

## *The Israel State Archives*

by PAUL ALSBERG

Israel's archives differ from most other national archives: they are the archives of a people who returned to its homeland and brought with it records from the Diaspora, including those of communities which had been destroyed. Prior to the establishment of the State, various independent Jewish institutions and organizations arose in Palestine, forming a sort of internal government. These organizations evolved a system of archives which preceded the reality of the State itself. The three most important among these archives founded in the pre-State period were the "Central Zionist Archives", established in 1919 in Berlin and transferred to Jerusalem in 1934, serving as repository for the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency for Palestine and the National Council ("Va'ad Le'umi") of Palestine Jewry; the "Archives and Museum of the Jewish Labour Movement", founded in 1932 in Tel-Aviv and connected with the General Federation of Labour ("Histadrut"); and the "Jewish Historical General Archives" founded in 1939 by the Israel Historical Society in connection with the Hebrew University in Jerusalem to collect documentation on Jewish history in countries of the Diaspora.

Israel's State Archives is the youngest in the family of archives in Israel, but it is the largest and most rapidly expanding—occupying today nearly 20 km of shelving. The State Archives began operating in 1949 under the auspices of the Government Secretariat, in provisional premises in Tel Aviv one year after the establishment of the State.\* Its aim was to document the development of Israel and to safeguard the salvaged records of preceding Administrations. The Archives did not receive the archival material of the former authorities in an orderly and organized fashion, since neither the Turks nor the British wished to pass on to their successors the machinery of government or a record of their acts.

In 1955-56, the archives were transferred to more permanent quarters in Jerusalem, and the Archives Law was passed by the Knesset in 1955. This Law not only gave legal status to the State Archives but also provided for State control over all historical archives in Israel. The Archives of the Israel Defence Forces, established in 1948, were considered to be part of the State Archives and to fall under the professional supervision of the State Archivist; as regards administration, the Archives of the Israel Defence Forces remained under the

\* The first director of the Archives was Sophie Udin, former head of the Zionist Archives and Library in New York.

14 June 1848  
 A. N. 1287/13  
 District Governor's notice on closing of the gates of Jerusalem at sunset, June 1848.  
 Monsieur le Gouverneur, Jérusalem, et ailleurs, Gaza  
 relativement à la clôture de portes, à la ville au coucher de soleil, par l'usage de la porte de Jaffa qui restera ouverte jusqu'à une heure après le coucher

Handwritten note in Arabic: *مسيره اميرالبحر على اميرالبحر في اميرالبحر...*

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم  
 في هذا اليوم المبارك من شهر ربيع الثاني سنة 1268 هـ الموافق 14 يونيو 1848 م  
 اذ علمنا باننا غير مجبول عندنا في المواقف المحيية في دوننا اعيد واقتراع عندنا بلاد والمخايبه باننا بفتح  
 بعدد وبتسعيد في ايامنا ولا بصبر في يومنا في اليوم الوعيد طلوع الشمس من اعادة من اعيد حايبه في مدينة القدس  
 لكننا نرغبه الفروع الهائيه غير اننا في بعض الاوقات على الصبر في باب البواكير الفارسيه الذين يفتح  
 وهو لم يعد في الشمس وانه لم يعد في يومنا اننا في ربيع القدس فذلك حيل ايضا منفتح في القدس في يومنا  
 اننا في يومنا اننا في باب مدينة القدس في يومنا اننا في ربيع القدس فذلك حيل ايضا منفتح في القدس في يومنا  
 هذه في منفتحها في يومنا في ربيع القدس فذلك حيل ايضا منفتح في القدس في يومنا  
 والوجود في يومنا في ربيع القدس فذلك حيل ايضا منفتح في القدس في يومنا  
 اليه في ربيع القدس فذلك حيل ايضا منفتح في القدس في يومنا

District-Governor's notice on closing of the gates of Jerusalem at sunset, June 1848. (Israel State Archives)

Ministry of Defence, whereas the State Archives operate within the framework of the Prime Minister's Office.

The Archives Law required the Government to appoint a Higher Archives Council, the Chairman of which is the State Archivist. The Council now comprises forty-three members, including representatives of archival institutions, government departments and other public bodies, as well as experts in different academic fields, such as history, political science, economics, and archival management, to assist the State Archivist in formulating policy and to approve the disposal of records no longer needed by the government. In 1956, the Prime Minister appointed Dr. Alex Bein, Director of the Central Zionist Archives, as first State Archivist; Dr. Bein held both offices until March 1971, when he retired after developing an advanced system of governmental and public archival institutions.

