

THEME

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Welcome to LBI Presents—a new podcast from the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. I'm the director of Open Learning at American Jewish University, and I've spent my career writing about Jewish history. On this series, we dive into LBI's archive, with key experts as our guides, to learn about the lives of German Jews throughout history...beyond the stories you already know.

Today, LBI *Presents*...history in a box.

THEME OUT

MICHAEL SIMONSON: So we're heading into the Leo Baeck archives. Here we go.

SFX: DOOR OPEN AND CLOSE

MICHAEL SIMONSON: And you can feel how the air quality, you know, it's climate controlled, the humidity, the temperature. Of course, the stacks are all... [fades under]

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Archivist Michael Simonson is in LBI New York's onsite archive. It's a room he describes as a bit chilly but pleasant.-

MICHAEL SIMONSON: I mean, it's a little more advanced than this, but basically, the rule of thumb, if it's comfortable for a person, it's comfortable for the paper.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): There are rows upon rows of stacks in this room—about 16 of them. LBI has about 12,000 archival collections dating back centuries, from Sigmund Freud's letters to an old amulet meant to ward off Lilith, a demon blamed for stillbirths. More on that later.

THEME

MICHAEL SIMONSON: So let me get the item I wanted to show you. Let's see. One of the boxes. Here we go. Oh, some World War One pictures! Well, that's not what I was going to show you. Hold on.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): And since this podcast is all about the vastness of LBI's archive, we're taking you there, so to speak, so you can get a taste of the archive's range and meet some of the people who care for it. Like Michael, who's been handling these boxes and their fragile content for over two decades. He'll be taking us on a tour.

MICHAEL SIMONSON: You do begin to feel like you really know these people through their material and it's a funny but really meaningful experience.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): You'll also hear my conversation with Markus Krah, LBI New York's Executive Director.

MARKUS KRAH: Original documents, the sources, they have a way of speaking to people if they're willing to listen.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): So let's heed their call and listen. By starting off in the LBI Archive.

THEME OUT

SFX: ARCHIVE

MICHAEL SIMONSON: And here, we have. And we don't really show this to anyone because they're very valuable as objects. But we have Einstein's chocolate cups. There's two of them. And one has a picture of Einstein as a child, Albert, and then the other is his sister.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Okay, in case you didn't get that, these are little tiny cups from which you would drink chocolate. And they have pictures of Einstein's and his little sister's faces on them. Little Albert looks kind of pouty in his picture. He's wearing a ribbon around his neck, neatly tied in a bow. And his hair is uncharacteristically tame, slicked in a perfect side part. Otherwise the chocolate cups look like regular tea cups. They're porcelain white, with saucers and a gold leaf design. They were probably commissioned by Albert and his sister's parents in the 1880s.

MICHAEL SIMONSON: These cups, these little chocolate cups from his childhood, he brought with him to America at the time of his exile from Germany, and then he always kept them. And I guess I'm sure it was a connection to, you know, to his childhood.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Einstein kept his chocolate cups at his Princeton home. After his death, his personal assistant gave them to LBI. But, usually, it's family members who donate to LBI's archive.

MICHAEL SIMONSON: And so then they call us and we're always happy to take it. And of course, a lot of times these families, they don't know what they have, even. Or they think, oh, my family wasn't so important. They were no Einsteins. But you know, that's not the point!

SFX: ARCHIVE

MICHAEL SIMONSON: So let me get the item I wanted to show you. Hold on here. This here, this is an old letter. It's a letter from our archives from Marcus Mosse to his wife. He was a doctor, a very prominent doctor, and his wife left him. And it was in 1844 and he wanted her back. But he said, you can only come back under certain conditions. So he wrote the conditions in a contract for her. And so I'll just read a little bit of it. "Dear Wife," I'll read it in a translation in English. "You have sinned greatly, and maybe I, too, but this much is certain: Adam sinned after Eve had already sinned. So it is with us. You alone carry the guilt of all the misfortune, which, however, I helped to enlarge later by my own behavior." Who knows what that was? Like, we don't know. "If we want not only to be content for a day, but forever, you have to follow my wishes. So examine yourself and determine if you are strong enough to conquer your false ambitions and your stubbornness and submit to all my conditions." And then he lists the conditions. It specified

that she has to be home at certain times. She has to also be sure to be a better mother to the children. And she...when they plan the meals. This is the best. When they plan the meals, if they differ on what they want, his choice is the automatic winner.

MUSIC CUE

MICHAEL SIMONSON: People, I think, generally do know that marriage and the role of women at this time, was much more oppressive. But it's still kind of shocking when you read these things and you understand, at least in our archives, how marriage worked for a lot of people, especially the upper middle class and the wealthy, the arranged marriages, you know.

