



Smithsonian

National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to Joseph Miller Collection

NMAH.AC.0514

Jolie V. Matedne

February 2003

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Joseph Miller Collection
Date:	1895-1992
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0514
Creator:	Miller, J. & D. (Bronx, New York) (Creator) Miller, Joseph (cutlery dealer) (Creator)
Source:	Galdston, Irene (Donor) National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of Cultural History (Collector)
Extent:	3 Cubic feet (8 boxes)
Language:	English .
Summary:	Letters, envelopes and other business records relating to the cutlery business of J & D Miller, Bronx, New York.
Digital Content:	Image(s): Joseph Miller Collection

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Donated by Irene Galdston in 1992.

Provenance

Transferred to the Archives Center from the Division of Cultural History, now the Division of Cultural and Community Life.

Separated Materials

The Division of Work and Industry holds a knifemakers shop sign in Yiddish. See accession 1992.0391.

This 1920s free-standing, wood-framed oilcloth window sign from the knife shop of Russian-immigrants Joseph and David Miller in the Lower East Side of New York City uses four implements and a legend in Yiddish to advertise their commercial offerings.

The sign reads:Do iz Millers a brentsh [Here are Miller's forgings]Di Miller halafim un mohel messer [The Miller ritual slaughter blades and circumcision knives]zaynen di beste un sheynste [are the best and most beautiful]in der gantser velt [in the whole world]garantirt keyn mol nit tsu rosten [Guaranteed never to rust]

The Miller shop, at 25 Canal Street, made ritual Jewish cutlery for the shochet (butcher) and for the mohel (circumcisionist), using extreme care in the hand fabrication of each instrument. The large rectangular knife (gasos halef) on the sign was used to slaughter cattle, the small rectangular knife (ofos halef) was for poultry; the curved implement is a circumcision clamp

(mohel mashinke); and the double sided knife is a circumcision knife (mohel messer). In compliance with Jewish tradition, great emphasis is placed upon cleanliness, speed, efficiency, and the minimization of pain in the use of these instruments.

Processing Information

Collection processed by Jolie V. Matedne, February 2003.

Preferred Citation

Joseph Miller Collection, 1895-1992, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Restrictions on Access

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Biographical / Historical

Joseph Miller (1885-1971) was born in Russia, a second son in a Jewish family of seven children. All nine Millers emigrated to the United States in the early twentieth century, bringing with them the family cutlery business. Joseph became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1912, and in 1917, he joined his brother David in business, forming J & D Miller. The shop specialized in fashioning circumcision knives and kosher knives, like the schochet, for rabbis and mohels. In addition, the company also made knives for surgeons, circus performers, and industrial uses, sold sharpening stones, and accepted dull or broken knives for repair. The company of J & D Miller, communicating in English and Yiddish, shipped its merchandise all over the United States and to foreign countries as remote as Afghanistan, Argentina, and Algeria.

Joseph had two children, Irving and Irene, by his first wife, Essie. In 1961, Joseph lost an adult son, possibly a child from his second marriage, to Gertie. Although Joseph retired from J & D Miller in 1955 at the age of 70, he continued fashioning knives in a basement workshop of his Laurelton home. At his death at 86, Joseph was still receiving international requests for his knives. Joseph was committed to keeping the Miller clan together in America; his poems and family correspondence reveal a man devoted to his family.

Scope and Contents

The collection is divided into three series. The first series consists of personal documents relating to Joseph Miller's life and his family history. The second series consists of business records from the cutlery shop; this series contains four subseries, including purchase orders from the United States, purchase orders from foreign countries, photographs, and miscellaneous business records. The third series contains materials relating to the collection itself and how it came to the Smithsonian Institution.

Arrangement

Collection is divided into 4 series.

Series 1: Personal, circa 1885-1971

Series 2: Business, circa 1950-1992

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Circumcision
- Cutlery trade
- Family-owned business enterprises
- Judaism -- Customs and practices

Types of Materials:

- Business records
- Certificates
- Correspondence -- 20th century
- Family papers
- Ledgers (account books)
- Photographs -- 20th century
- Trade catalogs

Names:

- Galdston, Irene
- National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of Cultural History

Container Listing

Personal, circa 1905-1965

Scope and Contents: This series includes family photographs from Russia and the United States, some circa 1960 correspondence between Joseph and his daughter and granddaughters, mementos from a 1953 family party, some of Joseph's poetry from the 1960s, photographs of Joseph's 1912 naturalization certificate and his 1971 death certificate, and a copy of the memorial address at his funeral. Not all time periods are covered in the same depth; most material in the file is from the 1950s and 1960s.

Box 8, Folder 1	Photographs of Joseph Miller, circa 1970
Box 1, Folder 1	Photograph of Joseph Miller, circa 1885-1970
Box 1, Folder 2	Photographs of Miller family, undated
Box 1, Folder 3	Photographs of Miller residence, 1912
Box 1, Folder 4	Naturalization certificate, circa 1960
Box 1, Folder 5	Family correspondence to Miller, circa 1960
Box 1, Folder 6	Family correspondence from Miller, 1953-11
Box 1, Folder 7	Partly 29, 1961-1962
Box 1, Folder 8	Poetry, 1961-1971
Box 1, Folder 9	Funeral papers
Box 8, Folder 2	Miscellaneous, 1950-1992

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Business, circa 1950-1960

Subseries 2.1: Orders – United States, undated

Scope and Contents: This subseries consists primarily of envelopes and letters written to J & D Miller from American customers, requesting merchandise. A business ledger from the 1950s is included at the beginning of this subseries; the ledger records transactions by customer name, as well as providing extensive handwritten notes on customer addresses, business contacts, a list of Joseph's grandchildren, and documentation of his savings bond purchases. Also included in this subseries are relevant post office receipts, J & D Miller receipts and purchase orders, postcards, and scrap notes; Joseph noted the status of orders directly on the corresponding request letter or envelope. Most material is in Yiddish and dates from the late 1950s through the 1960s.

