

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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Exhibit Reviews

The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience. New Orleans, Louisiana.

The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience (MSJE) in New Orleans opened to the public in May 2021. Located one block north of the former “Lee Circle” monument on Howard Avenue and just across the street from where the original Temple Sinai stood, the site is within walking distance of both the World War II Museum and the Ogden Museum of Southern Art.

The new museum evolved from its original creation at the Henry S. Jacobs Camp, a summer camp for Jewish children in Utica, Mississippi. In 2000, the museum expanded into the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. It closed in 2012 due to its inaccessibility, but eventually, in hopes of reaching a larger audience, New Orleans was selected as the new location for the museum. Throughout its evolution, its mission has remained the same: to preserve and highlight the unique and remarkable history of southern Jews.

While creating the exhibitions, curators at the MSJE faced a time-space conundrum: how to fit three hundred years of southern Jewish history into a mere nine thousand square feet of exhibition space. Working with these limitations, they designed a chronicle to “tell the overall arc of the history,” using “selected stories of individuals and families that personify specific events, attitudes, and experiences” through images, documents, and artifacts to engage, educate, and entertain visitors.

The museum tour begins with an eight-minute orientation film that introduces the Jews of the South describing how the early settlers stepped

into the unknown and over time assimilated into their communities with people of different backgrounds.

The first of three exhibition galleries describes Jewish immigration and acculturation in the South up to the twentieth century. Large wall displays include broad themes, the “arc of the history,” such as “From Immigrants to Early Settlers” and “Internal Migration: Following Rivers and Rails” (a map displaying railroad stops where Jews settled), “Navigating Southern States,” “Building Southern Culture,” and “Varieties of Acceptance.” Throughout the museum, individual items are used as specific examples of the broad aspects of the lives that Jews led in the South. However, space limitations and a lack of scope of content may leave visitors with a sense of missing continuity.

Focused displays that individualize the broad themes include a map, captioned in Hebrew, entitled “Guide of the United States to the Jewish People,” a Dun & Company business credit report for Lehman Brothers in Alabama, and a “Notice of Sale” for BelleChasse, Judah Benjamin’s plantation, complete with a listing of male and female slaves. Additional items on display include a copy of the Richmond Prayer issued by Congregation Kahal Kadosh Beth Shalom in Richmond in 1789 congratulating President Washington on his inauguration; a letter from Jacob A. Cohen of North Carolina to Rev. Max Lilienthal protesting his views on slavery; a Hebrew-French prayer book belonging to the Hirsh-Levy families in Louisiana with handwritten inscriptions; Moses Coplan’s Alabama citizenship documentation; a business ledger of the Cohn Brothers dry goods store in Rodney, Mississippi, from 1889; and a cotton trade document of H. Abraham & Sons in New Orleans, among many other items.

The first gallery is dominated, however, by a fully equipped pushcart. Peddling often provided the first career step for many young men in the South and offered a kinship connection with each other and acculturation with the gentile community. An impressive presentation, a description of each item in the cart would have lent fuller understanding of everyday lives of these early entrepreneurs.

The second gallery focuses on Judaism. Religious artifacts are displayed throughout the room: a *kippah*, *tallit*, tefillin and bag, a Haggadah, a circumcision knife, and a *ketubbah*. A Torah scroll is also presented with a crown, breastplate, and mantle from Congregation Gemiluth Chessed in Port Gibson, Mississippi, now a closed synagogue that the MSJE has long

(Courtesy of Gallagher & Associates, photo by Jeremy Bittermann.)

championed. An interactive touch screen entitled “Foundations of Judaism: A test of traditions, knowledge, and Yiddish” is skewed toward younger visitors. A display explaining how and why Reform Judaism evolved into the largest denomination in the South would be as explanatory of southern Judaism as the pushcart is in the first gallery.

The third gallery focuses on the twentieth century, starting with Zionism, the aftermath of World War II, and the Holocaust. “New Americans, New Southerners” highlights thirteen survivors who made their way to the South. The exhibition includes a video of six “New Americans,” describing how and why they made their way south and their experiences living and being southerners. Rene Fink of North Carolina discusses “surviving survival” of the Holocaust and settling in his new home, and Norbert Friedman recalls being told “you’re not a southerner, and you’re Jewish,” upon arriving in Georgia. Another section, “Documenting Immigration,” provides views of some of the paperwork needed by four families making their way to America.

