

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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COVER PICTURE: *Max and Trude Heller announcing Max's candidacy for mayor of Greenville, South Carolina, 1971. Heller's life and career are documented in the article by Andrew Harrison Baker in this issue. (Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, Furman University.)*

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Book Reviews

Taking the Fight South: Chronicle of a Jew's Battle for Civil Rights in Mississippi. By Howard Ball. Notre Dame University Press, 2021. 280 pages.

As a native of Mississippi, I read with rapt interest Howard Ball's memoir about his experiences—both the achievements and the obstacles—of living in Starkville, where he taught political science at Mississippi State University (MSU) from 1976 to 1982. The clash between a New York Jewish liberal activist and white reactionaries was inevitable. Ball won a few victories but wearied of the Sisyphean struggle. It echoed a little of the experience of Rabbi Abraham Ruderman, who grew up in Malden, Massachusetts, went to college at Boston University, and was ordained at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City in 1941. He served my hometown congregation in Greenville from 1966 to 1970 but ran into stiff criticism because he claimed a “moral mandate to speak out” against racial discrimination. I was rooting for Professor Ball because I am a southern-born-and-reared rabbi who developed a visceral revulsion to the injustice and violence that racists perpetrated in the region.

Ball claimed to find his opposition to discrimination policies in *tikkun olam*, the Judaic value of ameliorating social ills. He writes that it “was in my DNA and in my soul” (xvii). At his bar mitzvah ceremony in 1950, he learned of Hillel's three questions: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?” Ball's adult answers to these questions defined him “as a human and as a Jew” (xviii). When he told his mother that he and his wife, Carol, and their three daughters were moving to Mississippi, she blurted out, “You are

meshuggeneh!" Moving to Mississippi certainly put the family in some very hot water, but it was fortunately below the boiling point.

Starkville's white Protestants treated Blacks, Catholics, and Jews as "others." The Catholic priest became a friend who invited Ball to speak to his confirmation class on the Jewish understanding of the Messiah. Ball's elucidation of the concept proved so successful that he returned annually. The Catholics who served on the faculty at Mississippi State often came from the New York metropolitan area. Ball considered them *landsmen*—more so than the local Jews. He pitched for the Catholic softball team, and his teammates emblazoned his T-shirt with a Star of David. Carol Ball and her two older daughters also wanted to educate public school children about Judaism. The trio told stories about Hanukkah, Purim, and Passover, sang songs, and shared the foods associated with these holidays. The family also demanded that Bible readings and prayers be stopped in their daughters' public schools. The two older daughters felt the stigma of activism. They wanted to join a Girl Scout troop but were given the disingenuous excuse that no vacancies existed. However, an all-Black group existed without an adult leader. Carol Ball volunteered to be the leader of the troop, which became the only integrated one for Girl Scouts in Oktibbeha County, of which Starkville was the county seat. Such activism aroused the enmity of Starkville Jewry, which preferred to remain invisible as Ball discovered. He and his family became pariahs. Not once did a Jewish family invite the Balls to dinner in their six years in Starkville.

In June 1978, at the end of Ball's second year at Mississippi State, he became the head of the political science department. He remained in this position until he left four years later. At the helm of the department, Ball accomplished his greatest success at the university. He managed to develop strong, lasting relationships with his colleagues and with the university's president. Ball and his faculty quickly developed a graduate curriculum for a master's program in public policy and administration (MPPA). He intended to recruit Black students, especially Black female students. The president of MSU, James McComas, whom Ball described as a consummate mensch, wholeheartedly backed Ball's plan to upgrade the graduate program in public administration. McComas made funds available to the political science department for research and travel support. A substantial source of funding for this program came from the

Mississippi legislature, "An Act to Establish the Mississippi Public Management Graduate Intern Program." How this legislation came about makes for one of the most interesting stories in *Taking the Fight South*.

In early 1980 McComas asked Ball and his wife to attend in his place a meeting at the White House, to which President Jimmy Carter had invited the MSU president. On the way back to Mississippi, the Balls sat, by coincidence, in the same row on the plane as Robert Crook, an influential state senator. Crook told Ball that he wanted to pass legislation to create a program for public management graduate students to serve as legislative interns. Ball told him that he would prepare a draft bill within two weeks. Ball kept his promise to deliver the draft bill, and Crook kept his promise. The bill, which whizzed through the Mississippi legislature, was enacted into law as written. Crook knew that most of the interns were Black men and women who would be working in Jackson to assist state agencies and legislative committees. Crook's home was in Ruleville in Sunflower County. He was a protégé of U. S. Senator James Eastland, an arch-segregationist. Crook's southern bona fides were impeccable. A lifelong Democrat even after most white Mississippians became Republican, he studied the history of the "War Between the States" and belonged to the Sons of Confederate Veterans. Crook's overriding interest, however, was the training of Black students in public administration through their service as legislative interns.

