the boy. She first moved to Vienna where she took German courses and then in 1905 to Berne, Switzerland where she successfully passed the entrance exams to the University of Berne, despite never having been formally educated. In 1910 she graduated with a doctorate in philosophy.

During this time the affair, which was primarily conducted through correspondence, ebbed and peaked according to Brainin's moods. Many times Chava was on the verge of breaking up the relationship, having established a new circle of friends, when Brainin because of some personal setback or feeling depressed would pick up his pen and push all the right emotional buttons and re-ignite her passion.

This went on until suddenly in November 1910, without any preparation or warning, Brainin took his family and moved to North America putting an ocean between him and Chava. She was grief stricken. How could he leave Europe, the center of civilization where he had a strong base and a chance to build on his reputation and become a famous writer and go to live in some god forsaken primitive place, like Montreal, surrounded by illiterates, which was also so far away from her? She ranted and raved in her letters but gradually had no choice but to accept the situation. Easing her pain was the realization that she was in her prime, independently wealthy and well educated. She soon embarked on a journalistic career, which saw her travel all over Europe, leading an exciting life as an attractive single woman.

But this was not yet the end of the affair. Brainin reappeared in her life in 1913, when he came to Europe for four months and spent two of them with her in Berlin. This was the longest they had ever spent together and Chava was in raptures. She was sure that this time she convinced him to return to Europe and make a life with her there. Sadly she could not have been more wrong. When Brainin came back to Canada he stopped writing to her altogether and never contacted her again.

Chava persisted with her correspondence until 1928, not willing to believe that he could be so cruel. Throughout the years she chose to ignore the existence of Brainin's wife and children and she could not admit that finally they gained the upper hand.

What happened to her subsequently, until her tragic death in 1943, will be described in our next issue.

For our purposes here it is important to note that Chava proved to be right. Brainin never became a successful writer. He was a well-known journalist and an important community activist but he failed to be what he yearned for most, a prominent writer. He was fifty years old when he came to Canada and his early promise and potential within the world of letters, which had never really materialized in the old world did not happen in the new one either. He was painfully aware of that and it made him very bitter and frustrated and pushed him to find rewards and honours in other domains instead.
In the neighbourhood of the village of Ternovka in the Ukrainian province of Podolia existed farming communities where a few Jewish families resided. In one of them, Berezovka, lived a prosperous Jew who was kind and generous to Jew and gentile alike. His name was Joseph, but everyone called him Yozep. His home was open to all travellers, and his wife, who was as kind-hearted as he, welcomed guests and treated them like family. She was a simple, unsophisticated person and very proud of her husband.

On a rare shopping trip to the large Jewish town of Berdichev Yozep’s wife was on a train with many other Jewish passengers. She carried on a one-way conversation with an interested gentleman who encouraged her to keep on talking. She told him about Berezovka and its residents, its farms, its rich soil and its produce, but mainly she spoke about her husband. His wealth, his kindness, his generosity, the great esteem in which he was held and the respect accorded him by everyone. The longer she spoke, the greater the exaggeration. She built castles in the air and filled them with pious relatives and thousands of Yozep’s admirers. Time passed quickly and the train arrived at its destination. The gentleman bade her goodbye and they parted. What she didn’t know then and only found out later was that the gentleman was none other than Sholem Aleichem, the renowned Yiddish author and humorist.

One fine day a story was published entitled “Yozep from Berezovka.” When Yozep was told that Sholem Aleichem wrote a comical tale about his family he was not amused. He dropped everything and traveled to confront the publisher. In appreciation of a meaningful financial contribution to both the publisher and Sholem Aleichem, the publication was recalled and copies destroyed. The type was dispersed.

Actually, not all copies were destroyed, several were sold before the recall. In an archive, a library, a basement or attic lies unnoticed and unrecognized a rare and valuable copy of Sholem Aleichem’s “Yozep from Berezovka.”

Please let me know if you find it.

This story was told to me by a minstrel some 60 years ago. Since then I have searched for the elusive tale on three continents. Book stores, archives, libraries and even barns failed to surrender it. When I discovered a box of Sholem Aleichem pamphlets in our own JPL Archives I was hopeful. I carefully turned each fragile yellowed page, but was again disappointed. I will not give up the search, and neither should you.

