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Recommended Citation

Stempler, Amy. 2011. "Isaac Edward Kiev: Early Leader in American Judaica Librarianship," *Judaica Librarianship* 16, 137-147.
DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.14263/2330-2976.1009>

Isaac Edward Kiev: Early Leader in American Judaica Librarianship

AMY F. STEPLER

ABSTRACT

Isaac Edward Kiev (1905–1975), former Chief Librarian of New York's Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, spent a lifetime facilitating Jewish research. This article, based on the author's Master's thesis on Kiev, focuses on his contributions to the founding of Jewish book and library organizations during the American post-war era, including the Association of Jewish Libraries, Jewish Book Council of America, Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc., and numerous Jewish book foundations in the United States and Israel. In addition to providing insight into the creation of these associations, the article illustrates the parallel development of the fields of Judaica librarianship and Jewish Studies in academia. Kiev's legacy continues into the twenty-first century through his lasting influence on his profession as well as the I. Edward Kiev Judaica Collection at the George Washington University.

The life of Isaac Edward Kiev met a tragic yet poignant end when he had a heart attack while carrying books from his car up to the library of New York's Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR).¹ Kiev's entire life was surrounded by books, as a librarian facilitating learning and scholarship, and as a leader in Jewish book and library organizations. In addition to his fifty years at HUC-JIR's library, Kiev served as chaplain for Jewish patients at the Sea View Hospital in Staten Island (a tuberculosis sanitarium), and later as pulpit rabbi at Congregation Habonim, a synagogue built by German Jewish refugees in 1939.

Kiev was by all accounts a private person and did not leave behind a great deal of writings, sermons, or personal records. In fact, most of what is known

¹ Kiev died on November 3, 1975.

about his activities comes from archival records of Jewish book and library organizations. Therefore, this essay is not intended to be a comprehensive biographical review of Kiev's life, but should serve as a historical mirror reflecting the development and growth of American Judaica librarianship and its professional organizations during the post-war period following World War II.

Stephen S. Wise, the Jewish icon of the progressive Reform movement and the founder of the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR), would be a constant presence in Kiev's life from the beginning of their association in 1924 when Kiev was nineteen years old. Wise believed there was a need for a non-denominational Jewish seminary, particularly in New York City, which had the greatest concentration of Jews in the country. He especially wanted to create an alternative to Hebrew Union College (HUC), the only Reform rabbinical seminary, which was officially non-Zionist and often viewed as hostile to the idea of a Jewish State. The pluralistic spirit of the Institute embodied the concept of *Kelal Yisra'el*, which had a lasting effect on Kiev.

Kiev was accepted by the Institute as a "special student" due to the fact that he had not yet earned the prerequisite bachelor's degree. In addition to some coursework in history at Columbia University in 1925, his formal education consisted of attending the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School, where he studied Hebrew, History, Bible, and Talmud from age nine until age thirteen; subsequently, as a student at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, he was tutored privately in Mishnah, Ethics, Codes, and Talmud by a Rabbi Sohn.

From the beginning of their association, it was clear that Wise took a particular interest in Kiev. Wise helped him overcome his shyness and to realize his potential as a powerful orator. More importantly, Wise arranged a job for Kiev as a page in the JIR library so that he could support himself while in school. Although there was no tuition fee at the Institute, Wise also created a special payment structure so Kiev could pay off his indebtedness to the school for dormitory rent. Even as Kiev struggled to support himself through school, his love for books proved to be his weakness. After Wise told Kiev of the reimbursement arrangement, Wise remarked frankly, "Forgive me for saying that the purchase of books might well be deferred until after the payment of one's indebtedness."²

Kiev remained at the library as an assistant and Hebrew bibliographer for nearly twenty years before being named Chief Librarian in 1943. During this time, he worked under the preeminent historian, Salo W. Baron, who served as professor of Jewish history and librarian at the Institute until he began his tenure at Columbia University in 1930. Baron and Kiev maintained a close relationship, as evidenced by their friendly, work-related correspondence found in the Salo W. Baron papers at Stanford University. Upon Baron's departure, Kiev had the opportunity to work with another acclaimed Judaica scholar, Shalom Spiegel, who served as librarian from 1930–1942 and later taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary for forty years until his death in 1984.

² See the letter Wise to Kiev, October 1, 1926, Kiev Papers, GWU.