The civil rights section follows and includes a civil rights party poster from Mississippi, an anti-David Duke newspaper article from 1991 when he ran for governor of Louisiana, and descriptions of several southern Jewish women activists from states throughout the South. Another interactive video highlights a set of 1966 interviews conducted by Rabbi P. Allen Krause in of southern rabbis discussing their activities in the civil right movement such as their clerical roles, regional tensions, societal backlash, rabbinical responses, and attacks they suffered. Although viewing the videos takes time, visitors should make the effort as this is undoubtedly one of the more provocative sections of the entire exhibition.

The last room of the exhibition features two large murals, "Summer Camp Sweethearts," married couples who originally met at the Henry S. Jacobs camp, and "Vistas of Southern Jewish Life." The tour ends with the Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, a state-by-state, town-by-town online resource, chronicling the experiences of southern Jews in towns and cities throughout the South and a valuable resource for researchers.

(Courtesy of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience.

Photograph by Frank Aymami.)

All museums hope that every picture tells a story, and the MSJE provides a vivid view. Every display is its own gem, but three hundred years of Judaism in thirteen states, each with its own story, cannot convey the depth to communicate that story in such a limited space. Despite the physical limitations, the MSJE offers patrons an insightful introduction to the history of Jews in the South, while the encyclopedia and the other interactive displays provide great resources for deeper research.

Irwin Lachoff, Xavier University of Louisiana

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History with Chutzpah: Remarkable Stories of the Southern Jewish Adventure, 1733–Present. Curated by Sandra Berman and Jane Leavey. Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia.

The twenty-fifth anniversary exhibition of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, *History with Chutzpah: Remarkable Stories of the Southern Jewish Adventure 1733–Present*, tells the story of Georgia and Alabama’s diverse Jewish history and culture. Co-curators Sandra Berman and Jane Leavey used over three hundred artifacts, documents, and photographs from the Breman’s Ida Pearle and Joseph Cuba Archive for Southern History, as well as numerous oral histories as historical evidence. The breadth of content is indicative of the fact that both curators are well versed in the community’s history and the Breman’s collections: Berman served as the founding archivist and Leavey as the founding executive director of the Breman.

Located in Midtown Atlanta, the Breman boasts three gallery spaces, an auditorium, a research library, and an archive that holds the largest repository for Jewish history in the Southeast. When visitors arrive at the start of the *History with Chutzpah* exhibition, they step into an alcove that resembles an old-fashioned library and serves as a liminal space between the present and the past. This sensation is strengthened by several eye-catching artifacts and oral histories that grab your attention throughout the space. Berman and Leavey structured the exhibit around the themes of “Courage and Conformity,” “Hope and Survival,” “Success and Loss,” “Patriotism and Perseverance,” “Benevolence and Community,”

(Courtesy of the Breman Museum, Atlanta.)

and “Murder and Mayhem.” By organizing the exhibit around these themes rather than chronologically, it is easy for visitors to dive into whichever section most deeply resonates with them.

“Courage and Conformity” introduces visitors to Jewish stories of immigration and integration into American society. Included in this section are examples of Jews who fought segregation, such as dentists Marvin and Irving Goldstein, who opened the first integrated dental office and hotels in the region. Juxtaposed are those who accepted the status quo, such as Charlie Lebedin of Leb’s restaurant, who refused to integrate his deli despite sit-ins and protests. The exhibit demonstrates that Jews have served as both agents of change and masters of assimilation – to the pride and the dismay of the community.

“Hope and Survival” documents stories about Jewish resistance to oppression including pogroms and the Holocaust. These oral histories are some of the most moving, as are the trunks and suitcases stacked in the

(Courtesy of the Breman Museum, Atlanta.)

center of the room that carried the belongings of Holocaust survivors. For many of these immigrants, the American South was a place to start anew and a symbol of hope.

“Success and Loss” explores the Jewish economic condition, specifically how Jews found their niche as “mom-and-pop” shop owners in America and how the Depression and subsequent decades challenged this lifestyle. Some of the names in this section are recognizable as American success stories. For example, on display are artifacts from Jacobs’ Pharmacy, where Joseph Jacobs first sold Coca-Cola as a fountain drink. Particularly eye-catching is a coin-operated kiddie ride in the shape of the blue horse from Montag Brothers, Inc., a local paper company that highlighted the uniquely colored horse in its branding.

