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An Interview with Bernard Wax

by

Adam Mendelsohn*

In 1976 Bernard (“Bernie”) Wax acted as one of the midwives in the rebirth of the Southern Jewish Historical Society (SJHS). Although the society had been founded two decades before—born in the burst of enthusiasm for American Jewish history that accompanied the celebration of the three-hundredth anniversary of the first permanent Jewish settlement in America—it was all but moribund by 1970. Working with Saul Viener and Melvin I. Urofsky, Wax, the director of the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS), mobilized support from his organization and several others to stage a conference on southern Jewish history in Richmond, Virginia. The rest is history. The society has flourished, and Wax has been a stalwart member, long-serving officeholder, AJHS representative at its meetings, installer of SJHS officers, and proof-reader of its publications ever since. Even as Wax’s early and instrumental role has been described within the pages of this journal, little has been written about his background and his affinity for the field of southern Jewish history.¹ This brief article, aimed at filling these lacunae, is based on an oral history interview conducted over two sessions in 2007.²

Wax was born into what was, in his words, “essentially an immigrant family.” His parents settled in Philadelphia after leaving the Ukraine in the 1910s. His brother Nelson, thirteen years his senior, spoke only Yiddish until kindergarten. His mother could

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write little more than her name in English. "In a way," Wax remembers, he "had three parents" for the first seven years of his life, until his brother left to study at Ohio State University in 1937. Ten years later Wax, too, left home for college. He had wanted to become a "scientist, or a mathematician" (his brother later became a professor of electrical engineering at the University of Illinois) but was "waylaid at the University of Chicago." Since he placed out of mathematics completely as an entering freshman, he was not required to take additional math courses to graduate. And so he "became interested in history via the backdoor," inspired by classes on American history taught by Walter Johnson.

Wax graduated with both bachelor's and master's degrees in the early 1950s, during which time both his parents died and he married. He was drafted into the army as the Korean War was entering its latter stages. Days after his wedding to Dolly Nemchek in March 1953, Wax was inducted into the army. His two years of service provided unexpected preparation for his later career. Originally ordered to Austria—an assignment cancelled because of the death of his father—Wax instead spent most of his enlistment at Fort Meade in Maryland, within driving distance of his wife's family in Philadelphia, as a dayroom orderly and supply records management specialist. With ample time on his hands, he "became the best read private in the U.S. Army."

After his discharge in 1955, Wax applied to graduate school and was accepted into the University of Wisconsin's prestigious doctoral program in American history. He remained there as a student for several years, but, under financial strain as a father of two children and uncertain about when he would complete his degree, he "decided it wasn't going to work out." He initially pursued several alternatives, including working for the State Department, but he settled instead on a position to which his expertise in American history and organizational skills were well suited. Wax spent seven years (1959–1966) at the Illinois State Historical Library in Springfield (now the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library), first as the field services representative and then as the field services supervisor.

*Wedding portrait of Bernard and Dolly Nemchek Wax,
March 21, 1953, Conshohocken, Pennsylvania.
(Courtesy of Bernard Wax.)*

During his tenure at the research library he met several people involved with the American Jewish Historical Society. In 1965, amid a turbulent and transitional time in that society's history, he was invited to apply for the position of director. He took the reins in August 1966 after a period of "internecine battle" over the future of the society. Ironically, the feuding was the legacy of a substantial bequest left by Lee Max Friedman in 1957 that transformed the fortunes of an organization that had long struggled financially. The bequest enabled the society to become more professional by hiring staff with academic training, including Dr.

Nathan Kaganoff as its librarian, and systematizing its book and manuscript collections.³ The bequest also encouraged the society to plan a facility of its own. For several decades the society had occupied a “small suite of rooms” at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City and in an office building that doubled as library and work space for the society’s staff. Many of its treasures had long sat uncatalogued and unused in storage for want of space and attention.⁴ Now the society could finally afford to think of a future elsewhere. The leadership of the society splintered into three factions—there were “tough personalities involved”—each promoting a rival city: New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. The debate was prolonged, “heated,” and “acrimonious,” and eventually the relocation was challenged in court. By the time Wax was hired, the society had decided on Waltham, Massachusetts, where it had been invited to relocate at the invitation of Abram L. Sachar, the president of Brandeis University. The society moved its archives and offices from New York, its home since its founding in 1892, to a new site that it purchased on the university’s campus.⁵

After his appointment as director of the AJHS, Wax relocated to New York, commuting between there and Boston to supervise the move and the construction of a new building that was completed in May 1968. The latter soon housed a collection of thirty-five thousand books and one million manuscript pages, indexed for the first time in a comprehensive catalog. The collection, open to visitors as never before, began to attract a steady stream of researchers and aided the dramatic growth of American Jewish history as a field of academic inquiry in the 1970s by making primary sources accessible to scholars.⁶ Wax’s style of leadership—he “tried to do things by diplomacy rather than by atomic bomb weaponry”—soothed some of the “bitter” divisions that preceded his appointment. Several individuals, including Saul Viener, had left the society’s board in protest of the relocation, but Wax was able to lure some back.