Living in Starkville eventually became too heavy a burden for the Ball family. The liberalism of Carol Ball, who taught math at Starkville High School, continued to generate unease at the school. Their daughters had to endure the insensitivity of teachers and the daily intrusion of Protestant religion in the public schools. Ball's sterling academic successes

at MSU spurred resentment, including the objection that too many Black students were enrolled in the MPPA graduate program. In the last two years of living in Starkville, menacing middle-of-the-night telephone calls from the KKK frightened the family. Ball imagined terrifying acts of violence inflicted on his family. At the end of his fourth academic year at MSU, he began looking for a new academic position.

In one of his last meetings with President McComas, Ball mentioned his surprise that he had received very few hateful letters from crazy racists. McComas explained: "Let me tell why you didn't receive those hate letters." McComas then showed him "the Ball file," filled over the course of four years with hate mail. How had McComas responded to this avalanche? He did nothing. When Ball asked McComas why he had never informed him, McComas replied: "It was none of your business. You were doing things I wish others on campus would do to enhance the quality of graduate education at State. The last thing you needed was my sending you copies of these evil notes." That was one reason among others why Ball regarded McComas as a mensch.

Howard Ball left MSU for the University of Utah in the summer of 1982. In 1989 he moved to the University of Vermont, where he retired as professor emeritus in 2002. A fitting conclusion to *Taking the Fight South* was Ball's return to Mississippi in January 2005 to attend the trial of Edgar Ray "Preacher" Killen. The defendant was the Klan leader who had orchestrated the murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in the summer of 1964. Ball persuaded the managing editor of the *Burlington Free Press* to designate him as a special correspondent to cover the trial. He regarded the judge and the defendant as personifying two opposites: "goodness and evilness" (182). On June 21, 2005, the forty-first anniversary of the crime, the jury returned the verdict, holding Killen guilty on three counts of manslaughter. Judge Marcus Gordon sentenced Killen to twenty years in prison for each count, to run consecutively. Both men had grown up in the same small town of Union and had been neighbors. "Preacher" Killen had conducted services at the church that Gordon's parents attended, and Killen had presided over their funerals. Ball pondered the mystery: what had made these two men so different? After the trial Gordon told Ball that his parents "taught me to recognize the difference between right and wrong" (p. 187). Ball could have imagined *tikkun olam* at work in the heart of an upright Mississippi judge.

Howard Ball does not use the current term “systemic racial injustice,” but that is what he confronted in Mississippi—entrenched white power arrayed to block the civil rights of Blacks and to intimidate whites as well as Blacks who were bold enough to challenge racial discrimination. Ball’s courage to step into the cauldron of racism in Mississippi was rooted in his conviction that *tikkun olam* is “an elemental prescription for Jewish behavior.” Eventually the threats from the KKK, the ostracism by the local Jewish community, and the snide comments from some MSU faculty wore away Ball’s resolve to continue the fight in Mississippi. However, what Ball was able to accomplish at MSU with a sizable cohort of Black students in the MPPA graduate program was a remarkable achievement. In 1982, just before Ball left MSU, his program was ranked sixth best in the Southeast—behind only Duke University, the University of Virginia, the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, and the University of Georgia. That I consider impressive laurels.

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A Better Life for Their Children: Julius Rosenwald, Booker T. Washington, and the 4,978 Schools that Changed America. Photographs and Stories by Andrew Feiler. Foreword by Congressman John Lewis. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2021. 127 pages.

The cover of *A Better Life for Their Children: Julius Rosenwald, Booker T. Washington, and the 4,978 Schools that Changed America* shows a school-room with three rows of desks and chairs—some clearly old style, one a newer model with an attached arm-desk—facing a blackboard at the front. Four glass fixtures hang from a wooden ceiling while natural light from three large double-hung windows on the right illuminates the room. A small American flag adorns the blackboard; to its right, in one corner, stands a black potbelly stove. On the other side of the blackboard, a globe sits on a mostly empty bookcase.

