

Nineteenth-century Jewish family photograph albums: a source for family historians

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[The thick photograph album's] favoured location was ... on pier or pedestal tables in the drawing-room. Leatherbound, embossed with metal mounts, it sported upon its gold-rimmed, fingerthick pages absurdly draped or laced figures — Uncle Alex and Aunt Riekchen, Trudchen when she was little¹

The Benjamin family's photograph album, a conversation piece on display in their elegant drawing room in nineteenth-century Berlin, contained a collection of family and other portraits. A philosopher, cultural critic and collector of books, Walter Benjamin found little value in this relic, which he stored at the fringe of his library. He remarked from experience that a collection loses its meaning when it loses its creator.² With the passage of time, the names and stories about the album's sitters were forgotten and conversations about the photographs died. Similar albums, old family heirlooms, are stashed away in the home of a descendant, museums, archives and libraries around the world. What can family historians learn from these books?

Few nineteenth-century Jewish family albums are currently accessible to genealogists. Such books are now hard to find, in contrast to the large number of the same genre and era which belonged to non-Jews. This essay is based on one hundred such nineteenth-century Jewish family portrait albums, including some twenty-two in eight different locations in Britain, and a further nine albums of British Jews in a private collection in Israel. The majority of the books in this study belonged to Jews living in the British³ and Austrian Empires.⁴ Others belonged to Belgian,⁵ Danish,⁶ Dutch,⁷ French,⁸ Italian,⁹ German and Prussian Jews,¹⁰ a family in Jerusalem,¹¹ another in Zurich,¹² as well as Jews born in the Russian Empire.¹³ As Susan Sontag famously noted, "A family's photograph album is generally 'about' the extended family – and, often, is all that remains of it."¹⁴ The Nazis confiscated, threw out, burned, or looted the family albums of displaced or murdered Jewish families and are largely responsible for the dearth of Jewish examples from Europe and eastern Europe.¹⁵ Few surviving albums have been digitized for online study.

These albums differ from the twentieth-century snapshot albums in several ways. Frenchman A. A. E. Disdéri patented, in 1858, the first commercial photograph albums, resembling Christian liturgical books (Figure 1), to house the family collection of photographic portraits and provide a visual record of family history.¹⁶ He believed that these books would replace the prevalent custom of recording births and deaths on the fly-leaf of the family Bible or prayer book, also a Jewish custom.¹⁷ Disdéri created a genre of album that displayed small studio photographs known as *cartes de visite*, which he also invented, in pre-cut apertures on thick cardboard, gilt-edged pages.¹⁸ Excited by his new, cheap method of obtaining one's portrait, millions of men and women flocked to photographers' studios. For a few shillings, they received eight portraits of themselves and could order copies to gift to whomsoever they chose. Collectors of such portraits became



Figure 1. Photograph album of Hannah Merton, née Cohen. Leather-bound album with metal straps in the style of a Christian liturgical book, two *cartes de visite* per page, with the French patent printed on every page, early 1860s. Richard Levy Family Archive, Album 5.

curators, as they chose which cards to exhibit in their albums. They could also buy portraits of celebrities to add to their collection. Family portraits mingled in no chronological order among friends, acquaintances and, occasionally, celebrities. These albums therefore display a family's collective self within its Jewish and, sometimes, its national and international community.

Another difference between Victorian and twentieth-century albums lies in their social use. The early albums were drawing-room conversation pieces, as illustrated in a painting (1884) by Royal Academy artist, Solomon J. Solomon (see Figure 2). In 1867, *Punch* magazine ran a regular column, over nineteen weeks, satirizing album-centred conversations.¹⁹ One could remove a portrait, for close examination and discussion, give it away and replace it with a new one. It was therefore pointless to write the name of the sitter on the page. Captions were usually added only in the twentieth century, when the books changed hands. By this time, some portraits could often no longer be identified. The books were shelved and their conversations disappeared.



Figure 2. Solomon J. Solomon, detail from *A Conversation Piece*, 1884. Oil on canvas, 97.5 x 122.5 cm. Leighton House Museum, London.