On a professional and personal level, Wise had perhaps the most profound effect on Kiev's life aside from his wife Mary Nover Kiev, a fellow librarian and bibliographer whom he met at the Institute. In many ways, Kiev grew with the JIR and came to represent its first and only generation before its merger with Hebrew Union College (HUC) in 1950. Until Wise's death in 1949, Kiev played a significant behind-the-scenes role. Though not yet part of the JIR faculty, Kiev had a wealth of institutional memory. Wise regularly consulted with Kiev on internal administrative issues. Matters ranged from seeking Kiev's opinion on a planned Braille edition of the Hebrew Bible, to asking him to identify articles in the Yiddish press, and to acting as his liaison for the constant inquiries addressed to him.

Though not a prolific author, Kiev published a number of his own works. In 1949, he produced a new English translation of the Passover Haggadah in an edition with beautiful illuminated scenes by the artist Kafra. Along with Professor John Tepfer, he wrote the history of the Institute in honor of its twenty-fifth anniversary, which appeared in the *American Jewish Yearbook* (Kiev 1948a), as well as a separate piece on its library that was published in the *JIR Catalogue* (Kiev 1948b). In 1960 Kiev wrote, "Jewish Theological Seminaries and Their Libraries" for *Library Trends* and the following year he contributed a survey of "Jewish Bibliography in America," in *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore*, where he annotated the work of librarians and bibliographers in the field of Judaic Studies. During Kiev's tenure as associate editor of the *Jewish Book Annual* (1952–1975), he also wrote the annotated bibliographic report, "American Jewish Non-Fiction Books," a list that he often introduced with an overview of the past year's scholarship.

Though Kiev was not a librarian-scholar in the league of such figures as Isaac Rivkind, Alexander Marx, or Joshua Bloch, he was recognized as an expert on Judaic and Hebraic literature, possessing encyclopedic knowledge of Jewish sources. Rivkind compared the profession to teaching, where the library served as a one-on-one classroom to students and scholars. He noted that the true vocation of the librarian was in the service of others, a role Kiev was known to perform brilliantly. Herbert Zafren, the late Director of the HUC-JIR Libraries, observed that Kiev was a first-rate reference librarian, and excelled in the capacity of librarian-teacher.

The scholars whom Kiev personally assisted reads like a who's who in Jewish letters, and his facilitation of their research should not go unnoticed. At HUC-JIR's Cincinnati campus, Kiev assisted Israel Bettan, Professor of Homiletics and Midrash, Ezra Spicehandler, Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of Hebrew Literature, and Eisig Silberschlag, an eminent Hebrew scholar who also served as a trustee of the Nissan Touroff Foundation alongside Kiev. At New York's HUC-JIR campus, Kiev worked closely with Bernard Heller, a Visiting Professor of Jewish Ethics and the Philosophy of Religion, Henry Slonimsky, Professor of Ethics and Philosophy and later Dean of the school, and Harry Orlinsky, Professor of Biblical Literature. Kiev worked closely with scholars from neighboring institutions, such as Dina Abramowicz of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Dr. Jean Jofen of the Department of Modern Languages and Compar-

ative Literature of the City College of New York, and Yehudah Damesek of Yeshiva University. Kiev was singled out in the appreciation pages of Nathan Ausubel's *A Treasury of Jewish Humor* (1951), Leon A. Jick's *In Search of a Way* (1966), and in the numerous anthologies on Jewish holidays written by his close friend and colleague, Philip Goodman. Kiev also developed an extensive working relationship with noted author of Hebrew short stories, Solomon (Shlomo) Damesek, who wrote over thirty letters to Kiev requesting to borrow or purchase books needed for his articles in *Bitzaron*.

In addition to facilitating research, Kiev helped get scholars get published, through his work in various foundations. He served on the Advisory and Publication Board of the Jewish Classics series of the Gorfinkle Foundation, which popularized Jewish classical writings in English, and he served as chair of the Israel Matz Fund, which funded the publication of literature that promoted Jewish culture, established Hebrew libraries, and supported destitute Hebrew writers and their families. Kiev also chaired the Book Section Committee of the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods' Jewish Chautauqua Society.

However, the height of Kiev's career occurred during the religious revival that followed World War II and the subsequent decade. During this time, Kiev helped to establish and served as president of the Jewish Librarians Association (JLA), the predecessor of the Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL), and was an instrumental leader in various other national Jewish library and book organizations.