It is a puzzling black-and-white photograph that seems to evoke a bygone era, but one that belies in many ways the story Andrew Feiler tells through his text and images. The cover photograph is ordinary; the book

it fronts for is extraordinary. The cover photo portrays a school without pupils; the book introduces readers to schools that transformed the lives of many of their students. The cover photo suggests a typical schoolroom; the book uncovers an atypical, hidden history of benevolence, striving, commitment, and passion beneath a façade of schools that dotted the former states of the Confederacy. The cover photo is nameless; the book provides rich specific details for each and every photograph. Yet, in some ways, the cover photograph perfectly exemplifies the history that Feiler uncovers. This past has largely been unseen, although it has been previously told by historians.

Feiler brings the story of the Rosenwald schools — that brave experiment in education for segregated African Americans in the South — into contemporary visual consciousness. As his title suggests, his photographs lead readers to view a rich and complicated American heritage. By combining image and text within a standard format that presents a horizontal photograph on the top two-thirds of a page with commentary on the bottom third, Feiler engages readers first with the power of his superbly framed and printed photographs and then with his deft narrative.

Although the book is structured chronologically, it often seems to meander, taking the reader through various states as the author-photographer discovers first this school and then another. But this impression is deceptive. Feiler initially presents a succinct summary of the meeting

of Julius Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington that led to the benefactor's decision to support construction of elementary schools for African American children. He details the framework of the agreement: a three-way partnership between Rosenwald's philanthropy, African American fundraising contributions, and county public education funds. This tricky and subtly managed process put the

largest burden initially on African American parents and community members to raise the monies in part through labor and in-kind contributions to build schools.

As the reader goes through the book, Feiler introduces additional layers of complexity. The design of these schools, for example, needed to follow a certain pattern, in part to preserve their modesty and not draw a backlash from potentially jealous whites who might burn them down. The photographs introduce readers to design features like folding doors that divided the classrooms in two-, three-, or four-teacher schools.

The extraordinary partnership and commitment of Julius Rosenwald and African Americans to the importance and value of education emerges from the dialogue of photograph and text the deeper one goes into the book. Although Washington initiated the school program, Rosenwald continued it after the death of the head of the Tuskegee Institute. Rosenwald's deep dedication to education and his belief in its importance resonated with African Americans throughout the South who embraced the program. The partnership of a wealthy Jewish philanthropist with largely rural, poor African Americans and educated Black leaders who helped design the schools presents a different account of Jewish engagement with African Americans than the more familiar and popular version that focuses on the struggle for civil rights after World War II.

Midway through the book, Feiler offers a few statistics: South Carolina had 481 Rosenwald schools, at least one in each of its forty-six counties, and an average of ten schools per county. North Carolina had 787 schools in ninety-three of its one hundred counties, or more than eight schools per county (65). Viewing page after page of straight, elegantly composed photographs of modest school buildings set in rural landscapes, the reality of this small sample of images registers profoundly. Feiler's photographs pay tribute to the history embodied in the remaining buildings while also honoring some of the men and women who studied and taught in these schools, or who seek to preserve their history.

One of his most powerful photographs serves as the frontispiece for the book. It features an elderly couple dressed in coat and hat and standing in an empty building holding an enormous elaborately framed portrait of what clearly appear to be ancestors. Feiler does not explain how he came to take the photograph until page 5. Yet the extraordinary encounter effectively epitomizes the intersection of his dogged research and personal

persuasiveness that uncovered incredible stories of profound commitment along with rich visual treasures. By the time the reader meets Elroy and Sophia Williams again on page 33 (the two figures in the frontispiece photograph), the compelling character of their story has been amplified by a dozen earlier accounts of Rosenwald schools that were part of the initial phase of the program before it rapidly expanded.

That expansion produced Rosenwald schools throughout the South, as the statistics suggest. During these years of Jim Crow and segregated schooling, the Rosenwald school buildings allowed Black children to gain an education. From the beginning, Feiler notes how schools followed farming schedules that reduced the time available for learning. But he also records the push to extend the number of mandatory months of education. And in the 1930s, some of the buildings were designed as secondary schools, built of brick and holding multiple classrooms.