Genealogists can only find them useful if they know where they come from and can identify their subjects. They mostly display carefully choreographed studio photographs. Jews tended to adopt the fashions of non-Jews; their apparel and their hairstyles did not usually distinguish their religion. However, their garments and accessories reflected their class. Even vignettes of a head or bust, inside a rectangular or oval frame, reveal carefully groomed moustaches, jewellery, exquisite lace collars and capes, as well as coifs and snoods adorned with ribbons or flowers, which convey elegance and self-esteem. Other accessories, such as a fan, books, top hat, or a dog (Figure 3) suggest a person's status, interests or values. By carefully extracting the cards from the cardboard pages, it is possible to view the location where the photographs were taken. Only an eastern European family album exhibits portraits of old-world Jews, from Uman and Mezritch, among relatives who migrated and prospered, in Warsaw and Odessa.²⁰

What can we learn from such albums?

The Jewish family album allows the researcher to visualize elite and bourgeois Jews in their social context and in some cases also to discover meaningful narratives about a family's cultural identity, migration, international networks and leisure activities. As these portrait books embodied the photo-sharing visual culture of the period, the researcher can often find dedications inscribed in the book (on the cover or the frontispiece) and on individual photographs and sometimes also a hand-written name and/or date on the reverse of the portrait. Information about the book's provenance, the owner's biography, family trees, sitters' lives, journals, letters and death announcements, as well as about political and historical



Figure 3. (a) Lady Louisa Cohen with dog; (3b) Oscar Seligman with dogs, 1890s. *Cartes de visite*. Richard Levy Family Archive, Albums 4 and 11.

events, familiarize the reader with the world of the book's author. Such contextual material provides the radial system necessary for understanding these tomes.

Jewish family albums primarily bring to life the connectedness of the extended family. Nineteenth-century Jews often had many siblings and children. Jewish album-owners maintained contact with these, as well as in-laws and the in-laws' relatives, aunts, uncles, and cousins, often across national borders. For example, 65 per cent of the portraits in the two albums that belonged to Londoner Charles David Seligman depict four generations (Figure 4) of his enormous family in London, Frankfurt, and San Francisco, where his father and seven uncles ran the Seligman Bros. bank. Charles had seventy-three first cousins, many of whom feature in his collection.²¹ Such family networks assisted Jews in the making of their fortunes.²² The photographs bear witness to family connectedness outside business.

The presence of celebrities in Jewish family albums may declare their patriotism, cultural identity, and/or cosmopolitanism. Deborah Chambers proposed that nineteenth-century families placed images of celebrities in their albums in order to connect themselves to those people who represented national values and those who symbolized "high culture."²³ Hannah Merton's collection of royal portraits (Queen Victoria, her family, and the princesses; see Figure 5) and Louis and Gladys Montagu's portraits of Prime Ministers Gladstone and Disraeli in their family album demonstrates their patriotism.²⁴ Prussian and Austrian Jews similarly showed theirs through their display of their royals and military leaders.²⁵ The album of Frankfurt-born Baron Hermann de Stern's family displays sixty-four photographs, of which thirty-four are celebrities that portray the family's cultural identity. He opened a branch of the family bank in London in 1844 and married a daughter of London financier Aaron Asher Goldsmid. Portraits of various Stern and Goldsmid relatives feature alongside acquaintances, including financiers, Sir Moses Montefiore, Junius Morgan and George Peabody, their daughter's piano teacher Clara Schumann and Clara's half-sister, as well as Royal Academy artist Henry O'Neil, novelist Wilkie Collins and scientist John Tyndall with whom the Baroness corresponded. Images of French statesman Léon Gambetta, French historian Antonin Roche, a Portuguese diplomat and two German actors are also presented, as well as twenty-two commercial cabinet photographs of artists' impressions of Robert Schumann, Liszt, Schubert and Bach, Schiller, Goethe, Ephraim Lessing and Alexander Von Humboldt, Rembrandt, some German poets, artists, and novelists. These portraits, scattered among family photographs, convey the family's *Bildung*, respect for human achievement, as well as the family's engagement with European culture.²⁶

The nineteenth-century album is a portable container, like a suitcase, filled with personal gifts in the form of photographic cards that bear witness to the Jews' physical mobility. Unfortunately the printed data indicating the sitters' whereabouts is usually hidden from display, often inaccessible, and in some cases, nonexistent. Jews sometimes visited a photographer when they were on vacation, in order to send a portrait to friends or family in their next letter. The album of Budapest-born Elisabeth Leitner, mother of the British politician Leo Amery, displays portraits from thirteen countries, reflecting her unsettled life with an apostate step-father in Turkey until his death, her temporary residence in Germany and England,



Figure 4. Charles David Seligman with his mother, Lina Seligman (née Messel), grandmother Emilie Gregor, and great-grandmother Philippine Lindheim. Cabinet card, Carl Backhoffen, Darmstadt, c.1882. Richard Levy Family Archive, Album 11.