Initially much of Wax’s time was taken up with establishing the society in its new home: organizing public lectures, recruiting members in New England, hiring a small staff, and processing

collections that had never been properly organized. As the society developed local roots, it expanded its offerings, hosting exhibitions of Yiddish theater posters, colonial Jewish portraits, and synagogue architecture, among others; preparing a traveling show on the history of Boston Jewry (*On Common Ground*); and increasing its support for publications on American Jewish history. *Turn to the South*, for example, edited by Nathan Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky, was a collection of essays that were originally presented in October 1976 at the Richmond conference that relaunched the SJHS. The volume was published under the auspices of the AJHS in 1979 and is often credited with reviving academic interest in the field of southern Jewish history.⁷ The capstone of the AJHS publishing initiative was a five-volume survey of American Jewish history completed at the end of Wax's tenure at the society.⁸ The society also expanded its reach by organizing meetings in Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cities where it had not held meetings before in an effort to be a truly national historical society. Even farther afield, the society collaborated with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the *New York Times* over a fifteen-year period to publish books, reprint older volumes, and organize conferences on the connections between America and the Holy Land, including one at the U.S. National Archives.

Under Wax's direction, the society actively added to its collections. Wax saw his role as one of "curator, or gatekeeper for the future," saving those historical sources that would be valuable to later generations. At times this involved "seizing upon events that were taking place that seemed to have a historic resonance." In 1967, for example, the society was the only Jewish institution collecting material relating to American responses to the Six Day War. He "took this [work] personally." His responsibilities included everything from visiting the actress Molly Picon to encourage her to donate her papers to the society, to loading and driving the truck that collected the papers of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry.

Wax served as director until first "retiring" in August 1991, but he continued to serve in a variety of senior capacities until

his “second retirement” in 2004. His early career at the AJHS informed how he thought about efforts to relocate the society to New York and to house it at the Center for Jewish History. The society’s move to Boston had offered opportunities to rebuild and reconfigure. This second move provided a chance to reimagine the AJHS. While the benefits of being on a university campus were clear in the 1970s, the society had not “reached its potential” in Boston. He supported the planned relocation as long as the society retained a presence in the Boston area, something it had initially done with its library on the campus of Hebrew College in Newton. Once again he was responsible for supervising the moving of the society’s books and manuscripts. The society ultimately relocated its Boston-area activities yet again to the New England Historic Genealogical Society, its current location.

As director of the AJHS, Wax took a proprietorial interest in the growth of local and regional Jewish historical and genealogical societies. But why did the SJHS, of all the societies that blossomed in the 1970s and after, win and keep his allegiance even after he had retired from his role as AJHS director? Wax ascribes his abiding interest to the nature of SJHS annual meetings. When he was AJHS director, SJHS annual meetings were a professional obligation, but once retired, he recalls, they were like “taking a professional vacation.” The dynamics of his extended family also played a part. Wax jokes that he and his son-in-law, raised in Montgomery, Alabama, do not see eye-to-eye on southern history, particularly when it comes to the Civil War. Given his early career in Springfield and his expertise in matters relating to Lincoln, Wax thought it important that he “understand the other side of the coin” when it came to how the South interpreted its past. Tongue heavily ensconced in cheek, he described wanting to “protect” his “grandchildren” from their father’s historical “vagaries.”

Although his “dream” of reeducating his son-in-law has “not materialize[d],” the SJHS is all the richer for Wax’s contributions. A native Philadelphian, a graduate of Chicago, a student of Springfield, and a resident of Brookline, Massachusetts, Wax’s commitment to spreading the story of southern Jewish life has surely also earned him the status of honorary southerner.

At the SJHS 10th annual conference, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 1986.

From left, Stephen Whitfield, Janice Blumberg, Bernie Wax.

(Courtesy of Special Collections, College of Charleston.)

Selections from the Interview

MENDELSON: What was the state of the collections when you first arrived at the American Jewish Historical Society in 1966? What were the strengths? Where were the gaps?

WAX: We didn't know. We really didn't know. We only knew what had been listed, but we didn't know the contents of what had been listed. Dr. [Isidore] Meyer had a very possessive nature.⁹ He had devoted his professional life to the society for a long period of time, from the late 1930s on. It had been run primarily by lay personnel—volunteers—when he was hired. And so he tried to maintain some control when Dr. [Nathan] Kaganoff came; I think there was some reluctance to let go of the keys. I had never been a confrontational type of person so we had lunch one day and I explained the situation—what we were trying to do—and by the end of the lunch he handed me the keys, and I then handed them

to Dr. Kaganoff. And no bitterness or anything of that nature [persisted] that I can recall. They were very civil in their relationship.