Most of the Rosenwald schools were destroyed in the decades after the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown* decision that defined separate schools as inherently unequal. This project to record images of the remaining schools captures the textures of this incredible experiment. The rich details in these photographs invite readers to linger, to notice those quotidian elements that were part of the lives of countless children, and to recall a milieu from a century ago. Feiler has restored that world to our collective memory.

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Port of No Return: Enemy Alien Internment in World War II New Orleans.

By Marilyn Grace Miller. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2021. 304 pages.

Astride the Mississippi River about 110 miles upstream from its mouth, New Orleans has over the decades acquired numerous sobriquets: the gateway to North America; the birthplace of jazz; the northernmost Caribbean port; the nation's bohemian heart; the town with a promising past; the historical center of the American slave trade; the land of Mardi Gras and enchanting dreams. Marilyn Grace Miller's book

has dubbed New Orleans “the port of no return,” because in the riparian preserve, captivity in a federal detention center irrevocably altered aliens’ lives during what came to be known as “the good war.”

The geography of the city that served as the dominant hub of the slave trade foreordained the character of detention centers in World War II. The antebellum vessels deposited cargoes of Africans on the plantations along the Mississippi River, where the luckless victims of “the peculiar institution” were then engaged in agriculture for their white owners’ profit. The value of a plantation depended on its frontage along the river; the greater the footage, the more easily vessels could be docked to load and unload cargo. These plantations typically supplied the model for twentieth-century detention centers that separated aliens from the civilian population. During and after both world wars, federal immigration officers jailed enemy aliens in a network of fortress-like camps and detention centers on the lower Mississippi. The proximity of New Orleans to bayous and the adjacent Gulf of Mexico made the city eminently suitable for isolating aliens from the citizenry. On the southern bank of the river opposite New Orleans, the Algiers detention center figured prominently in the camp system that is the subject of *Port of No Return*.

This monograph examines “the internment of named alien enemies . . . to manage perceived security threats both within and beyond U.S. borders during World War II” (2). The application of such policies in a port city like New Orleans constitutes a chapter of American history, Miller asserts, that is “rarely taught and little known” (2). Historical study tends to focus on the concrete, the specific, perhaps even the singular, and this book claims that “not only did the Crescent City play a pivotal role in the . . . matrix of World War II internment, but also that this role, like the city itself, was utterly unique” (3). But *Port of No Return* also casts an ominous shadow over the internment programs of the twenty-first century, when very young children could be put in cages, separated from their parents whose identification records could be ignored or “lost,” thus creating orphans. The Trump administration modified the uses of the detention camps, so that asylum seekers were sent back to their countries of origin and children were distributed throughout the United States without documentary identification. This incarceration policy was designed to terrify migrants and refugees and thereby discourage them in the cruelest fashion from coming to the U.S. Miller’s topic can be understood as a signal of

troublesome questions about the commonplace description of the United States as “a nation of immigrants” (207).

For many of the captives at the Algiers center, the label of “enemy” was a misnomer. Numerous detainees never exhibited any hostility to the United States. After all, about 75 percent of them were Jewish, and they were often quite frightened of their neighboring Nazi sympathizers. Many of these “enemies” lacked English language skills and therefore could not explain their fears to their captors. Members of the Border Patrol of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) often suspected Jews of disloyalty to the United States. These monitors had little appreciation of what it meant to have been put in German concentration camps. The possibility that Nazi spies might be mixed with the Jewish survivors of Buchenwald and Dachau made the monitors wary of German detainees, even if the Third Reich might have classified them as “non-Aryan.” The support of NGOs from the Jewish community, such as the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and the Jewish Welfare Board, lessened the plight of the Algiers Jewish detainees. Other aid came from the National Refugee Service and the YMCA.

But the Algiers detention center did in fact house “enemy aliens” who were foes of the American republic. They were Nazis. In the recreation hall, they and their sympathizers replaced American flags with swastikas and German flags, as though prefiguring the neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klansmen and Christian nationalists who demonstrated in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, vowing that “Jews will not replace us.” In the 1940s, the Nazis and their allies managed to wrest control over camp life from the federal monitors, perhaps more easily because of the antisemitic sentiments that the INS guards often harbored. To read Miller’s book is to discern continuity with the immediate postwar era when federal agencies drew upon avowed Nazis and former Nazis to help with anti-Communist intelligence abroad and to build in Alabama the space program that would be deemed essential to the geopolitical struggle to contest Soviet power.

