

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

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2012

Volume 15



Southern Jewish History

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Articles appearing in *Southern Jewish History* are abstracted and/or indexed in *Historical Abstracts*, *America: History and Life*, *Index to Jewish Periodicals*, *Journal of American History*, *Journal of Southern History*, *RAMBI-National Library of Israel*, and the *Berman Jewish Policy Archive* (www.bjpa.org).

Southern Jewish History acknowledges with deep appreciation grants from the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, New York, and the Gale Foundation, Beaumont, Texas.

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ISSN 1521-4206

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Exhibit Review

That You'll Remember Me: Jewish Voices of the Civil War. Curators: Bonnie Eisenman and David Farris. Designer, Drew Gladwell. Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives, Richmond, Virginia. Through April 2015. <http://www.bethahabah.org/bama/index.htm>

This compact exhibition takes its wistful title from a song lyric that Confederate veteran Moses Ezekiel recalled hearing at a Richmond theater during the war years. Richmond's Jewish population then included three congregations, with the oldest dating from 1789. At the exhibition's entrance an oversized map of the city in 1861 locates the synagogues and homes of Jewish leaders, all within walking distance of the soon-to-be capitol of the Confederacy and residence of President Jefferson Davis. There would be no escape from the war for Richmond's Jewry.

Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives occupies a converted rowhouse next to Congregation Beth Ahabah's beautiful synagogue and near Monument Avenue. The first floor is the exhibition area, with this one filling a middle room and its entryways. Texts and images cover the walls, with strategically placed paintings and other artifacts providing color to catch the eye. The design of this content-heavy exhibition is consistent, and yet each story stands on its own within the whole.

The exhibition addresses historical questions by emphasizing that American Jews were "a minority group anxious to assimilate." About Jews and slavery, the exhibition notes slave ownership and some small involvement in the slave trade. Richmond rabbis embraced the proslavery argument, and Jewish Confederates acted on regional loyalties, just as their northern co-religionists did. Indeed, the exhibition tells of Confederate Herman Myers, reported killed in action but who survived to return home to find his overjoyed family dressed in mourning. Myers had two brothers. One died in the Confederate service, and

the other, who moved north prior to the war, served in the Union Army.

The stories are good ones. On the north wall are a photo and the shaving cup of Philip Whitlock (his birth name in Poland is unknown), whose militia company, joined by the pro-southern actor John Wilkes Booth, went to see the abolitionist John Brown hanged. Next to him is Richard Forrester, son of lawyer Gustavus Myers and an enslaved woman, who snatched up the American flag that Confederates pulled down from the state capitol in 1861 and hid until the Union Army entered Richmond in April 1865 and the flag could fly again.

On the opposite wall is the story of Phoebe Yates Levy Pember, the matron at Richmond's Chimborazo Hospital, the largest in the Confederacy. In the exhibition's only interactive technology, a pressed button brings a recording, by a descendant, of a stirring account from her diary of how Pember stood down whisky-seeking thugs with her pistol. On the west wall are stories of immigrants from poverty and antisemitism who arrived just in time for the war and of Myer Angle, the first president of Congregation Beth Ahabah, who sent six sons to serve the Confederacy.

Angle's son-in-law, Max J. Michelbacher, was the spiritual leader of Beth Ahabah, and his letters exchanged with Robert E. Lee in 1861 and 1863 have been treasured evidence of the congregation's connection with the hero of the Confederacy. Selections from those letters appear here, too, adjacent to a discussion of the service of Judah P. Benjamin, the "Brains of the Confederacy." These stand among all the other stories, but several decades ago they would have been highlighted, along with the exhibition's closing image of the honored space set aside in Richmond's Hebrew Cemetery for burials of thirty Jewish Confederate soldiers. These evidences were once central in Richmond Jewry's postwar embrace of the Lost Cause as an assimilationist strategy.

This exhibition suggests, instead, that the multiplicity of experiences, in combat on both sides and on the home front, shows how Jews participated fully while yet retaining a religious identity. The stories also show that neither religion nor the larger society's antisemitism solely determined the various paths that

*Phoebe Yates Levy Pember,
matron of the largest hospital
in the Confederacy.*

*(Photo loaned to the exhibit
by Robert Marcus. Courtesy
of Beth Ahabah Museum and
Archives, Richmond, Virginia.)*

*Max J. Michelbacher,
spiritual leader of
Congregation Beth Ahabah
from 1846 to 1867.*

*His portrait is part of
the exhibit.
(Courtesy of Beth Ahabah Mu-
seum and Archives, Richmond,
Virginia.)*

Jews in Richmond traveled during the Civil War. Supporting that thesis are the exhibition brochure, with names of all the Richmond Jews who served in the military, and a special issue of *Generations*, Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives' publication, with extended essays on several of the most prominent people featured in the exhibition.

Recently, the *New York Times'* museum critic, Edward Rothstein, charged that the similar storytelling of Virginia's official Sesquicentennial exhibition was "a kind of exculpatory relativism," a dodge away from the issues of slavery and Union. He has a point, but this exhibition makes multiple stories the fact of the experiences of Jews in Richmond. Visitors of all stripes to Richmond during the Sesquicentennial ought to make time for this small but powerfully engaging exhibition.

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