



Fannie Zelcer (1923–2003)

The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (AJA) notes with great sadness the passing of Fannie Zelcer on May 29, 2003, at the age of 80. Fannie Zelcer was the chief archivist of the American Jewish Archives from 1958 to 1989.

Fannie took an indirect route to the American Jewish Archives and to her career as an archivist. Born in Cincinnati in 1923, she attended the city's public schools and the University of Cincinnati. During World War II Fannie served in the U.S. Army Air Force, rising to the rank of sergeant. Following her service, Fannie returned to Cincinnati, working at a variety of jobs and then beginning a family. Not formally trained for the archival profession, Fannie developed the talents she would later use at the AJA during these years: refining an attention to detail and a knack for organization, together with an ability to lead. As Dr. Gary P. Zola noted, "The skills Fannie acquired [during this time] conjoined with her own personal qualities to create a take-charge woman—a person who knew how to get things done."

With these experiences and skills in place, Fannie became the AJA's second chief archivist, succeeding Selma Stern-Taeubler. During Fannie's tenure she helped guide the AJA from a fledgling institution to a world-renowned repository. Working with a small staff—and sometimes single-handedly—Fannie was responsible for the full-

range of archival duties. She worked in collection development (overseeing more than a five-fold growth in the size of the AJA's collection), cataloged, preserved and processed its materials, and refined a system of bibliographic control over the AJA's holdings that was unmatched in the detail and access it provided to researchers and patrons.

Fannie's work and influence transcended technical archival matters, for she was, in many ways, the public face of the AJA. Working in accord with the vision established by the AJA's founding director, Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus (1896–1995), and in conjunction with her colleagues, Associate Directors Stanley F. Chyet (1931–2002), and Abraham J. Peck (b. 1946), Fannie cultivated and implemented a philosophy of personalized service that became the hallmark of the institution. Disdainful of pretense or sophistry, Fannie helped establish the American Jewish Archives as a "people's archive." Bringing both a professional commitment and personal devotion to her work (she often called the AJA's many Hollinger boxes of materials her "children"), Fannie cultivated an atmosphere where work and service were performed without ostentation or excessive regulation—practices that she believed hindered research and stifled congeniality.

Fannie assisted and befriended thousands of researchers during her career. This included many generations of Hebrew Union College students who either worked for her as student assistants or utilized the AJA for their studies. It was a testimony to the atmosphere she created that many of these students became lifelong friends, who, in later years, would regularly call or visit Fannie to tell stories, update family matters, or swap memories, long after they went on to careers in the rabbinate or academia.

One of Fannie's favorite stories (and she was a great storyteller) related how Dr. Marcus once quizzed his students on what they should do when they went to the American Jewish Archives to research their term projects. "That's easy," one of the students replied, "I'll just go ask Fannie."

Fannie loved this story. It represented her greatest pride: that she made an impact not only as an archivist and a professional, but most of all, that she touched people's lives. Fannie Zelcer was energetic and forthright. She always strove for the best in herself and in those around her. She was loyal to her friends and zealous in defending causes and principles she felt were right and true. She was fiercely

dedicated to Judaism and to her Jewish identity. Most of all, Fannie embraced her family—her husband Ralph, her children Rhonda and Marilyn, her grandchildren Matthew and Katie, her sisters Yetta and Shirley, and her entire extended family—with a love that was unconditional and everlasting.

Fannie Zelcer's passing is a tremendous loss for the American Jewish Archives and for all of us whose lives she touched. We, and those who succeed us, are proud to follow in her footsteps. We will always remember Fannie with love, devotion, and respect—for the work that she did and for the life that she led.

May her memory be always for a blessing.

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