The author of this disturbing volume teaches in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Tulane University, which was built on land that had once been a slave plantation, like numerous estates along the Mississippi River. The current president of the university, Michael Fitts, has sought to reckon with the antebellum history of Tulane. But its morally problematic past (like that of other institutions of higher learning) is

hardly confined to the era that ended with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Miller's research has uncovered, for example, the stain of Nazism at Tulane prior to the Second World War in the person of Professor Herman Beyer.

A celebrated archeologist with extensive experience in Latin America, Beyer pioneered the excavation of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. But he never renounced his German citizenship, and he admired the Third Reich—even to the extent of wearing (on at least one occasion) a swastika armband in his office. Beyer professed to believe, according to the New Orleans press, that Hitler had made Germany more democratic than it had been under the constitution of the Weimar Republic (125). The stigma of pro-Nazism antagonized Beyer's colleagues, especially once the United States entered the war. In 1942 he resigned from Tulane, a gesture that its president, Rufus Harris, accepted with pleasure. That Beyer was detained during the war at Algiers terminated whatever influence he had enjoyed at Tulane, where the German language program was eliminated during the war as well. That he felt degraded because of the association of the facility with the history of Black slaves may be regarded as a suitable comeuppance. That he was confined among Jews may be regarded as a rather mixed blessing. Beyer died shortly before the war ended, and then most of the detention camp that Miller's research has admirably saved from oblivion was dismantled.

The wartime story of Algiers that *Port of No Return* indispensably tells needs to be placed in the widest historical context. Such camps have been and probably will continue to be repurposed. They receive asylum seekers and COVID-19 victims. But such camps have also constituted an enduring stain upon the most heavily incarcerated population in the western world. These camps entail the cruel confinement of human beings for

indeterminate intervals without adequate concern for the protection of due process of law. Unlike prison inmates, camp detainees do not have to be released on a specific date, which assures continuity for both current and new inmates. In many locales, camps are privately owned, and their owners profit from long-term contracts and concessions. By providing long-term employment to an extensive staff, such camps can become community anchors and can consolidate government links to the local population. For these reasons, detention centers in the United States are unlikely to disappear.

Miller wants Algiers to be understood as something more than a wartime episode but as an example of an international phenomenon. Her rich bibliography and notes refer to the frequency with which foreign governments have established detention centers and concentration camps. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's massive trilogy, *The Gulag Archipelago*, is undoubtedly the most ambitious and influential effort to describe the workings of the Soviet corrective labor camps of the past century. But Miller's eye is also on the present, and her epilogue, "A New War on Aliens as Enemies," underscores the "rallying cries for the reimplementation and expansion of World War II-style detention and internment programs [that] increased during the campaign . . . of Trump, but there was substantial defense for them even before 2016" (248). This story is not over.

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Behind the Magic Curtain: Secrets, Spies, and Unsung White Allies of Birmingham's Civil Rights Days. By T. K. Thorne. Montgomery: New South Books, 2021. 368 pages.

Of all the authors who have written books about the history of race and civil rights in 1960s-era Birmingham, Alabama, T. K. Thorne is surely one of the most unusual. Her background includes multiple careers as a police officer, an executive director of a downtown business improvement district, a historical novelist, a mystery writer, and now a writer of nonfiction. And she has done it all in or around her hometown of Birmingham, a famously benighted community that has long served as a

convenient symbol of White racism, interracial violence, and economic and social inequality.

Thorne knows all about the failings and prejudices of the city's White citizens, as she demonstrates in a whirlwind of both factual and impressionistic revelations of life "behind the magic curtain." But she is determined to save us from the easy and conventional stereotypes that obscure the complexity and diversity of White Birmingham, commonly known as "Bombingham" among civil rights activists. Thorne goes beyond the rampaging Klansmen who attacked the Freedom Riders in 1961 and killed four Black girls attending Sunday School at 16th Street Baptist Church four years later. She goes beyond the Bull Connor-led policemen who used attack dogs and high-pressure hoses to intimidate and injure young Black protestors in 1963. She goes beyond the "Big Mule" power-brokers who ruthlessly maintained control over local and state politics in order to sustain both racial and class privilege. The result is that Thorne finds a wide spectrum of behavior and belief in the White community, an assortment of heroes and villains, with most residents falling somewhere in between.

