

The Contemporary Jewry Database: Coordination and Flexibility in Bibliographical Registration and Retrieval

by Mira Levine, MLS¹

Director of The Bibliographical Center

Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University Jerusalem

The Bibliographical Center in Contemporary Jewry was designed some five years ago to compile a computerized database of bibliographical information relating to various aspects of 20th century world Jewry. A digital minicomputer (VAX-750) was purchased and the ALEPH Information Retrieval program developed at the Hebrew University was adapted for this purpose. In the fall of 1985 we began registering indexed and annotated descriptions of books, articles, films, taped interviews and other archival material at or available to the Institute of Contemporary Jewry. The records are accessible both for publication as separate catalogues by the cooperating bodies and for on-line global searching via the ALEPH network of the Hebrew University and other Israeli academic institutions.

To date, over 15,000 bibliographical items have been indexed, abstracted, and registered by seven cooperating but separate computer projects:

Bibliography in Anti-semitism Through the Ages of the Sasson International Center for Research in Anti-semitism

Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive - holdings and catalogues

Jewish Filmography Project listing - of films on Jewish subjects available throughout Israel

Oral History Division of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry - holdings and catalogues

Publications of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry, and of its teachers and researchers

Bibliography of Contemporary Jewry 1984-1987, listing relevant books and articles published between 1984 and 1987 arriving at the Jewish National and University Library. (Although discontinued for lack of funds, it will be resumed when funding is available.)

Studies in Contemporary Jewry in English and Hebrew - articles, book reviews and books reviewed in the two annual journals of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry.

Slated for future inclusion are the library and bibliographical projects of Jewish Demography, syllabi of courses offered through the years at the Institute of

Contemporary Jewry, American and the Holy Land bibliographical and archival project, and other funded projects approved by the Institute. Once registered, all records are retrievable via a single master index - by author, title, subject or words appearing in the title, subject headings of abstract. For example, by entering the search term "intermarriage" one summons a list of not only books and articles in which intermarriage is treated, but films and taped interviews as well. Further sophistication in word searching is to be included this summer in the newest ALEPH version, thus facilitating access even more.

Having noted briefly the construction and composition of the Contemporary Jewry Database, let us turn now to the various products and activities it generates at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry Bibliographical Center.

Printed catalogues and bibliographies:

Several participating collections retrieve and publish their respective entries as catalogues, bibliographies or filmographies. The Bibliographical Center staff designs the ALEPH application, advises, trains and supervises staff involved in all aspects of registration and retrieval right up to the preparation of photo-ready copy for the publisher. Garland Publishers in New York has undertaken the publication of sections of the database as part of its series Garland Reference Library of Social Science. To date, one volume has appeared:

- *Anti-semitism: An Annotated Bibliography, Volume 1*, edited by Susan Sarah Cohen for the Vidal Sasson International Center for the Study of Anti-semitism, 1987.

- the second volume of the Anti-semitism bibliography

and three others are in the final stages of preparation

- *Films of the Holocaust: An Annotated Filmography of Collections in Israel*, edited by Sheba Skirball for the Spielberg Jewish Film Archive (in preparation)

- *Oral History of Contemporary Jewry: An Annotated Catalogue*, compiled by Institute of Contemporary Jewry.

On-line database

Of course, the primary product of the bibliographical center is an efficient, easily used on-line database of bibliographical information on the various aspects of twentieth century Jewry. Subjects include the Holocaust, Zionism and the State of Israel, Jewish demography and other social science research, Anti-semitism, Israel-Diaspora relations, Jewish communities the world over and the Arab-Israeli conflict to name the most salient.

Thesaurus generation

A third product, an on-line publishable thesaurus for Contemporary Jewry, will be discussed in detail later on.

Network searching

Besides catalogue production, database maintenance and thesaurus development, the Bibliographical Center provides researchers at the Institute with access to information relevant to their work via retrieval from our own database, libraries and databases on the network of Israeli universities (ALEPH), and other Israeli and foreign databases accessible via our facilities. Individual search and subject updating requests are filled as much as time and budget allow.

In coming months we hope to be extending these search services to include access to Israeli databases of relevant materials outside the ALEPH system as well pertinent foreign databases and vendors such as DIALOG and BRS. Institute of Contemporary Jewry researchers are also assisted in computerizing their own research using the ALEPH system.

Experience in cooperative computerization

One of the most interesting by-products of developing the database has been the experience and knowledge that has accumulated in the process of designing and implementing our cooperative computerization. We are frequently turned to by libraries, archives and information centers interested in establishing similar or related projects, or in implementing the ALEPH system for non-library and/or multi-media applications. We enjoy these opportunities to share both our knowledge and data. At the same time we benefit by learning about and often gaining access to related data registered at these institutions. Thus, the spirit of cooperation has been extended beyond the parameters of our own institution's projects.

ALEPH adaptation

We have found the ALEPH information retrieval program particularly suitable for our independent/interdependent applications. First, its multi-lingual, multi-character-type capacity is essential for registration of materials describing world Jewry in Hebrew and Yiddish as well as Latin character languages; Arabic is also available, though not used by us; Cyrillic and Far Eastern character use is still to be developed. ALEPH's structure of several local libraries within a single global library allows, on the one hand, independence in design, cataloging and maintenance, searching and retrieval, and on the other hand, overall maintenance and control if desired.

Other invaluable aspects of the program for our purposes are its user friendly presentation (as we have over a dozen professionals and countless users at varying levels of computer proficiency), and its flexible thesaurus construction and maintenance capabilities. Being part of the overall network of Israeli academic libraries and databases is of great advantage, not only by providing access to our database from any of the 25 installations all over the country, but by allowing us to search their collections as well with but a simple 5-character command. Finally, the excitement generated by participating in the development of such *au courant*, constantly growing and improving research project has stimulated creative applications, fruitful cooperation and productive commitment by our bibliographical center and participating project staffs.

Coordination and flexibility

Indeed, the execution of such a multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary and multi-media database has been a fascinating, albeit challenging, exercise of coordination and flexibility. Each stage of designing, implementing, evaluating, improving and expanding the database over the past five years has necessitated a careful balancing of desire for overall standardization while satisfying the requirements peculiar to each individual project.

Cooperation began with sharing information on and the costs of hardware acquisition and maintenance. Experimenting with ALEPH adaptations for bibliographical and archival applications also involved learning from previous and each other's insights and mistakes. Common code assignments wherever possible facilitates maintenance as well as the sharing process. Meanwhile standardizing divergence provides helpful searching and maintenance cues. For example, all codes peculiar to a given collection are preceded by the same character: P for the Film Archive, A for Anti-semitism, while both PTL and ATL are dumped into and accessible via a single title index.

Training for indexers, abstractors, catalogers, and editing is centralized as much as possible, and retrieval for publication, contacts with both our publisher and computer facilities of the university are centrally coordinated. This avoids wasteful duplication of efforts while at the same time providing supportive, stimulating collegiality. Peculiarities of different types of material, support organizations or lines of authority thus become fruitful bases for comparison and adaptation.

Two activities at the bibliographical center illustrate particularly well the balance between inter-dependence and independence of the cooperating members of the Contemporary Jewry Database: one is thesaurus control, the construction and maintenance of our controlled language for indexing; the other is catalogue preparation, the production of photo-ready copy of bibliographies/catalogues/filmographies for publication.