In “Patriotism and Perseverance,” visitors learn how American Jews participated in politics and the armed forces as early as the Revolutionary

War and how they persisted despite discrimination. Dr. Perry Brickman, in his oral history, gives an account of how he and his classmates uncovered rampant antisemitism at the Emory Dental School during the 1950s and 1960s, which eventually led to a formal apology from Emory University. The closing panel depicts Jon Ossoff, the first Jewish United States Senator elected in Georgia, and features the *chumash* of civil rights activist Rabbi Jacob Rothschild that Senator Ossoff used during his swearing-in ceremony, which pulls these themes into the present day.

The specter of antisemitism is brought home in “Murder and Mayhem,” which includes stories of temple bombings and the lynching of Leo Frank. The exhibit includes a miniature of the pencil factory where Mary Phagan was murdered, the crime of which Leo Frank was accused and for which he was lynched in 1915 despite a commutation of his sentence by the governor of Georgia. A remnant from The Temple bombing of 1958 also serves as a physical example of the violence inherent in antisemitism, as does the failure to bring the bombers to justice.

The exhibition concludes on a more positive note in “Benevolence and Community,” which highlights stories of Jews in civic and social engagement and the arts. This section shows the great breadth of Jewish engagement in the region and throughout the country and features award-winning playwright Alfred Uhry of *Driving Miss Daisy* fame, philanthropists such as Emma Mayer and Bill Breman, and community and civil rights activists like Janice Rothschild Blumberg. In the closing panel titled “Women of Note: Ladies Aid Societies to Community Leadership,” visitors learn about generations of Jewish women who have served their community.

The theme of the exhibit, *chutzpah*—Yiddish for having extreme self-confidence or audacity—is highlighted throughout the exhibit. It is perhaps most evident in the oral histories that play on a loop in each section, memories that prove insightful and moving stories that bring the past to life. Interviewees reflect on living through the civil rights movement, surviving the Holocaust, and causes that inspired activism and philanthropy that transformed the South. Many of these narratives are engaging and difficult to step away from.

Although the oral histories stand out, in some areas the audio sources overlap, which can be distracting. Also not uncommon for AV

equipment in exhibitions, one of the terminals was down. Fortunately, the exhibition contains so much interesting content that it is easy to move on from technical challenges to the next story.

History with Chutzpah is impressively interactive and visually stimulating, including multimedia through which visitors can quickly browse or dive deeper into themes and stories. A fitting close to the exhibition, there is a small recording booth in which visitors can give five-minute oral histories of their own, serving as a reminder that Jewish history continues today and that we all have the agency to demonstrate chutzpah that benefits the community.

Leah Lefkowitz, Atlanta History Center

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A Source of Light. Curated by Steve Silver. Aiken County Historical Museum (March 4–May 22, 2022) and Augusta Jewish Museum (May 29–July 15, 2022). www.asourceoflight.org.

On March 4, 2022, over a hundred current residents and descendants of the Jewish community of Aiken, South Carolina, in addition to dozens of civic leaders, reporters, and historians, gathered to celebrate the centennial of the state charter that formally established congregation Adath Yeshurun. The weekend-long festivities began with the official opening of the *A Source of Light* exhibit, which tells the story of Aiken's historic Jewish community. The exhibit is a product of joint efforts by curator and principal researcher, Steve Silver, and Lauren Virgo, executive director of the Aiken County Historical Museum. Della Hertzberg served as chair of the Centennial Committee, which organized the weekend's events.

Moving chronologically, the exhibit begins with the earliest documentation of Jewish life in Aiken. While the names of the original Jewish merchants and families are unknown, two historical sources from 1856 attest to a Jewish presence and suggest friendly relations between Jewish and Protestant neighbors. Jewish immigration from eastern Europe at the turn of the century fueled the growth of Aiken's Jewish community. A display case of peddlers' licenses from the early 1900s speaks to a growing

immigrant population, and large Jewish families who trace their roots to Aiken, including the Efrons, Poliakoffs, Poliers, Rudnicks, Suraskys, and Wolfs, begin to appear in the historical record.