Box 1, Folder 10	Ledger, undated
Box 1, Folder 11	Alabama, undated
Box 1, Folder 12	Arkansas, undated
Box 1, Folder 13	California Los Angeles, undated
Box 1, Folder 14	California miscellaneous, undated
Box 1, Folder 15	Colorado, undated
Box 1, Folder 16	Connecticut, undated
Box 1, Folder 17	Delaware, undated
Box 1, Folder 18	Florida, undated
Box 1, Folder 19	Georgia, undated
Box 2, Folder 1-3	Illinois, undated
Box 2, Folder 4	Indiana, undated
Box 2, Folder 5	Iowa, undated
Box 2, Folder 6	Kansas, undated
Box 2, Folder 7	Kentucky, undated
Box 2, Folder 8	Maryland, undated
Box 2, Folder 9	Massachusetts, undated
Box 2, Folder 10	Michigan, undated

Box 3, Folder 1	Michigan, undated
Box 3, Folder 2	Minnesota, undated
Box 3, Folder 3	Missouri, undated
Box 3, Folder 4	Nebraska, undated
Box 3, Folder 5	New Hampshire, undated
Box 3, Folder 6	New Jersey, undated
Box 3, Folder 7-9	New York, undated
Box 4, Folder 1-9	New York, undated
Box 5, Folder 1	North Carolina, undated
Box 5, Folder 2-3	Ohio, undated
Box 5, Folder 4	Pennsylvania, undated
Box 5, Folder 5	South Carolina, undated
Box 5, Folder 6	Tennessee, undated
Box 5, Folder 7	Texas, undated
Box 5, Folder 8	Vermont, undated
Box 5, Folder 9	Virginia, undated
Box 5, Folder 10	Wisconsin, undated
Box 5, Folder 11	Wyoming, undated
Box 5, Folder 12	Unaddressed papers, undated

Subseries 2.2: Orders- Foreign Countries, 1950-1960

Scope and Contents: This subseries consists primarily of envelopes and letters written to J & D Miller from international customers, requesting merchandise. Also included are relevant post office receipts, J & D Miller receipts and purchase orders, postcards, and scrap notes; Joseph noted the status of orders directly on the corresponding request letter or envelope. Most material is in Yiddish and dates from the late 1950s through the 1960s.

Box 5, Folder 13	Algeria
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Box 5, Folder 14	Afghanistan
Box 6, Folder 1	Argentina
Box 6, Folder 2	Australia
Box 6, Folder 3	Belgium
Box 6, Folder 4	Brazil
Box 6, Folder 5	Canada, Ontario
Box 6, Folder 6	Canada, Quebec
Box 6, Folder 7	Canada, British Columbia
Box 6, Folder 8	Canada, Saskatchewan
Box 6, Folder 9	Canada, miscellaneous
Box 6, Folder 10	Denmark
Box 6, Folder 11	Dominican Republic
Box 6, Folder 12	England
Box 6, Folder 13	Ethiopia
Box 6, Folder 14	France, Paris
Box 6, Folder 15	France, Marseilles
Box 6, Folder 16	France, Nice
Box 6, Folder 17	France, miscellaneous
Box 6, Folder 18	Germany
Box 6, Folder 19	Ireland
Box 7, Folder 1	Israel
Box 7, Folder 2	Italy
Box 7, Folder 3	Mexico
Box 7, Folder 4	Morocco

Box 7, Folder 5	New Zealand
Box 7, Folder 6	Nigeria
Box 7, Folder 7	Poland
Box 7, Folder 8	South Africa
Box 7, Folder 9	Switzerland
Box 7, Folder 10	Tunisia
Box 7, Folder 11	Uruguay
Box 7, Folder 12	Venezuela

Subseries 2.3: Photographs, 1990s

Scope and Contents: This subseries consists of photographs of J & D Miller catalogs, shop locations, merchandise, equipment, and a photograph of the original Russian cutlery workshop. Aside from the circa 1900 Russian photograph, most of these images seem to date from the early 1990s, after Joseph's death. Subseries D: Miscellaneous consists of original J & D Miller catalogs, blank stationary, blank shipping labels, blank purchase order forms, and a receipt book from 1950s with two intact purchase receipts.

Box 7, Folder 13	Photographs of J & D cutlery shop locations
Box 7, Folder 14	Shop photograph from Russia
Box 7, Folder 15	Photographs of cutlery
Box 7, Folder 16	Photographs of cutlery catalogs
Box 7, Folder 17	Photographs of equipment

Subseries 2.4: Miscellaneous, circa 1950s

Scope and Contents: This subseries consists of original J & D Miller catalogs, blank stationary, blank shipping labels, blank purchase order forms, and a receipt book from 1950s with two intact purchase receipts,

Series 3: Collection, circa 1980-1990, consists of a news clipping featuring an interview of Joseph's son Irving, in which he describes how he found a home for the collection, and photographs of sample items from the collection.

Box 7, Folder 18	Purchase orders
Box 7, Folder 19	Stationary
Box 7, Folder 20	Shipping labels

Box 7, Folder 21	Receipt book, 1956-1957
Box 7, Folder 22	Cutlery catalogs
Box 7, Folder 23	Photograph samples from collection
Box 7, Folder 24	News article on collection

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