

## The Lewis S. Feuer Papers at Brandeis University

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Published online: 4 June 2013

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**Abstract** The Lewis S. Feuer papers at Brandeis University include correspondence, manuscripts, Feuer’s collection of radical literature, and other personal and professional materials. The process by which these materials came to Brandeis and were organized into an archival collection reveals connections and lacunae inherent in the material record and illuminates the principles involved in “archiving a life.”

**Keywords** Lewis S. Feuer · Archives · Manuscripts · Libraries · Special collections · Primary sources

It has been said that libraries are about answers, and archives are about questions. One question archivists face is: How do we archive a life? To know someone solely through the papers, photographs, and documents left behind, those created and those kept, is a unique experience. There will be holes and gaps. There will be topics and events and people that were of passionate importance to the person and yet are invisible in his or her collected papers. There will always be questions: what is the significance of this unattached note? Why are the letters from this person included but not that person? Where are the documents from the institution of which this person was a part for years?

But there will also, in any archived life, be evidence. I do not mean evidence in a legal sense, although often there is that as well. By evidence, I mean a trail of breadcrumbs that points to the daily expressions of a mind at work. Think of how much correspondence you create in a day: email, text messages, phone calls, even, sometimes, letters (I will note that the collection of new digital formats is a cutting-edge topic in the archives field). Permit yourself the vanity of

thinking about what story the flurry of documentation you create in your path would tell about you were you suddenly to be whisked away to another dimension. [As an aside: While you’re imagining this, as I always say to groups of students visiting our collections, be sure never to use rubber bands, metal paper clips, or Post-Its on your personal materials, since the archivist of your papers years hence when you have achieved immortal fame and fortune will be lamenting the damage to your papers and also your lack of knowledge of preservation practices.]

In a collection of personal papers housed in a repository such as this one, a researcher might find love letters, or ballistic evidence photographs, or a smoking gun of a letter fingering the murderer in a controversial trial (all actual examples from our collections). Or one might find reams of nearly identical routine business documents. But there is never a way to say what a future researcher will be interested in, and so the decisions about materials we collect and preserve, and the order in which we arrange them, are informed by a few foundational principles of the archival field as well as by a feel for the subject—subject in the sense of “topic” and also in the sense of “principal character.”

As archivists we aim to create context in the way we order a collection, in the information we include in an inventory, in the way we keep even closely related collections separate. (Why do we have five collections on Sacco and Vanzetti at Brandeis? Because they were collected by—and donated by—five different people, and the way those people ordered their papers when they were still in their hands can provide revealing context.)

The Lewis S. Feuer papers at Brandeis span 75 linear feet and consist of Feuer’s personal and professional papers, from the 1920s to the 1990s, with heaviest emphasis on the 1950s to the 1980s. The papers consist primarily of Feuer’s correspondence, the manuscripts and research notes for his books, and reprints of all his published work. This collection is unusual for including outgoing correspondence as well as incoming;

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this is rare, for obvious reasons, but we have handwritten drafts of letters that were later typed, for example.

The papers also contain Feuer's collection of radical literature from the 1920s to the 1970s. The holdings are particularly rich in material concerning Feuer's involvement in Jewish studies, the rise of neoconservatism in the 1970s and 1980s, student movements of the 1960s (especially at Berkeley), and the history and philosophy of science and scientific thought. Feuer's own philosophical and political journey, from Marxism in his youth to alienation from the left in the 1960s to neoconservatism in the 1970s and beyond, is also well documented. The collection also includes personal materials: family photographs, diaries, remembrances.

The Feuer collection came to Brandeis beginning with conversations during his lifetime; a deed of gift signed by Feuer dates to 1995, and while the collection was not physically transferred to Brandeis until a few years later, the intention was sealed.

When a collection such as this one comes to us—or, in this case, when it is collected and packed up by Brandeis archivists at Feuer's home—we refolder, rebox, relabel, and in some cases, rearrange in order to gain intellectual control over the materials. Today, the collection is organized into nine series and more than 70 boxes, a complete finding aid is available online, and some of the papers have been digitized for a scholarly database on the 1960s era.

A manuscript collection cannot capture a soul, but it can conjure one. It can be fun to consider the juxtapositions of

special collections in this repository and imagine what conversations might have taken place between shelfmates, so to speak. This is particularly fruitful with a scholar as polymathic as Lewis Feuer. I envision him discussing the siege of Leningrad with a diarist who survived it, or confronting the Spanish Inquisition cleric who crossed out passages of the 1564 *Divine Comedy*, or engaging in a good old-fashioned intellectual scrimmage with the post-Stalin-Hitler-pact communists in the extremist literature collection.

The reading room of the Archives & Special Collections department, where you can add your own brain to these imagined conversations, is downstairs in this library. That is where the Lewis S. Feuer papers at Brandeis can be seen and used by all. We welcome you to use the collection. I welcome you to look at the interesting sampling of materials here in this room. And I am glad to be able to say that Lewis S. Feuer, whose intellectual leavings are now in our care, will continue to enliven the conversation for years to come.

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