As she explains in the book's introduction, "For Whites in Birmingham, positions on race and segregation existed on a continuum that stretched from strident white supremacists who wielded bombs and murder to those who risked social and financial ostracism, even their lives, to meet in secret with Black friends and activists and take unpopular stands. In between were varying degrees of segregationists. The majority of Whites disapproved of Klan violence but stood against desegregation" (xi).

A gifted storyteller, Thorne takes a biographical, quasitheatrical approach to her subject. Her purposes are to entertain and instruct, and she does both admirably. Taking full advantage of an extraordinarily wide network of friends and acquaintances and relying on an impressive research base of both written and oral sources, she introduces a fascinating cast of characters summarized in a sensationalist subtitle reference to "Secrets, Spies, and Unsung White Allies." For a book dedicated to exploring the internal dynamics of a city burdened with deep traditions of racism, disfranchisement, and social and economic chasms, there is an abundance of whimsy and even occasional glibness, which some readers may find jarring and inappropriate. Yet Thorne always finds her way back to the

overall story line of individuals dealing with racist pathology and related problems.

She begins this story with the saga of Tom Lankford, a courageous *Birmingham News* reporter and photographer who covered the local police beat beginning in 1959. Lankford risked life and limb to keep his editors informed about the nefarious activities of Bull Connor, the city's explosive and archconservative commissioner of public safety, and his Klan allies. Lankford's heroism was almost always behind the scenes, and the vast majority of his contemporaries had no knowledge of the extent of his risk-taking during and after the Freedom Rider crisis.

After devoting several chapters to Lankford's exploits, Thorne turns to the Jewish community's largely hidden involvement in the local civil rights struggle. She traces this involvement back to Samuel Ullman, the president who usually conducted religious services at Temple Emanu-El, who fought for the advancement of Black education as a member of Birmingham's board of education during the 1880s, and his wife, Emma Mayer Ullman, who worked to extend hospital care to all local citizens, Black and White. Later, focusing on the mid-twentieth century, Thorne profiles a number of Jews who joined the Birmingham Council on Human Relations (BCHR) and pushed for racially progressive policies, although not generally for outright racial integration. A number of Jewish couples including Betty and Robert Loeb, Dora and Mervyn Sterne, Fred and Gertrude Goldstein, and Abraham and Florence Siegel joined Christian allies in this important effort, risking social and economic reprisals. Thorne devotes an entire chapter to "The Jewish Connection," a tentative but unmistakable trend towards concern for civil rights that emerged after the April 1958 discovery of fifty-four sticks of dynamite that the Ku Klux Klan planted under the flooring at Temple Beth-El. After that near

miss, Karl Friedman and others organized an ad hoc group known as the Jewish Committee. Its members realized that the Jewish community could no longer remain silent on civil rights issues and interracial and inter-ethnic intimidation and violence.

Thorne is careful not to make more of this than is warranted. White involvement in the Birmingham civil rights struggle, whether on the part of Jews or Christians, was often hesitant and tepid, she acknowledges, and should not be confused with the stalwart and unflinching activism of a significant portion of Birmingham's Black community during the 1960s. No one in the White community rivalled the indomitable Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, whose Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) welcomed and protected the Freedom Riders in 1961 and spearheaded two years later the nonviolent direct action campaign that bravely withstood police and vigilante pressure to bring about the beginnings of desegregation in a segregationist stronghold thought to be impregnable. In Birmingham, as elsewhere, the movement found the vast majority of its strength in the Black community.

Yet Thorne is correct in pointing out that even in Birmingham the White contribution to the civil rights struggle was not inconsequential. A complete picture of that struggle has to take into account the often hidden actions of Whites trying to accommodate or advance a movement that they did not fully understand or endorse. Thorne's narrative is peopled with men and women who may have been less than heroic but who nonetheless risked censure and harm to become involved in a multifaceted effort to improve the human condition as it existed in Birmingham. Her nuanced portraits of influential figures such as the attorney Chuck Morgan, the business leaders David Vann and Sid Smyer, the detective Marcus Jones, and the journalists Vincent Townsend and Edward Harris remind us of the complexity and irony of historical change. We can only hope that with this eccentric but fascinating book, Thorne has laid to rest the reductionist stereotypes that have dominated public and even scholarly understanding of what happened in Birmingham during the tumultuous 1960s.

Nevertheless, the city's Jewish community deserves further study. Mark H. Elovitz's 1974 communal history treats "a century of Jewish life in Birmingham," according to his book's title, but needs updating. When the Southern Jewish Historical Society met in Birmingham in 2013,

participants appreciated the necessity and the value of studying how the city coped with change. T. K. Thorne's new book constitutes a welcome contribution to such retrospectives.