Figure 5. Photograph of Queen Victoria in mourning dress with baby Prince Henry of Prussia, 1862, centre right, between Hannah Merton's nieces and an acquaintance, labelled later as "dau. of a Frenchman". *Carte de visite*, albumen print. Richard Levy Family Archive, Album 5.

years in India after her marriage, back to England, and following her divorce, also to Germany and Italy. Her portraits exhibit family, friends, poets, Turkish street sellers, European royalty, an Indian prince, Italian republicans, an opera singer, a doctor of divinity, a complete set of pictures of the Ottoman sultans, as well as architectural and Christian imagery.²⁷ In Prussian, German, Austro-Hungarian and eastern European Jewish family albums, photographs often attest to the migration of family members from country towns to big cities, across national borders and overseas.²⁸

Nineteenth-century family albums occasionally reveal leisure activities, an outing to the beach (Figure 6), a chess game, play-acting, and fancy-dress parties. Fancy-dress balls enabled Jews to play with difference and cross class and ethnic boundaries. For example, they became a Russian or Bavarian peasant, French or English king (Figure 7), or Spanish matador for an evening.²⁹ Surprisingly, two photographs taken by Sir David Salomons, when he was a teenager, in the privacy of the Salomons country estate near Tunbridge Wells, show Edward Wagg (a great-grandson of Levi Barent Cohen) in his twenties, dressed as a woman. Edward handled Rothschild business in his father's stockbroking firm and later became its



Figure 6. (a) Lady Louisa Cohen, her four children and their governess on Ramsgate's sandy beach, May 1881, tintype. Richard Levy Family Archive, Album 20; (b) Charles David Seligman (right, in cap) with members of the Heller family on the sandy North Sea beach at Sylt, North Frisia (Germany), 1890–94. Cabinet card, A. Gabel. Richard Levy Family Archive, Album 2.

director. In these photographs he wears a shawl, a flat bonnet with a drooping ribbon, an improvised skirt and holds a fan. Solomon Alexander Hart, a sixty-three-year-old professor at the Royal Academy, posed good-humoredly as Wagg's partner – an old rake, or *roué* (Figure 8). There is no indication that these happy bachelors were merry-making in celebration of Purim.³⁰ Wagg's playful costume is non-conformist for his era and revealing: the 1891 census records that he was living with a stockbroker, James Kenrick Edwards from Dundee, a relationship that endured until Wagg's death in 1933.³²

I hope that some readers who have a Victorian album in their homes will revisit it with new interest, label the photographs where possible, and record whatever they know about the sitters.³²



Figure 7. (a) Mr Beddington as Richard I; and (b) Mr Montefiore Waley as Charles I, 1879. Albumen prints. Salomons Museum, Album 512.



Figure 8. (a) and (b) Edward Wagg (dressed as a woman) and Solomon Alexander Hart (with beard), R.A., c.1869. Albumen prints, Sir David Lionel Salomons. Salomons Museum, Broomhill, Album 510.

Michele Klein is an independent scholar. Her book, *A Time to be Born: Customs and Folklore of Jewish Birth* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1998, 2000) won the National Jewish Book Award. She served as guest curator at The Jewish Museum London and other Jewish museums. She is currently researching a large family archive.