At the end of the State's first decade, the Archives were reorganized to provide for the proper preservation of all State records; to safeguard all public records of permanent legal, administrative or historical value; and to formulate a disposal programme for all other State records. To control the ever-

growing holdings of the Archives (including more than a hundred thousand printed items), it was necessary to postpone all plans for systematic collection of photographs, films and sound recordings. These projects have been left to the Government Press Office and the Broadcasting Authority under the supervision of the State Archivist, and to other historical archives or academic institutions which operate in consultation with him. The State Archives are now organized under six main departments: Archives and Documentation, Registration and Indexing, Services to the Public and Auxiliary Services, Publication of State Papers, Records Management, Supervision of Public and Private Archives.

The *Department of Archives and Documentation* is responsible for the storage of files and documents, the keeping of transfer-lists, inventories and other finding aids, the loan of material to depositing agencies such as Government Departments and law courts, and the provision of records to researchers for examination in the search room. The records are grouped under the following headings: Ottoman; Mandatory; State of Israel; material abandoned by Arab authorities; and non-official and private papers. There are large quantities of records of the law courts, public notaries, and land registries which form special groups, some of them dating back to Ottoman times. The department also administers the microfilm collection of files pertaining to Palestine copied from the holdings of the Public Record Office, London. A special section is responsible for the collection of official publications and their registration. According to a Government Resolution of 1967, all governmental agencies have to deposit two copies of every printed or mimeographed document within two weeks of publication. Many items are not catalogued individually, but are arranged according to agency and filed chronologically. There is also a special collection of the official publications of the British Mandatory Administration.

In accordance with the 1958 UNESCO Convention on the exchange of official publications, the Israel Government authorized the State Archives to act as the central exchange authority. National libraries or exchange centers in the United States of America, Great Britain, France, West Germany, Canada, Australia and Belgium regularly exchange official publications with Israel. The publications received by the State Archives are distributed to governmental research libraries in Israel. Every year, about four thousand publications are sent abroad and some ten thousand received.

The *Department for Registration and Indexing* is responsible for the processing of unarranged records, the preparation of finding aids, the programme for compiling computerized lists and indexes, and the publication of guides. This Department has published ten guides to some of the most commonly requested record groups. For internal reference purposes the Department is also compiling a computerized general index with two sections: one for records catalogued in Hebrew comprising more than 50,000 entries, and the other for catalogues in Latin characters.

Most of the activities of the *Department of Services to the Public and Auxiliary Services* are interconnected with those of the two departments mentioned above. The department is responsible for information and guidance to researchers, for photographic reproductions, and for the certification of copies

for legal purposes. Access to all records for research purposes is granted in accordance with the regulations promulgated by the Prime Minister in 1966, after consultation with the Higher Archives Council. Records of Government departments on administrative or professional matters are accessible after twenty years as are records of local authorities. Records of foreign relations are available after thirty years, and records of the Defence establishment after fifty years.

The Archives' library constitutes a section within this department and is responsible for the search room. In 1953, the Knesset passed an amendment to the Press Ordinance, 1935, requiring publishers to supply the State Archives with a deposit copy of every newspaper and new book published in Israel. Most of the deposit copies of books printed in Israel are transferred to a separate branch of the State Archives at the Municipal Library at Beersheba. The rest—encyclopedias, reference works, biographies, and books on history or public administration—are retained, forming a reference library for the staff of the State Archives and for researchers.

The *Department for Publication of Documents*, established in 1974, is responsible for the publication of Israel State Papers. The department is preparing an annotated series of documents on the foreign policy of Israel beginning with the United Nations' vote of the 29 November 1947 on the establishment of the State. One or two volumes will be published annually, starting in 1978, when the 1948 files are scheduled to be opened for research purposes.

The *Records Management Department* has four main functions: supervision of the management of active and non-active records in government offices; disposal of records no longer needed by the creating agency and having no further administrative, legal or research value; acquisition of records of archival interest and supervision of the preparation of transfer lists; and the training of staff engaged in records administration. This department periodically surveys the records of different Ministries. The official responsible for the survey is assisted by a records administration officer appointed by the Ministry and approved by the State Archivist, or by an official of the State Archives seconded to the Ministry.

The disposal of records, approved by the State Archivist and the Higher Archives Council, is prescribed by regulations promulgated by the Prime Minister in accordance with the Archives Law. Disposal is carried out in three ways: by schedules designed for individual departments describing the records and fixing the minimum retention period; by general schedules, applicable to all Government departments, of material pertaining to finance, staff, stores and equipment; by ad hoc disposal approved by the State Archivist on the basis of a special list, after consultation with a committee composed of representatives of the Ministries of Finance, Interior, and Justice, the Office of the State Comptroller, and the Ministry or agency directly concerned. Members of the Higher Archives Council have the right to demand the prior publication of a notice in the Official Gazette or in a daily paper describing the records to be destroyed. They may also raise objections to any proposed disposal plan. The State Archivist publishes—after consultation with the Higher Archives Council—“Guidelines for the Preservation of Records”, enumerating material which should not be destroyed and also suggesting retention periods for

records of limited value. The Records Management and Supervision Department has also issued handbooks and instructions on methods of records disposal, records retirement, cut-off procedures and maintenance.