A Source of Light traces the patterns of early twentieth-century Jewish life that are now familiar. Aiken's earliest east European Jewish-owned shops were first established in the late 1880s when Harry Louis Polier opened a dry goods store. More stores quickly followed. The opening of the Augusta-Aiken Railway in 1902 drew enterprising migrants to the area and, within a few decades, Jewish merchants were operating more than twenty stores in downtown Aiken. With economic success came the desire to formalize the institutions of a religious community. In January 1913, the trustees of the Sons of Israel purchased a burial ground. Although planning for a synagogue began as early as 1907, it was not until March 1921 that the South Carolina secretary of state issued a certificate of incorporation for the organization of a synagogue in the city. Residents managed to raise ten thousand dollars to cover the cost of building the synagogue. Construction was completed in July 1925, and the synagogue has been in continual use ever since.

With economic success came greater degrees of Jewish political and communal engagement. *A Source of Light* highlights the handful of Aiken's Jewish elected officials who served at the municipal and state level, including Mandle Surasky, who won election as mayor in 1941. Irene Rudnick was the first Jewish woman elected to the South Carolina state legislature, where she served from 1972 to 1986. The exhibit likewise highlights the various important entrepreneurial and communal leadership roles assumed by Jewish women in Aiken.

The waxing and waning of Aiken's Jewish community is closely tied to the overall evolution of the town and local economy. The arrival of the railway, the "Winter Colony" for the affluent, in addition to the construction of the Savannah River Site nuclear facility in the 1950s, all served as catalysts for successive waves of Jewish immigration. Despite this influx, remaining Jewish-owned stores began to close in the 1960s, compelled by the exodus of college-educated younger generations and the changing nature of retail. Today Aiken serves as a destination for equestrians, weekend travelers, and retirees eager to settle in the quaint southern town. Continued migration has sustained synagogue membership in a way that most southern towns lack, but residence does not translate into

*(Courtesy of the Aiken County Historical Museum.
Photograph by Lauren Virgo.)*

*(Courtesy of the Aiken County Historical Museum.
Photograph by Barry Bornstein.)*

the attachment of old. *A Source of Light* concludes with a plea for support from more recent Jewish transplants and those with historic ties to Aiken who now reside elsewhere.

There is a common refrain that southern Jewish history *is* the history of Jewish merchants, and the overarching framework of *A Source of Light* shares this view. The general message of the exhibit is that Jewish success in Aiken was made possible by a long-standing “culture of tolerance and inclusiveness in Aiken” that made the southern town an appealing destination for Jewish migrants. Speaking with those who were born and raised in Aiken, it is clear that they harbor fond memories of growing up in the predominantly Protestant southern town. While the memory of the violent murder of peddler Abraham Surasky in 1903 is still alive and well, antisemitism appeared to be the exception, not the rule.

Given this overarching message, the question of race is a notable absence. With the sole exception of a small placard dedicated to renowned civil rights lawyer Isadore “Shad” Polier, which hangs adjacent to a photo of him standing near Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at the Lincoln Memorial, nowhere does the exhibit reflect on the history of race relations in Aiken, nor does it address how local Jewish merchants responded to efforts to desegregate private businesses. Southern Jews have a long history of serving African American clientele, extending credit to Black customers when other white-owned businesses would not, and of employing African American workers in their stores and homes. Moreover, southern Jews often found themselves caught in the crosshairs of civil rights protests and boycotts and white supremacist organizations such as the White Citizen’s Council and the Ku Klux Klan. Many southern Jews were forced to navigate an uneasy balance between maintaining their livelihoods, their moral commitments, and their desire to maintain acceptance among the privileged white majority. It remains unclear what racial dynamics existed, in addition to what exactly transpired in Aiken during this tumultuous era.

The story of southern Jewish life is best understood through the lens of small-town Jewish merchants and their families, who thrived for over a half century across the American South. Although *A Source of Light* claims value in the universalness of the story it tells, I would argue that its greatest contribution lies in the particulars of an intimate, local history that individualizes alternative patterns of Jewish life, migration, economy, and

community that are often eclipsed by more well-known stories of Jewish success in urban centers, particularly in the northeast.

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