

Preservation of the Iraqi Jewish Archive

ABSTRACT

Rare, historic, and modern books, documents, and parchment scrolls pertaining to the Iraqi Jewish community were found in the flooded basement of the Mikhabahrat headquarters in Baghdad in early May 2003. Upon removal from the basement, the wet materials were packed into sacks and transported to a location where they were partly dried and sorted by category. The materials were subsequently packed into twenty-seven metal trunks and in June were frozen to stabilize the collection. At the request of the White House and with support from the Department of Defense, Doris Hamburg and Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, representing the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), traveled to Baghdad in late June to assess the condition of the materials and provide preservation options.

The Iraqi Jewish Archive suffered greatly by being under water for several weeks. Well-meaning efforts to salvage, sort, and pack the collection resulted in extensive mold damage and physical distortion of text blocks. A preservation plan was outlined in a NARA report to the White House, the Coalition Provisional Authority, and the Department of Defense. The collection has been transported to the United States where NARA has taken physical custody of it to oversee the preservation project.

In this session, Hamburg and Ritzenthaler discussed the circumstances surrounding their trip to Baghdad, decisions regarding moving the collection to the U.S., the overall preservation plan for the Iraqi Jewish Archive, and the progress made to date. In addition, they discussed cultural and political issues that affected the decision-making, and the intriguing aspects of developing a preservation plan for cultural property in the midst of war.

This session addressed preservation matters as well as issues relating to threats to cultural property during times of war and conflict, and mechanisms employed to protect national cultural property from seizure by other political groups or entities. In addition, the speakers provided background on the U.S. Government taking physical custody of a significant group of Iraqi Jewish archival materials for the purpose of preservation, and on preservation measures that were adapted to salvage severely damaged paper and parchment records.

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