NOTES

1. Benjamin, Walter. *A Small History of Photography* (*Literarische Welt*, 1931, German), transl. by Stanley Mitchell (1972), ed. Henry Bond. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 18. <https://dokumen.tips/documents/benjamin-short-history-of-photography-1972.html>, Accessed April 2, 2020.
2. Benjamin, Walter. "Unpacking my Library" in Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968, pp. 66–67.
3. Anglo-Jewish Archive (AJA), Southampton University, Henriques MS 371, A3042/2/4/9, A3042/1/3, A3042/4/8; Salomons Museum (SM), Albums 500, 501, 504, 505, 506, 510, 512, 514; Private collections, Franklin, Solomon, Disraeli family albums; Richard Levy Family Archive (RLFA), Israel, Merton Albums 3, 4, 5, Cohen Albums 6, 7, 8, 20, Seligman Albums 1, 11. I thank Dr Chris Jones for his assistance during my study of the Salomons albums. Toitū Settlers Museum, Otago, New Zealand (TSMO), De Beer 1936/118/2, 1936/118/3; I thank Dr. Jill Haley for enabling me to study these two.
4. Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP), Jerusalem, anonymous albums AU/Ph300-363b and AU/Ph536.1-551.2; Leo Baeck Institute (LBI) Kris album 190, AR 10905; Jewish Museum Prague (JMP), Bondy album 91.835, Flusser 91.836, Kalmus-Wehli 91.723, Lustig-Zelenka 27.722, 27.723, Riedl/ov 176.919, anonymous 89.340, 91.830, 104.126; Jewish Museum Vienna (JMV), Todesco album 13369, Prizibram 4515, Smolensky 20529/1; National Library of Israel (NLI), anonymous TMA 4206; Rothschild Archive London (RA), Perugia-Landauer album; Jewish Museum Frankfurt (JMF) Brandeis album B 1988/006.
5. Jewish Museum, Brussels, Lévi album BE/MJB/FondsLévi, Box 14a, Y 156.
6. Jewish Museum of Denmark, Bing album 0201X0001, Melchior 0148X0001 and 0148X0001, Meyer 0213X0003, 0213X0004, 0213X0005, 0213X0006; Private collection, Copenhagen, Henriques family album.
7. Jewish Cultural Quarter, Amsterdam, Levisson-de Waal album F000657, Hartog F007593, Aletrino-Pinedo F014840, Ter Veer-Schuurman F011832, anonymous F006594.
8. Museum of Jewish Art and History, Paris (MAHJ), Pereire album 2000.08.012, Halphen Schaje 2000.08.013, Schil 99.52.022, Dreyfus 99.52.023; Private collection, Wiener album.
9. Private owner, USA, Pesaro family album, thanks to Pat Bernstein; Isa Corinaldi Archive, Turin, Wollemborg album Fot. Woll. 16, Treves de Bonfili, Corinaldi, and Rignano, Fot. Cor. 34 (i) and (ii), Fot. Cor. 35 (i) and (ii); I thank Claudia de Benedetti for enabling me to view these. Center for Jewish Documentation Milan, Jozs family album.
10. Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB) Burchardt albums 2000/500/46/46.001-46.238, 2000/500/47/47.001-47.026, 2000/500/48/48.001-48.015, Hirschberg 88/1/5/001-092 and Salinger 89/2/62 / .001-.031; CAHJP, anonymous 8741 and 8742; LBI, Altshüler album 45 AR 3801, Deutsch-Freiburg album 187 AR 25181, Mosse album 102, AR 25184; JMF, Schiff; NLI, Schames TMA 4833/1; RA, Rothschild.
11. The Valero family album; Shai, Lavie. "*Ha-albom ha-mishpakhti ha-rishon be-Yerushayim*" [The First Family Album in Jerusalem] *Kathedra* 152, 2014: 110–181 (Hebrew).
12. JMB, Bernheim album.
13. JMV, Smolensky; Private owner, Israel, Ettinger family album.
14. Sontag, Susan. "Photography". *The New York Review of Books*, October 18, 1973, reprinted in Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. London: Allen Lane, 1977, 8–9.
15. CAJH, 8741 and 8742 entered the Würzburg State Archive as a result of the racial laws of 1838; the 14 JMP albums came from Nazi depots. Belgian stockbroker Henry Wiener (1887–1974) and his wife, Marguerite, née Bollack, lost their nineteenth-century family album when they fled Paris for the USA in 1941, after the Nazi invasion; personal communication, Francis Newton, March 27, 2019.
16. Linkman, Audrey. *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*. London and New York: Tauris Parke Books, pp. 69–71. Later bindings became more luxurious and were often personalized with the owner's name or initials.
17. Klein, Michele. *A Time to be Born: Customs and Folklore of Jewish Birth*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2000, pp. 243–4.
