Relics of a Long Life: the Gaster Papers at University College London (UCL)
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When he died in 1939, Rabbi Dr Moses Gaster left behind a vast collection of archival material. In this talk I will give brief descriptions of Gaster’s life and the archive and then explain how I and my predecessors went about arranging, cataloguing and partially digitising it. I will also be addressing some of the challenges faced by librarians in dealing with archival material.

Moses Gaster (1856-1939)
Moses Gaster was born in Bucharest, Romania, 1856, into a wealthy family; his father was a diplomat. He attended the universities of Bucharest and Leipzig and the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau. He was ordained as a rabbi but then worked as a lecturer in the history of Romanian literature and in comparative mythology. His activities on behalf of Romanian Jews led to his expulsion from Romania in 1885. He settled in England where he initially taught Slavonic literature at Oxford. In 1887 (age 31) he became the Haham of the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish Community in England. He also became Principal of the Judith Lady Montefiore College in 1891, but this ended in a major dispute in 1896. He resigned his post as Haham in 1918 and died in 1939. Gaster was an important figure in the Zionist movement: he was an early supporter of Herzl, helped to found the English Zionist Federation, and played a key role in the negotiations that led to Balfour Declaration. He was a prolific scholar of Romanian literature, folklore, and the Samaritans as well as Jewish subjects.

The Gaster Archive
The archive was deposited at University College London on permanent loan in 1960, and donated outright in 1974. The papers of Moses Gaster’s wife Lucy and his eldest surviving son Vivian were added around 1976. Altogether there are over 170,000 items. Their dates range from 1862-1973 (with some printed material and press cuttings as early as 1794 and as late as 1981). They are in ten languages. There is a range of types of material: the bulk is correspondence to and from Moses Gaster, but there are also diaries, notebooks, manuscripts, typescripts, offprints, press cuttings, photographs, postcards, ephemera, posters, certificates, medals and commemorative coins. The archive covers all aspects of Gaster’s life and work: his personal life, family, communal activities, Zionist activities and scholarship. It is a significant source not only for Gaster’s life and work but also for the people he corresponded with, for Anglo-Jewish life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; and also for family historians.

Initial work on the archive was carried out by the late Trude Levi, who spent 22 years on it. She arranged the correspondence and some of the other material, and began cataloguing and indexing the correspondence, but this was never completed. She also compiled a guide to the papers, which included a description of the archive (fig. 1) and various indexes (fig. 2), and put a lot of effort into identifying Gaster’s correspondents. Trude’s work was continued by my predecessor Dalia Tracz.

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Thinking like an archivist

Before I began work on the Gaster Papers I attended a course on archival arrangement and description. Before the course I had not appreciated how differently archivists and librarians approach material (at the library school I attended we were not taught together). Here is a brief summary of what I learnt about the principles of archival arrangement and description:

**Principles of archival arrangement**

- **Provenance:** records originating from the same creator belong together.
- **Original order:** the arrangement should preserve the original order of records when last in use by their creator, as far as possible. If this is not possible, then the archivist can create an “artificial order”.

• Hierarchical arrangement: records are organised in a hierarchy as follows:
  ➢ Collection
  ➢ Section
    ➢ Series (sub-series, sub-sub series etc)
  ➢ File
    ➢ Item
    ➢ Piece

Archival description
• Archives are by their nature unique hence their descriptions are unique.
• There is much less conformity in archival description than in library cataloguing, and much more use free text.
• There are international standards, such as ISAD(G), but these are less prescriptive and more general than library standards.
• In describing an archive, you proceed from the general to the specific, starting at collection level then working down the hierarchy.
• Only information relevant to the level of description is included at that level.
• Information should not be repeated at more than one level.

Organising the archive
When I took over responsibility for the Gaster Papers, the correspondence was arranged in various sequences, and partially indexed on cards (fig. 3); the contents of the bound volumes were listed; the remainder of the material was loosely arranged and unlisted beyond a brief listing in the Guide (fig. 4). This was the material I focussed on.
The tasks involved in organising the archive were:

1. Examining every file without altering its order, and recording the contents on cards (fig. 5). At the same time “first aid”, such as removing staples and putting the rehousing in archival quality folders, was carried out.
2. Arrangement. It was not possible to discern an original order, so an artificial order was created (fig. 6) down to series level. Within series the original order was preserved and noted where this was still discernible.

3. Items that really did not belong in a particular file, such as press cuttings and photographs, were relocated. Boxes that were a complete mixture were sorted into the appropriate series. A record was kept of where all relocated material originated.

Describing the archive

A handlist (fig. 7) was compiled by transferring information from the cards mentioned under 1 above.
The archive was also catalogued to series level using the Calm archival management system (fig. 8), and made publicly available at http://archives.ucl.ac.uk.

Figure 8 Example of a series record in Calm

Figure 9 The record hierarchy in the public archival database
Digitisation
The archive includes nearly 2000 items of ephemera – invitations, greetings cards, visiting cards, menus, programmes, etc. We received a grant to digitise some 400 of these. A major challenge of this project was the selection of items to be digitised, which took much longer than planned. The following criteria were used in selection:

- a balance of well-known and ordinary people
- links with Gaster’s correspondence and/or UCL
- a broad date range
- a range of types of events
- visually interesting
- items that would illustrate daily life

The tasks involved in the digitisation project were:
1. Cleaning – this was carried out by volunteers supervised by a conservator
2. Photographing – done by UCL’s Media Services team
3. The setting up of a microsite on the UCL website
4. Ingestion of the images and metadata into the DigiTool platform (fig. 10)

![Figure 10 Example of metadata in DigiTool](image)
5. Cataloguing in Calm at item level (fig. 11), with links to the digital images (in retrospect it would have been better to have done this first, which would have improved the quality of the metadata on DigiTool).

6. Rehousing each item in archival pockets (fig. 12)
Publicising the archive
Having completed the work above we wanted to publicise the archive more widely, and to that end I have given a number of talks about it. Several members of the Gaster family attended one of these, and this led to an event being organised specifically for members of the extended family. Very little has been published on Moses Gaster in English, but now some academic research is being done, and I have spoken at workshops at UCL and the University of Manchester.

Future plans
Plans for the future are at a very early stage, and are subject to funding. Ideas for the future include: further digitisation and more detailed cataloguing, for example the rest of the ephemera collection; the use of crowdsourcing to identify, for example, the subjects of photographs, and names that appear in the ephemera collection; and setting up an oral history archive. Developments will be advertised via Twitter (@UCLHJSLibrary) and UCL’s Hebrew & Jewish Studies library blog.