Superior education and business experience created prosperity for Americans in general and Jews in particular during the postwar years. On a whole, the Jewish community was firmly embedded in the middle class. In addition to economic success, a "popular resurgence of piety" arose, that was viewed as a consequence of war's brutality, strengthened by the opposition to the "new godless" enemy of Communism (Ahlstrom 1972, 951–952). For the Jewish community, the revival was a declaration of unity and survival, which led to record synagogue affiliation, peaking at sixty percent by the late 1950s. Within this climate, Judaism achieved a new level of recognition, symbolized by the universal popularity of the 1946 inspirational book *Peace of Mind*, by Reform Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman, and later with the success of Will Herberg's *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*. The title of Herberg's 1955 work proclaimed America's "triple melting pot" and illustrated the Jewish community's newfound social acceptance, as well as the decline of anti-Semitism. Postwar prosperity had bolstered Judaism institutionally through the building of synagogues, religious schools, and new communal institutions such as Jewish Community Centers (JCCs). Like a chain reaction, a remarkable growth in synagogue and Center libraries soon followed, which had a dramatic effect on Jewish library organizations.

Unprecedented interest in religion and theology among Jews fostered an exceptional amount of scholarship concerning Jewish thought after the war. In the 1952 edition of his annual article, "American Jewish Non-Fiction," Kiev observed that the works listed in the bibliography were of greater substance than in previous years. Five years later, he again noted the considerable growth and diversity of the list in his report. The trend of turning towards faith was significant and included important members of Manhattan's literary and academic

community, who extolled the likes of Martin Buber and the Yiddish storytellers, Maimonides and medieval Hebrew poetry, and even the rabbis of the Talmud. Jewish representation on America's intellectual landscape was not in question. Jewish professionals entered academia, literature, journalism, and architecture in strong numbers. The era also witnessed an expansion of Judaic Studies programs and courses. Positions in the field were found at sixty college campuses throughout the country by the 1960s. Naturally, all of these progressions led to a major increase in Jewish books, which directly increased the importance of Jewish libraries and those responsible for them.

Kiev's involvement during this time in the JLA, as well as the Jewish Book Council of America (JBC), and Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc. (JCR), lend insight into this era and the organizational development of American Judaica librarianship. Kiev was among the founding members of the JLA, which was established in New York City in 1946, and he served as its president from 1951 until 1959. The original group included Sophie Udin of the Zionist Archives and Library, Dr. Alexander Marx of JTS, and Dr. Joshua Bloch of the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library (NYPL), among others. The members of this organization were well-respected professionals from prestigious communal and academic institutions, primarily in the metropolitan New York area. They discussed bibliographies, union catalogs, and indexes, and produced a checklist of periodicals in the New York City area with the intention of expanding the group to include as many Jewish libraries as possible. In 1946, Kiev chaired the Subject Headings Committee, which included Theodore Gaster, then chief of the Hebraic Section of the Library of Congress, Leon Nemoj of Yale University, Harry Wolfson of Harvard, and Joshua Bloch. The field of Judaica librarianship was still in a nascent state in 1946. This fact was clearly illustrated when Kiev sent out letters requesting Subject Heading lists. He received responses from such prominent libraries as HUC and Dropsie College, which regretted that they had not yet developed such an essential cataloging tool.

The published histories of the JLA, by Joseph Yenish (1967), Marcia Posner (1990–1991), and Pearl Berger (2006), report that in 1965, nearly twenty years after its inception, the Jewish Librarians Association merged with the Jewish Library Association. The latter Association was organized at a founding convention in Atlantic City in 1962 under the leadership of Miriam Leikind, a synagogue librarian in Cleveland, Ohio, and consisted primarily of librarians and paraprofessionals who worked in synagogue and Jewish community center libraries. In contrast, the Jewish Librarians Association was preoccupied with problems unique to their largely academic and research settings. These accounts note that under the strong and determined leadership of Herbert Zafren, who was active in both organizations, the merger of the two was formalized. While this history is true, it does not tell the complete story.

Records of the Jewish Book Council of America confirm that Kiev helped build a relationship between librarians at smaller and larger Jewish libraries as far back as 1948, and communication had continued under Kiev's tenure as JLA president. The JBC, sponsored by the National Jewish Welfare Board (JWB), had received numerous requests from librarians working at JCCs urging the Council

to assemble a meeting between themselves and the JLA to discuss issues of mutual interest. A committee of Kiev, Joshua Bloch, Philip Goodman, and Isidore Meyer, all also founding members of the JLA, met with that Association in their capacities as members of the Jewish Book Council. Notes from the JBC Executive Board meeting on October 20, 1948, state that the JLA “agreed to invite these people to membership in their organization.”³ While this statement seemed to result in simply an informal acceptance, it is evident that cooperation between the two groups of Jewish librarians and the groundwork for unification existed prior to the official merger in 1965.

