

# Treasure Trove

## HOW JEWISH-AMERICAN ARCHIVES DEFINE HEBREW UNION COLLEGE AND CINCINNATI

By Patricia Gallagher Newberry

It's the week before classes start at Hebrew Union College in Clifton and Gary Zola is back where he started: courting new students.

The former dean of admissions is walking 13 students through the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, a world-renowned collection of Jewish-American documents and artifacts.

As he walks through the glass-and-marble entryway to a skylit reading room and then a state-of-the-art amphitheater-style classroom, Zola tells the students that the archives (together with the neighboring Klau Library) "make this institution what it is in the world of scholarship ... It gives the Hebrew Union College bona fides."

Beginning in 1947, founding archivist Jacob Marcus traveled the country to build the American Jewish Archives, literally digging materials out of synagogue basements and filing cabinets.

"He believed American Jewish history must be written from the bottom up, not the top down," says Zola, who took over the archives after Marcus' death, at age 100, in 1995.

### FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Today, a year since the college was engulfed in a financial crisis that threatened to end its century-plus run in Cincinnati, much the same could be said about the modern-day Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion: It is being revitalized and reinvigorated from the bottom up.

That was made clear in late October, when some 550 HUC-JIR friends and supporters packed a ballroom in the downtown Hyatt Regency for an annual fundraiser. As they marked HUC's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary — and added more than \$900,000 to the college coffers — they got a Cincinnati-centric update on the status of the college.

Among the highlights: A nine-minute video celebrating the storied history of the college, and a near-



Gary Zola leads students through Hebrew Union College's archives.

term future that will add to that history. The images all came from the American Jewish Archives.

Two years ago, such a celebration seemed unlikely. Buffeted by the near-collapse of the U.S. financial system, HUC, like other universities, saw charitable giving and the value of investments plummet.

By January 2009, news began to trickle out that the Hebrew Union Board of Governors was considering closing one or two of its four campuses to make up a \$3 million deficit. By April, rumors were rampant that the Clifton campus would not survive. In May, the board put the rumors to rest, announcing its intent to retain its presence in Cincinnati, along with New York, Los Angeles and Jerusalem. Just more than a year ago, on Nov. 1, it cemented that announcement and unveiled a restructuring plan called The New Way Forward just hours later at the 2009 fundraiser.

A year later, it is clear that archives played a role in saving its Cincinnati home. That, of course, is Zola's belief.

### STRONG SUPPORT

When rumors of a Cincinnati closure began, he says, reaction was swift and strong. Twelve local supporters formed an ad-hoc committee to plot strategies.

A group calling itself Save Hebrew Union College created a website ([www.save.huc.wordpress.com](http://www.save.huc.wordpress.com)) to track developments and urge involvement. Zola reached out to Jewish scholars across the country. They responded by crafting a letter of support with some 150 signatures. At the board's behest, the college dug into its own archives and learned that the 1950 merger agreement between HUC and JIR stipulated that both Cincinnati and New York should retain campuses permanently.

Also lending support was Dick Weiland, the Cincinnati lobbyist and supporter of all-things-HUC, who recruited Ohio Attorney General Richard Cordray. Cordray responded with at least three letters urging HUC-JIR to "reconsider the closure of this (Cincinnati) campus." He specifically noted the archives and their role in drawing scholars and helping make the campus a "magnet for Jewish culture throughout the Midwest."

Zola, who calls the crisis of 2009 "nadir of my professional career," puts no punches when he talks about what was at stake.

"I think it is quite apparent that the American Jewish Archives and the library of the college are great and precious gifts on the school diadem," he says.

## PROTECTING THE TREASURE

While Zola could have lived with moving the collections, albeit with a broken heart, any attempt to sell them or otherwise dismantle them would have been “disreputable, despicable,” he says. “What makes the college great is its academic treasures. That’s what makes it a research institution, not just some half-baked seminary.”

Indeed, Jacob Marcus designed the AJA specifically to gather all essential documents in one place, notes the dean of the Cincinnati campus, Kenneth Ehrlich. The archives are an essential stop, he says, for anyone seeking comprehensive knowledge of the economic and political history of Cincinnati and of the national civil rights movement, he adds. Students, numbering just shy of 80 here with another 300 at the other three campuses, benefit from the collection as much as the scholars who visit.

Says Ehrlich: “The AJA stands as the premier collection ... a very, very important treasure trove of information about the American Jewish experience.”

Treasure trove is, perhaps, the most common characterization of the archives, created in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust to preserve Jewish life and learning to share with future generations.

## 8,000 FEET OF ARCHIVES

Under Zola’s direction, the home of the archives has tripled in size. Dedicated in 2005, the Malloy Education Building greets visitors with eight video screens and other high-tech exhibits in the lobby. Inside the modern, sophisticated space is the real treasure trove: nearly 8,000 linear feet of archival material, some 25 to 30 million individual pieces of paper.