18. In 1854, Disdéri invented the technique of printing a set of eight identical portraits on a single sheet, cut them, and stuck each portrait on a small card printed with the photographer's name and address. The negative number, noted on the back, enabled the order of extra copies. Photographers increased their income by selling portraits of celebrities. McCauley, Elizabeth Anne. A. A. E. *Disdéri and the Carte de Visite Portrait Photograph* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), chapters 2 and 3.
19. "My Photograph Book". *Punch, or the London Charivari*, Tableau I-XIV, vols. 53–54, 1867–8, starting on August 31, 1867.
20. Private owner, Israel, Ettinger family album.
21. RLFA, Charles David Seligman, Album 1. The 44th portrait was of his mother's nanny. Seligman's other album (RLFA album 11) displays many of his friends and lecturers at Cambridge University, in addition to a multitude of family members. His wife's album (RLFA album 4) shows her parents and siblings, an aunt, and Queen Victoria.
22. Grange, Cyril. *Une Elite Parisienne: Les familles de la grande bourgeoisie juive (1870-1910)*. Paris: CNRS, 2015.
23. Chambers, Deborah. "Family as Place: Family photograph albums and the domestication of public and private space". In Schwartz, Joan M. and Ryan, James R. *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination*. London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003, p. 99. See also Plunkett, John. "Celebrity and Community: The Poetics of the Carte-de-visite". *Journal of Victorian Culture* 8, Issue 1, (2003): pp. 55–56.
24. RLFA, Hannah Merton, Album 5. AJA, MS 383 A 4000/6/1/1.
25. JMB, Burchardt, 2000/500/46/46.001-46.238; JMP, anonymous album, 91.830; RA, Landauer-Perugia album 00093/1; TSMO, De Beer 1936/118/3.
26. SM, De Stern 505, and M. D. Brown, *Salomons, Catalogue of Mementos* (GB National Archives 2464, 1968) pp. 23, 25, 66; discovery. nationalarchives.gov.uk/download/GB2464%20COLLECTIONS, Accessed 11 April, 2019. Similarly, amidst family portraits, RLFA, Cohen 7 displays Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, Cardinal Manning, whom her husband had met at the 1882 Mansion House meeting concerned with helping persecuted Jews in Russia, and a Conservative Irish Unionist MP, a colleague of Cohen's husband, who also became a Conservative Unionist MP. These portraits embody the Cohen family's bicultural identity, their involvement in Jewish causes and English intellectual and political life.
27. The album is in the Leopold Amery collection, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge, AMEL 10/6. Nebahat Avcioglu, "Immigrant Narratives: The Ottoman Sultans' Portraits in Elisabeth Leitner's Family Photo Album, circa 1862–72," *Muqarnas* online, https://brill.com/view/journals/muqj/35/1/article-p193_9.xml, 2020.
28. For example, CAJH, 8741, RLFA, Seligman 1 and 11, migration from Germany to the USA, and the latter also to England; JMP, Lustig/Zelenka 27723 and anonymous 89.340, migration from Bohemia to the USA; JMB, Hirschberg 88/1/5/001-092 from Prussia to USA;

- TSMO, De Beer 1936/118/2 and 3, migration from Prussia to Australia and New Zealand. Private owner, Israel, Ettinger album, migration from small Galician towns to the cities; NLI, Schames TMA 4833/1 German migration to USA and Switzerland.
29. AJA, Henriques 371 A3042/2/4/9 and Montagu 383, A 4000/6/1/1; Nymans House Archive, National Trust, Hampshire, Messel album; RLFA, Cohen albums 6 and 20; SM, Salomons albums 510 and 512; Isa Corinaldi Archive, Cor. 34.
30. Victorian newspapers in England reveal that Jews wore fancy dress to society balls, whereas the first Purim fancy-dress ball was held in London in 1878, about a decade after these photographs were taken.
31. SM, Salomons 510, 512 and RLFA, Cohen 6. Wagg granted probate to his nephews and to Edwards: personal communication from Carrie de Carteret, August 13, 2019.
32. I would be interested in hearing from anyone who has such an album: michele2kl@gmail.com.