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Judah Benjamin: Counselor to the Confederacy. By James Traub. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021. 200 pages.

As James Traub points out in his contribution to the Yale Jewish Lives series, Judah P. Benjamin's acquisition of 140 fellow human beings made him "by far the largest slave-owning Jew in America" (36). Nonetheless, Traub begins and ends his book by highlighting the two most extended utterances that Benjamin ever gave on the subject of the humanity of Black people. The volume opens with a description of his 1843 speech before the Louisiana Supreme Court. The attorney who would eventually become the second most powerful official of the Confederacy sought to exempt the insurance underwriters who had hired him from liability in the face of a slave revolt at sea. Benjamin therefore argued that a slave was a human being whose heart "swells with love, burns with jealousy, aches with sorrow, and pines under restraint and discomfort" (1). Twenty-two years later, as U. S. Grant's Army of the Potomac closed in on Richmond and Benjamin was desperate to raise the fighting spirit of the Confederates, he spoke in favor of freeing enslaved men so that they might serve in the military. Traub evinces no interest in exculpating Judah Benjamin for his wholehearted and nearly career-length participation in the propagation and defense of slavery. But the biographer is nonetheless drawn to the apparent "paradox" of Benjamin's service to such an unjust and seemingly un-Jewish cause.

Succinctness is a requisite quality for the volumes in the Jewish Lives series, which makes perfectly understandable Traub's decision to employ Benjamin's vexing legacy as a freedom-touting enslaver as the central framing device for this book. That Benjamin is a significant figure in Jewish American history is unquestionable. In 1852 he became the first Jewish

person to be elected to the U.S. Senate. (Florida's David Yulee, who was born a Jew and was elected to the Senate in 1845, would be the other possible contender for this distinction, but he advanced his career by claiming to be an Episcopalian, whereas Benjamin never made the slightest pretense of having changed faiths.) Shortly after Benjamin's election to the Senate, Franklin Pierce offered him a position on the Supreme Court, but Benjamin turned it down so that he could continue his career in politics. In the aftermath of Lincoln's election in 1860, Benjamin resigned his senate seat in order to

serve under his former senate colleague Jefferson Davis, first as Attorney General, then as Secretary of War, and finally as the Confederacy's Secretary of State. When that eventful phase of his career came to a close with Lee's surrender, Benjamin completed a spectacular escape from federal authorities, reached England, and went on to achieve great success there as an honored barrister. These events and others in his vacuum-packed life have already been extensively chronicled, especially by Robert Douthat Meade in 1943 and most recently by Eli N. Evans in 1988. In 2021 some thematic ingenuity was necessary for a biographer, which may be why Traub sometimes overstates the depth of the mysteries at hand.

Traub's strongest suit is his ability to pose fascinating questions about his subject. At the heart of his exploration of Benjamin's life is a quandary: Why did so talented a historical figure choose to devote himself to such an unjust cause? As Traub phrases it: "Charm, brilliance, tact—how can they weigh in the scale against a life made possible by slavery and devoted to the defense of slavery?" (6). Jewish Americans who kvell over the success of coreligionists—whether in the antebellum South or in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century sports arena—would therefore find the career of Judah P. Benjamin especially troubling. Even when

Traub's readers leave aside trying to assess the Confederacy's counselor's true feelings about slavery and racial oppression, this book poses other questions too. Was Benjamin gay? With little in the way of substantive evidence to support such a claim, a 2012 *Tablet Magazine* article by Daniel Brook speculated that "the scant historical record would suggest that Benjamin was . . . a gay bachelor in the contemporary sense of the word." A mere decade after his marriage, his wife Natalie and their daughter Ninette left Benjamin for Paris where they remained.

But how will we ever know if Judah Benjamin regretted the fact that he led a single life? Was he ashamed, proud of, or indifferent to the fact of his Jewish origins? Benjamin never uttered a single word on that topic either. Traub's biography raises all of these questions but, quite wisely, resists trying to answer them directly. If we can say one thing with confidence, after all, it would be that Benjamin would never have asked such questions about himself. The mysteries that attend his life are solely those that we impose upon it. That Traub chooses nonetheless to haunt the margins of his biography with so many unanswered and unanswerable questions is a testament to one certainty: the Jewish American imagination gravitates towards powerful symbolic icons, and Benjamin's fascinating life offers a plethora of possible implications.