Now digitized, the breadth and width of the AJA is apparent online ([www.americanjewisharchives.org](http://www.americanjewisharchives.org)). The site offers the full collection of the twice-annual *American Jewish Archives Journal*; the writings of Rabbi Wise, considered the father of Reform Judaism; an exhibit called “Abraham Lincoln and the Jews” and a full-text version of a pivotal work called “First American Jewish Families.” Follow one link, and you’ll learn about Jewish abstract painter Adolph Gottlieb (1903-1974); follow another to learn about Jewish actor/comedian Groucho Marx (1890-1977); yet another takes you to Irving Berlin (1888-1989), the songwriter. The site also provides background on Cincinnati Jews of note, including photographer Ben Rosen (1913- ),

who chronicled Jewish life for the American Israelite newspaper, and Joseph Jonas (1792-1869), a jeweler and watch repairman who was among the city’s earliest Jewish settlers.

Back in the stacks are some 3,000 reels of microfilm, 3,000 audio and video recordings and 13,000 photos capturing Jewish-American life. In two of the boxes: a history of Cincinnati Holocaust survivors, chronicling efforts between 1963-89 to build Holocaust memorials, including the major museum in Washington, D.C.

Such rare specimens — along with the largest U.S. collection of books on the Jewish-American experience at the library — added gravitas to arguments for retaining the Cincinnati campus. Without them, Zola says, “I don’t think Cincinnati would have stood even a chance of survival.”

## PARTS OF THE WHOLE

As the 2010-11 academic year got under way, Zola said staff and faculty were returning to a collaborative spirit.

“I think everybody wants all the campuses to flourish,” Zola says.

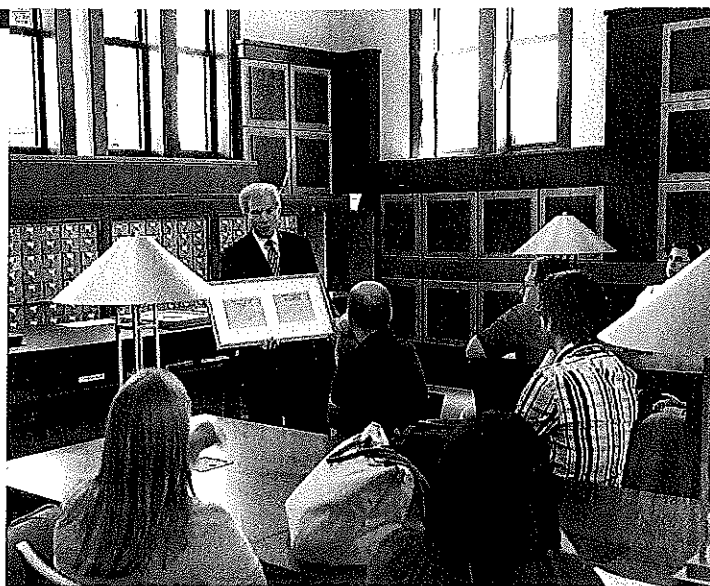
It was that message that all the campuses were essential that kept HUC-JIR intact, says President David Ellenson. That was the most frequent theme of some 10,000 letters, e-mails and other communications sent to his New York office during the turmoil.

“I think part of what the crisis did was make persons throughout the United States realize that HUC, in each of our locations, was the hub of Reform Judaism for that region,” Ellenson says.

The success of the first year of the New Way Forward plan attests to that sentiment.

The college is ahead of schedule on plans to trim \$7 million from a \$40 million budget by 2014. The university has secured at least \$33 million in new funds from foundations and others. It raised another \$24 million by selling land on its LA campus. And it raised annual tuition by \$3,000 to \$19,000.

The Cincinnati campus, meanwhile, just picked up \$500,000 in new funds for scholarships, travel funds and other awards for students. It stands to gain more cash when



Gary Zola has overseen the HUC archives since 1995.

it completes the sale of about seven wooded acres behind its Clifton Avenue buildings. Recruiting got new muscle this fall, too, with renewed attention (and new dorm space) for visits by prospective students.

At the same time, the university is pouring more money into its already high-tech classroom in Cincinnati to allow for more “distance learning” between campuses. It aims to create new revenue through a partnership with Xavier University and a new ethics center created with the University of Cincinnati. This fall, it announced a major outreach program, launching several lecture series, a “Concerts on Clifton” series and tours of its buildings and collections.

Says Ellenson: “The story at this point is really very good.” Moving forward, under The New Way Forward, “has quelled a great deal of the anxiety,” he says.

## ‘WALKED BEFORE YOU’

Back in the archives on a white-hot August day, Zola is cool and composed as he escorts the new students.

He ends the tour in a conference room, where his staff has assembled files of archival material from each student’s home synagogue. He invites them to use the Jacob Rader Marcus Center during their years at HUC. And he urges them to add to their file, reminding them of Marcus’ philosophy that the history of American Jewry is built from the bottom up, saying, “You’re really looking at the lives of people who have walked this way before you.” ■

“Planting Our Future,” a video about HUC-JIR, is available at [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

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