Additional correspondence from 1956 supports the premise of an earlier affiliation of the two types of librarians. There are several letters of correspondence from 1956 between Philip Goodman of the JBC, Kiev, then President of JLA, and Miriam Leikind, of the Jewish Library Association, regarding a permanent committee of the Jewish Librarians Association to deal with matters affecting these smaller libraries. Although there are no definitive records of the organizational history of the Association of Jewish Libraries, it is clear that Kiev was directly involved in the inclusive gestures towards the smaller synagogue and center libraries. His sensitivity to the role of smaller synagogue and center libraries may have stemmed from the fact that his wife, Mary Kiev, was synagogue librarian at New York’s Temple Emanu-El.

Kiev’s long association with the JBC also sheds further light into the Jewish library world of the post-war era. Kiev began serving on the Executive Board in 1946, and during the 1950s and 1960s he held the positions of Treasurer and Secretary, in addition to chairing the Committee on Library Citations for most of his nearly thirty-year tenure. Kiev served as Associate Editor of the *Jewish Book Annual*, sponsored by the JBC, and for almost thirty years produced the bibliography for American Jewish Non-Fiction for the *Annual*, while Mary wrote the bibliographies for American Jewish Fiction.

The massive growth of synagogue and JCC libraries during the post-war period is apparent from Kiev’s Annual Report to the JBC. In 1948, as Chairman of the Committee on Library Citations, Kiev noted that the purpose of the committee was initially to select an outstanding Jewish library for an award. However, as a result of discussions and investigations, it was decided to expand its original function and include Jewish libraries in synagogues, centers, schools, and similar organizations that met certain minimum criteria. Kiev added, “The appreciable growth of Jewish libraries in the last decade should be noted at this time and the trend away from the collection of surplus or discarded books within centers and institutions irrespective of the usefulness, and the other requirements of the community, is another development which gives us considerable pleasure.”⁴ The statistician of the Jewish Welfare Board concluded through a survey that more than

³ See the Minutes of Executive Board Meeting, October 20, 1948, RG7, Jewish Division: Box 2: Folder “JBC, 1948,” New York Public Library, New York.

⁴ See the Proceedings of the Annual Meeting, May 19, 1948, JBC Records, I-259, 1:2, American Jewish Historical Society, Center for Jewish History, New York.

one-quarter of these libraries were organized in the previous two years, from 1946 to 1948, and approximately sixty percent had been organized since 1935.

At the JBC annual meeting held on May 19, 1948, Kiev acknowledged the special significance to Judaica librarianship of the birth of Israel, which had occurred just five days earlier. He declared, "With the resumption of normal communications with Israel within the next few days, I hope the flow of a growing amount of Palestinian Hebrew literature will become increasingly evident among us in the country. This is one of the important services we can render at this time to the *Yishuv*, the greatest producer of Jewish books in the present day."⁵

One of Kiev's most important endeavors directly related to the post-Holocaust era was his work with the umbrella organization, Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc. The JCR was created to inventory and redistribute 2.5 million books, artifacts, artworks, and sacred objects that had belonged to Jewish victims of the Holocaust but were, in most cases, unable to be returned to their original owners. The JCR was established in February 1949 in New York City, under Executive Director Hannah Arendt and the leadership of Professors Salo Baron and Gershom Scholem, the renowned scholar of Jewish mysticism. Kiev served as secretary from 1949 to 1951 and was a member of its Advisory Committee. JCR completed its work by 1952. In those few years, the organization distributed approximately 500,000 books, over 10,000 ceremonial objects, and 1,200 Torah scrolls to centers of Jewish learning all over the world. The task of handling, shipping, and processing these materials was a complicated undertaking, particularly the decision as to the final location of the materials.

The JCR Board of Directors decided that the Jewish National and University Library of Hebrew University in Jerusalem had top priority of all non-duplicates. Israel also received the majority of artifacts that remained in the Offenbach Archival Depot, the German depot used by the U.S. Military Government to gather remaining Jewish property that had been looted by the Nazis for their planned museum. However, Kiev was a strong advocate on behalf of the American Jewish Archives (AJA) to become the primary processing center for these ritual objects. Located on the Cincinnati campus of HUC-JIR, the AJA was established by Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus in 1947, and devoted itself to documenting and preserving the American Jewish experience. The creation of the AJA, a projected aided by Kiev, illustrated the notable shift from Europe to the United States as the religious and cultural center of world Jewry.