SFX: ARCHIVE

MICHAEL SIMONSON: Okay. Let me put this back and I'll get another item. We try not to keep too much stuff just sitting out. Obviously, that's very stressful for an archivist to have things not put away.

MUSIC CUE ENDS

MARKUS KRAH: My name is Marcus Krah. I'm the executive director of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I started in October last year. And I'm still on a learning curve because I'm an academic by training and taught as an academic for a while. So I came here prepared for the substance matter of Jewish history, but not for the administrative stuff I have to do in leading a small, but not-that-small, nonprofit.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Markus, I think there are people who like this administrative stuff, but I've never met them. Anyway, you have diaries and personal materials, letters that are hundreds of years old from long dead German Jews. Why is it important to preserve these things?

MARKUS KRAH: I think we know a good deal about German-Jewish history, including and maybe particularly about German-Jewish history in the 1930s and '40s, the Holocaust. But on the other hand, this history is really histories. It is made up of millions and millions of people's experiences. There are untold histories which tend to be less known. That is, the experiences of women, the experiences of the Orthodox community in Germany at the time and countless others. And to make this history understandable at its human level, it helps to know how they experienced it, how they dealt with it, how they responded to it. In a way, to preserve their own voices. And if you look at it from a larger perspective, German-Jewish history also shines a light on larger issues, which we deal with today. These are issues of migration, refuge, persecution, expulsion, questions of the promises of liberal democracy that were not kept, and what people had to give up in order to enter the bargain of being accepted, which they ultimately were not. So these are, I think, very powerful fundamental questions that are still with us in different forms to this very day.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: And some argue we're seeing a rise in fascism globally. So does that mean that these stories take on a special resonance right now, or is that like its own form of anachronism, to think that all of a sudden these stories are special for this moment?

MARKUS KRAH: I think we should always be learning history. But at this particular moment, I think looking at the original documents, at the sources, takes on particular

significance because you cannot question the authenticity of an experience if you find the diary of a person who described what it was like facing more and more exclusion or persecution or social pressure with new legislature being past every other week or so. Original documents, the sources, they have a way of speaking to people if they're willing to listen or to read that and to hit them, not just in the head, but also reach them in the gut and reach their heart. I think the power of the authenticity that comes out of those original documents that we preserve, whether it's intellectuals and elites or whether it is in our family collections, more the day-to-day lives of those people, it just hits you in a different way.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: We did another podcast using the LBI archives. It was called Exile. It was narrated by Mandy Patinkin. And in that podcast, each episode tells a story about someone in the archive. What is it that you hope audiences will get out of this new podcast after already having hungrily devoured our last podcast, Exile?

MARKUS KRAH: I hope they will get an impression of the vastness and the richness of LBI's archives, beyond those individual stories on Exile. We try to make German-Jewish history relevant to audiences today by pointing out how questions that we are discussing today were discussed in different ways 70 years ago, 50 years ago, 200 years ago. So we want to shine a light on our work in not just promoting and preserving Jewish history, but also showing how relevant it is to what we discuss today.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Well, final, most important question. I certainly know that the movie Oppenheimer has wrought havoc on my life. You know, I tried to get through TSA security at the airport the other day, and the guy looked at my driver's license and chuckled in disbelief and waited for the real driver's license. Like who's this clown going around with the last name Oppenheimer? Has the movie created a run of interest on your files, which surely have at least a dozen people named Oppenheimer somewhere in them?

MARKUS KRAH: We get more requests about Barbie!

MUSIC CUE

MARK OPPENHEIMER: [laughs] Another bit of Jewish cultural production, of course! Barbie having been invented by a Jewish woman. Markus, from Leo Baeck Institute, New York, thank you so much for joining me today.

MARKUS KRAH: Thank you. Thank you for your interest.

MUSIC CUE ENDS

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): And now, back to Michael Simonson, combing through the archive.

SFX: ARCHIVE

MICHAEL SIMONSON: So here, we also have in our collections, this amulet. We don't know the date, but probably, the early 19th century.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): The amulet is made of paper. So it looks rather fragile. And because of its age, the paper's turning a little brown. So Michael says they try to avoid using it or touching it.