The *Department of Supervision of Public and Private Archives* is responsible for: the supervision of local archives, which by law form part of the State Archives; supervision of archives defined as Public Archives in regulations issued by the Prime Minister under the Archives Law; the keeping of the register of private archival material as prescribed in the Archives Law; issuing permits to export archival documents from Israel after copies of the material have been deposited in the State Archives or in one of the Public Archives or after confirming that the material has no research value.

Among the Public Archives operating under the supervision of the State Archivist, the most important is the "Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People", located in the Hebrew University, containing the remnants of the archives of Jewish communities in the Diaspora, especially in Europe and North Africa, from the fifteenth century to the present. The documentation relates primarily to the internal life of the Jewish communities and to their economic and organizational relationship with the governmental institutions in their surroundings.

Material preserved in other archives is more recent, and deals mainly with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The "Central Zionist Archives", which is connected to the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency, contains files on Zionist organizations and institutions from the beginnings of the movement to the present, including material on the settlement of Israel before the declaration of the State. Special emphasis in the Zionist Archives is placed upon the inclusion of private papers of the movement's leaders and its outstanding personalities. To date about three hundred personal archives are included. The Zionist Archives also houses a large collection of material on the Diaspora, both in the files of the Zionist organizations and in the private papers.

The "Archives and Museum of the Jewish Labour Movement" is connected with the Federation of Labour and preserves the archival material of the institutions of the Jewish Labour Movement, and the Labour Federation in Israel and the Diaspora. The special significance of the material is in its value for the study of economic problems and the ideological trends in the labour movement.

A special place in the family of archives in Israel is reserved for the archives connected with political parties and movements such as the "Archives of the Kibbutz Arzi Hashomer Hazair Movement", and for those archives established to perpetuate the memory of a particular leader. Such archives include the Weizmann Archives, named after the first President of the State of Israel; the Jabotinsky Institute, devoted to the memory of the father of the Herut movement; and the Aharon Aharonson Archives in Zikhron Ya'akov. Naturally, all these contain more than a wealth of material by and on the man after whom the archives is named. In the Weizmann and Aharonson archives, for example, sections are devoted to their scientific activities, the former as a chemist, and the latter as an agronomist.

Several institutions developed a goal to preserve material on the Holocaust and on the uprisings and the rescue attempts during the Nazi regime. The foremost among these is the archives of Yad Va-Shem (Remembrance Authority), as well as the archives of kibbutz Lohamey Ha'getaot (the Ghetto Fighters) and "Moreshet" (Legacy).

In addition to the documents and files preserved in all the archives there are collections of published material including official publications, posters, proclamations, journals, and newspapers-photographs, tapes and films. The written documentation in all the archives is supplemented by oral testimony. The "Institute for Contemporary Judaism" of the Hebrew University has taken upon itself, on behalf of a number of archives, the task of carrying out the technical recordings and the preparation of interviews to serve as a basis for the new field of "oral history".

There is a close relationship and coordination between the various archives in Israel, and the archival material found in one archive often complements that in another. But it is naturally impossible to avoid a certain amount of overlapping in the activities and collections of the archives. The institutions cooperate in photocopying material from archives abroad to complement their own collections; for example, a large-scale project is being carried out to microfilm the files of the Public Record Office (London) and to photocopy documents on Jewish history in various countries, emphasizing the period of the Nazi regime, World War II and the destruction of European Jewry. Such photocopying activities are usually based on preliminary research by the archives. In the interest of coordination among the institutes, a Coordinating Committee was established and functions under the Archives Law and related regulations. The archives have also jointly published a "guide to the historical archives in Israel" to facilitate their use.

The State Archives itself is today scattered among three buildings in Jerusalem: the office of the State Archivist, the secretariat, the search room and an exhibition room containing the Declaration of Independence, are all in the main building of the Prime Minister's Office, whereas the principal repositories and the conservation workshop are located in industrial buildings on the outskirts of the city. In order to solve space problems, and to minimize duplication of activities in collecting complementary archival material and in maintaining technical services, the three main archival institutions in Jerusalem have called upon the authorities to erect a common archives building. The plans have been approved, but political events and economic problems have delayed the project. The Central Archives Building, to be erected opposite the Knesset, will house the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (now connected with the Hebrew University), the Central Zionist Archives of the Jewish Agency, and the Israel State Archives. The technical services and some collections of books, pamphlets, films, photographs and recordings of the three institutions will be merged and enlarged. This joint building may be considered the nucleus of the Israel National Archives.

## **Résumé**

Une institution relativement nouvelle dans un état qui n'existe que depuis trente ans, les Archives nationales d'Israël tombent sous la responsabilité du bureau du Premier ministre. Trois autres institutions d'état possèdent beaucoup de documents du domaine soit public ou privé. L'auteur nous décrit comment ils collaborent en vue d'établir des principes d'archives pour Israël.