Author and humorist Sholem Aleichem, the Jewish Mark Twain, died in New York on Saturday, May 13, 1916 at the age of 57. Two days later the funeral proceeded from his home in the Bronx through Harlem and the whole length of Manhattan, then across the Williamsburg Bridge to Har (Mount) Nebo cemetery in Cypress Hills, Brooklyn. Sholem Aleichem instructed that his burial should be temporary until the war’s end. He desired to be buried permanently in Kiev, Russia but the Bolshevik revolution prevented that.

Twenty thousand mourners followed the hearse to Brooklyn and more than one hundred thousand admirers lined the route. In 1921 he was re-buried at the Workmen’s Circle Mount Carmel Cemetery in Queens, New York. Photographs of the 1916 funeral procession were donated by Sholem Aleichem’s granddaughter, Bel Kaufman, when she visited the JPL Archives in 1976.
Smithsonian/University of Alberta Visit

This past October the JPL-Archives played host to researchers from the Smithsonian Institution’s Folkways Recordings unit and the University of Alberta’s Folkways Alive project. The purpose of their visit was a week of exhaustive interviews with Sam Gesser, Montreal impresario. Mr. Gesser was interviewed on film in several locations around Montreal, including with his extensive archival collection at the JPL-Archives. The JPL-Archives is looking forward to working with these two institutions as they continue to document Mr. Gesser’s contributions to the legendary Folkways label.

Mr. Gesser was also recently the recipient of two new awards for his contributions to preserving folk music in Canada. Mr. Gesser is now included in the Ottawa Folk Music Walk of Fame and was the inaugural recipient of the Resonance Award, presented by the Canadian Museum of Civilization at the Canadian Folk Music Awards in December.

Environmental Guidelines Workshop at the JPL Archives

On October 25th and 26th, the JPL Archives played host to a diverse group of archivists and museologists attending a Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) workshop. The workshop, organized and facilitated by the JPL Archives was led by professional conservators from the CCI, Canada’s centre for the conservation of national heritage.

The workshop provided participants with an introduction to the techniques and theory in diagnosing the effects of light, humidity and pollutants on archival collections and specific materials. The event was hugely successful in terms of professional development but also in exposing other archivists to the JPL Archives collections and programmes.

INSTITUTIONS AND SCHOOLS REPRESENTED AT THE WORKSHOP:

- Anglican Diocese of Montreal Archives
- Canadian Jewish Congress Charities Committee – National Archives
- Centre d’études acadiennes et du Musée acadien, Université de Moncton
- Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre
- McGill University Archives
- McGill University Graduate School of Information Studies
- Université de Montréal

In Memory

The Jewish Public Library and Archives lost two good friends this past December.

On December 16, 2007, Judy King, granddaughter of Reuben Brainin, passed away at the age of 92. Ms. King took a great interest in the history of her grandfather and her family and was very encouraging in the work of the Archives over these many years. Ms. King earned a B. Sc and a M. Sc (Physiology) from McGill University and later went on to teach for many years at West Hill and Riverdale High Schools.

Mannie Lecker, a Jewish war veteran, passed away in Montreal on December 27, 2007. Mr. Lecker served with the RCAF during the final Allied push across Europe in World War II. In 1978, Mr. Lecker donated the first of his wartime memorabilia to the Jewish Public Library. He reconnected again with the Archives in 2005 bringing in additional material – such as Nazi propaganda leaflets – that he collected during his time in Europe. His visits to the Archives were always entertaining and will be missed.
In the next issue...

- A call to all workers, the May Day issue!
- From furs to oranges: Asher Pierce.

Give us your ideas! If you have a suggestion for topics you would like covered, e-mail Shannon Hodge at archives@jplmontreal.org.

North America’s oldest Jewish lending institution, the JPL is an agency of FEDERATION CJA. The JPL Archives contain 800 linear meters of textual documents, 17,000 photographs as well as artifacts, textiles and ephemera reflective of Montreal's Jewish community's culture and history.

We are located at: 5151 Côte Ste-Catherine Road
(514) 345-2627, x 3015