In a letter to HUC-JIR President Nelson Glueck, Kiev wrote, "It seems to me that the College-Institute with its present staff of experts and historians in the field of European Jewish history could rightfully claim to be the research centre for the history of Jews and Judaism outside of Israel."⁶ Glueck instructed Kiev to write a letter on behalf of HUC-JIR requesting that the AJA become the chief repository for artifacts. Kiev also made these arguments to the JCR's Board

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See the letter Kiev to Glueck, December 18, 1950, MS20, Ala-14:8, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

of Directors and cited the work of six prominent scholars affiliated with the College-Institute, including Dr. and Mrs. Taeubler, Guido Kisch, Isaiah Sonne, Moses Marx, Ellis Rivkin, and Jacob Rader Marcus. Although Kiev's fellow members of the Sub-Committee on Artifacts agreed with him, the vote was for Israel to receive the majority of the artifacts still in Germany. However, nearly 4,000 ceremonial objects were already at the Jewish Museum in New York, which created a special exhibition and ceremony for these treasured remains.

Administrative records of Jewish book and library organizations show that many of Kiev's suggestions contained the basic theme of inclusiveness and outreach. In addition to creating regular Judaica exhibits, he recommended appointing special liaisons to bring Jewish books to small cities and towns in America, as well as creating a Jewish book column in major national publications and radio programs. At a symposium of Jewish publishers he proposed that consideration be given not only to authors in the U.S. but also to those in South America, France, and elsewhere. He suggested that Jewish books be made more attractive by frequent redesign, stressing that books were a business and their distribution should be treated as such. Kiev believed that it was essential to get Jews reading and for them to become active members in the Jewish community, even if philanthropic subsidies were necessary. Kiev worked on behalf of Jewish libraries of all sizes and strove to ensure that Jewish books would always be available to Jews who wanted to read them. Undoubtedly, Kiev maintained his commitment made as a young man to Jewish learning and literacy, while weaving the inclusive theme of *Kelal Yisra'el* throughout his actions.

Kiev's long career culminated in a Festschrift produced in honor of his sixty-fifth birthday in 1971. *Studies in Jewish Bibliography, History and Literature*, edited by the Head of Harvard's Judaica Division, Charles Berlin, was a fitting tribute to Kiev as a preeminent librarian. The studies written by forty-three renowned authors illustrated the dynamism that existed in Jewish scholarship at the time. Every essay topic, from analysis of German Reform Judaism to bibliographic research, contributed to the knowledge and understanding of Jewish life and letters. In many ways, the Festschrift, which began production in 1966, represented the dynamic state of Jewish academia at the close of the 1960s, a watershed decade in the aftermath of Israel's monumental victory in the Six-Day War.

Out of respect and appreciation, many contemporary Jewish intellectuals felt motivated to participate in the honorary publication. Solomon Grayzel (1971) noted that Kiev had followed in the tradition of past eminent Jewish librarians and distinguished himself for his willingness to serve students and scholars in locations as widely varied as the subject matter that they were studying. Two receptions were held to celebrate the publication. The first took place at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1971, hosted by Gershom Scholem who had known Kiev from the time of his first lecture series at the JIR in 1938, and another event was held in New York City the following year.

Paul Steinberg, former dean of New York's HUC-JIR school, noted that Kiev "was that rare person, always remaining in the background. He was a scholar who helped others to receive credit for the work he shaped. All the years, all the

anonymity.”⁷ Symbolic of how he viewed himself and his nature as a behind-the-scenes player, Kiev always stood in the back of group photos. He did not attain high levels of achievement on the world stage or devote himself to preaching social justice from the pulpit, as did his mentor Stephen S. Wise. However, as the last remnant of the Jewish Institute of Religion, he fulfilled Wise’s legacy through his own path, one that was committed to making Jewish literature available to *‘Am ha-Sefer*. I. Edward Kiev’s life’s work illustrates the importance of American Jewish library and book organizations, and his professional activism during the postwar era is his one of his many contributions to Jewish literacy.

However, perhaps Kiev’s most enduring legacy was the donation of his personal library to the Special Collections Research Center at the George Washington University, Washington, DC. The I. Edward Kiev Judaica Collection was established in 1996, following the bequest of 18,000 volumes by Kiev’s son and daughter-in-law, Dr. Ari and Phyllis Kiev. A special reading room was built and is open to the public to support Jewish research on campus and abroad. The collection, which also includes manuscripts, artwork, artifacts, and other ephemera, continues to grow through the support of the Kiev Foundation, as well as outside donations, and is considered one of the premiere university Judaica collections on the East Coast.

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