Traub is well aware that neither Benjamin's Jewish origins nor anyone else's in the South (nor in the North, for that matter) would have predisposed him to hostility to slavery. Traub rightly notes that to expect Jews to differ in this respect from anyone else is misinformed and anachronistic. American Jews in the early nineteenth century were far too insecure in their social standing to risk challenging the racial status quo. "Our instinct to hold Judah Benjamin to a higher standard because he was a Jew," the biographer does not hesitate to declare, "ignores the near universal ownership of slaves among Southern Jews of means" (59). Traub nevertheless engages in a bit of historic speculation on the subject of Benjamin's actual racial views. In doing so, he seems to depart not only from the purely factual into a realm of what-ifs, but also from the realm of biography as a genre securely tied to history. In his chapter on Benjamin's boyhood and adolescence in Charleston, for instance, Traub notes that residents of "Dutch Town," the working-class neighborhood in which his subject and his family lived, would have heard the anguished screams of slaves being whipped in the nearby workhouse where punishments were

meted out (14). For better or worse, the biographer wants his readers to imagine what it was like to be the young Judah Benjamin hearing those screams.

Later, in a more sustained effort to prod his readers, Traub engages in a detailed description of racial categories in New Orleans, where Benjamin began his career as an attorney and launched his political career. "Nowhere in America was the question of race more complicated than in New Orleans," the author points out as a prelude to reintroducing the story of Benjamin's plea for the defendants in the 1843 suit, in which he spoke so eloquently about the humanity of enslaved Blacks. The upshot of Traub's disquisition on Benjamin's exposure to Louisiana's arcane racial hierarchies is that, deep down, his subject might well have believed, as did Thomas Jefferson, that Blacks were full-fledged human beings who just happened to be the victims of chattel slavery. "By this time," Traub writes, "Benjamin had spent fifteen years in New Orleans' mixed-race milieu" and "had seen free people of color every day performing many of the same tasks that white people did, and demonstrating the same attributes and attitudes" (31-32). His paraphrase of Shylock's famous vindication of the humanity of Jews, Traub conjectures, suggests that what Benjamin heard as a boy in Charleston and observed as an adult in New Orleans shaped and complicated his racial beliefs.

Traub's attention to Benjamin's experiences as potential evidence of his most closely held feelings about human bondage is curious. Despite the healthy skepticism that the biographer evinces about the moral distinctness of Jews as historical actors, Traub hesitates to abandon the possibility that his subject was conflicted and perhaps even troubled by his actions. This book argues, effectively enough, that Benjamin "deserves our attention" (3). But Traub also seems to want to explain that *why* Benjamin merits our interest has something to do with the moral discomfort this topic forces us to consider today. Because Benjamin left such a scant paper trail, his status as an archetypal Jewish American is enigmatic. The meaning of his life lies more in twentieth- and twenty-first-century misgivings about the record of Jewish slaveholding and support for the Confederacy than in Benjamin's reluctance to clarify his intentions or beliefs. At the beginning of this book, Traub writes that Benjamin "revealed virtually nothing of himself," and that the "inner recesses of [his] soul remain a mystery" (3). He thus "succeeded very well in erasing himself from

history" (4). That several full-length biographies already laid the groundwork for his volume and that the enormous scholarship on the antebellum South and on the brief history of the secession provides the context for what Benjamin *did* in the world suggests that we may already know what we need to know.

Given the number of fairly comprehensive biographies that have been written about this politician and plantation owner, Traub's strangest claim is that Benjamin actually "succeeded very well in erasing himself from history" and "hardly registers more than a footnote outside the very specialized world of nineteenth-century Jewish studies" (4). Traub may be attempting to justify his new treatment of a well-gone-over life. Perhaps he wishes to hint that people who write about early Jewish American history lack an audience. Ultimately, his suggestion that Benjamin has been ignored by historians is, quite simply, inaccurate. Ironically, the strongest proof for the error of his claim may be the fact that his book, for all of its readability, falls short of proposing any new ideas about or shedding any fresh insight into its subject. To his credit, Traub is faithful to the existing record of scholarly work on Benjamin and properly attentive to the extant primary source materials. Had Benjamin been truly ignored by historians and biographers (not to mention fiction writers, who have also featured him prominently), Traub's book might have been in a position to break new ground.

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