MICHAEL SIMONSON: And this was an amulet that was probably hung in the bedroom of a woman who was pregnant and was going to give birth. And it was to protect her from Lilith, who was, in Jewish folklore, she was the cause of stillborn children or children who died in infancy. And also, she could be blamed for a mother's death during birth. It was written with a kind of ink that has a lot of metal in it. So, in some ways, it's dissolving a little. But we have it digitized, so we're very happy about that. It's the Star of David. And then around it are all these things written in Hebrew. And these things are for protection. It has Abraham and Sarah, the patriarch and matriarch of Judaism, to protect the woman. And then the words below mean "Out, Lilith!" And then this part, "machshefa", I think you'd say, maybe? That means "witch." And then this word means "life," and this word at the very bottom means "no." And so these are all kind of like, also, in a way, abracadabra chants, prayers, what have you, that you recite and you keep Lilith away. So, Lilith, for people who are not, don't know about her, Lilith was a demoness. She gets a very bad rap. But, you know, they've tried to revive her. Of course, a lot of feminists, as you probably are aware of. A lot of feminists have claimed her as a positive figure against male patriarchy. But for the Jews in Europe, in the, you know, from the Middle Ages, it was a real figure of fear. And people walked around with a lot of amulets and charms to protect themselves from Lilith. Yeah. Okay...Let's open this one. I think it's down here...Here's the box.

SFX: ARCHIVE

MICHAEL SIMONSON: Let's see here, I was going to show that many people don't really have or know about, is also a very old thing. And this is a book called *Augenspiegel*. And this is a very old book that we have in our collections. We're very lucky, by the way, to have a copy. I mean, there's few copies in the world. It's one of the earliest things in our collections. I'm going to look up the date here for us now because I actually took some little notes on it. *Augenspiegel*...Hold on here.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Michael finds the date. *Augenspiegel*'s from 1511. It's a small book with yellowed pages. An image of eyeglasses is printed on the front cover.

MICHAEL SIMONSON: So there was a man named Johannes Reuchlin, and he was a theologian and he was studying Judaism, though he was a Christian. And he was writing many articles about Judaism, about, you know, how it influenced the Christian faith, etc., etc.. So he, from a scholarly perspective, at any rate, was like a friend of the Jews and Jewish scholars. There was another man at this time in Cologne, Germany, who was born Jewish, but he converted to Christianity. And he became a Dominican monk and he became a virulent antisemite. So his name was Pfefferkorn. And Pfefferkorn was actually trying to convince the Holy Roman Emperor to have all Jewish books burnt in the empire. And so Reuchlin wrote this book, *Augenspiegel*, which means eyeglasses. And in it, he argued against the burning of the books. And he said a very famous statement. He said, "You shouldn't burn what you don't understand." And it was decided at that time that Reuchlin was correct. So Reuchlin won. And books, Jewish books, which they'd already started to gather in some cities to burn. The emperor said, no, we won't burn the books. I think the story is interesting because it also is such an early attempt to burn Jewish books and to ban Jewish books. And when the Nazis burnt the books in Berlin in 1933 and banned Jewish authors, I mean, in one way it was no different, right? It was a part of a

long history. And we see that even today, right, where people are still trying to ban books, at least in this country, but other places, too. And the fight against the seizure of books in libraries today.

THEME

MICHAEL SIMONSON: Okay. I have to put it back in its rightful place. That's very important. Oh. Eeek. Here we go. Tada! All right, onto the next thing.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): And there is another thing. And another thing. And another thing that Michael can show us. LBI's archive is a fascinating treasure trove. From gossipy 19th century letters about marital affairs, to 16th century books defending Jewish texts, we just experienced a sample of the surviving documents—and of the people they belong to. They help us understand our past. Our stories. And a bit about ourselves.

Thank you to Michael Simonson for a tour of the archive. And to Markus Krah for our conversation. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. And this is LBI Presents. 'Til next time.

PRODUCER: For more information and to visit LBI's digitized archive, go to lbi.org.

On the next episode of *LBI Presents*...Egon Lustgarten was an up and coming composer forced to leave Vienna. A promising musical career thwarted by exile. And, now, one opera singer's attempts to revive his works almost a century later.

ALEXIS RODDA: I found his music absolutely gorgeous. And the fact that after emigrating, his main goal in life was still to compose and have his music be heard, even it was on a small level. And I think that was just an incredibly beautiful kernel of love for music and love for the artistic expression that drew me to him.

PRODUCER: The art of exile. Coming up on *LBI Presents*.

LBI Presents is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions. It's hosted by Mark Oppenheimer. Our Executive Producers are Laura Regehr, Stuart Coxe, and Bernie Blum. Our Senior Producer is Debbie Pacheco. Our Associate Producer is Emily Morantz. Our associate sound editor is Cameron McIver. Sound design and audio mix by Philip Wilson.