And it was only in that particular period of time that we knew what we had. Portraits, yes. Sometimes there had been exhibitions of various manuscripts. But for anything detailed we didn't have a clue. Everything was located in several big rooms on the eighth floor of an office building in New York City on Fifth Avenue and Twentieth Street. We were going to move, and the only way to move properly was to know what we had.

MENDELSON: How did the society's move to the campus of Brandeis University affect your early tenure?

WAX: The battle [over the future home of the society] became quite heated [before I started in 1966], and I think in fact there were some fisticuffs during some of the meetings. The meeting in Charleston, South Carolina, which was held in 1965, was the most acrimonious. I think there were personalities, really tough personalities, involved. There may well have been a Reform-Conservative-Orthodox tinge to some of this also. I remember a lot of people who were unhappy with us being at Brandeis University. And I can't really attest to it, [but some people were] unhappy with Abe Sachar being involved, [they feared the society] being subsumed by the university, which we tried to fight by having the society build [its new building] on a separate piece of land which we purchased from the university. We didn't tell anybody that the university gave us back money each year to pay for that purchase. We had a separate address so that our rear end was on campus and our front door on Thornton Road. "Theoretical" Thornton Road, because there was a gate that cut it off, but it was still Thornton Road. And I think our mailman came through the gate as opposed to cutting through the [campus]. I mean, it was subterfuge, if you will. I think there were a whole host of reasons [for the acrimony], and there were some very strong personalities, very strong personalities. Sometimes I wonder why I was even chosen [for the job] as a result of that; I guess I was the least threatening to anybody. But you know, as I described in my relationship with Dr. Meyer, I tried to do things by diplomacy rather

than atomic bomb weaponry, and fortunately most of the time I was successful.

MENDELSON: What were your early challenges and disappointments?

WAX: I had really been interested at one point in fostering a greater emphasis in the historical society on Yiddish and the eastern European community. However, YIVO [the New York-based institute of Yiddish scholarship] was in existence at that time. Also I think that the thrust of much of the leadership for a long, long time at the American Jewish Historical Society was Reform-oriented. So my gut feeling was that most of the officers were not really oriented toward [Yiddish and the immigrant community].

Then the National Yiddish Book Center and [its founder Aaron Lansky] became something. My predilection toward this moved away. It just didn't seem to be necessary. And there were a whole host of local societies that were now coming into existence. That was one of the things that I had really hoped that the historical society would foster. And then the genealogical movement took off, which initially I must admit I looked at askance. Because having worked in Wisconsin when I was a graduate student at the State Historical Society [of Wisconsin] and then when I worked at the Illinois State Historical Library, all I could picture in my mind was little old ladies with white sneakers running around trying to determine whether or not they were members of the Daughters of the American Revolution or the Sons of the American Revolution. And my orientation was not for *yichus*, it was for knowledge, so basically I came up very surprised at the approach that Jewish genealogy had.

In fact I spoke one time at a meeting in Philadelphia and gave a mea culpa because I had misjudged what Jewish genealogists would be doing. They were really seriously interested in learning the histories of their families, particularly those people that were Holocaust survivors. They were interested in the Holocaust, or American Jewish history, or other forms of history, which would tell them more about the story of those Jews, not the inheritance of those Jews as far as their status was concerned. By the time I retired there must have been close to sixteen local Jewish historical

societies and genealogical societies, not that I had much to do with any of them. I know I helped start a few, but most of these were indigenous.

MENDELSON: What was your relationship with your board?

WAX: [It is difficult to compete with other cultural institutions] without essentially gathering two dozen extremely wealthy individuals and having them deeply involved and concerned about the society and doing more than just giving money. We had several [wealthy board members] but nothing, nothing in terms of two or three dozen people whose commitment is solely to that. Many of the people we have or were on the board also committed to other institutions; [they'd give us] twenty-five thousand dollars, whereas the other [gift] is a million dollar one.

For the most part I had a lot of latitude [as director], but my problems arose from the monetary aspect, from when there wasn't a great deal of money. And there was a lack of recognition, I feel, on the part of the board, that they should be out there getting money. Even when I asked them, "OK, let me go [raise money]. If you're not going to do it, here I'll go out [and do so]," and there was some reluctance on that because they were concerned I'd be spending money, and so what's going to happen because [they feared] nothing would come in. And what was important, is [that] a lot of these people were businessmen, and they'd do things [as board members that] they would never have done in business. They'd do [things] at the historical society, taking risks, or believing that a certain approach would work, but if they'd thought about it, if they were going to do this in their particular business or their law firm, they'd see it was crazy. [For example,] the concept of holding a big [fundraising] meeting some place without inviting certain people who you need to make sure it's successful. Make sure there are people there who will be shills, who'd say [publicly], "OK, I'll give some [money]," and then by the end of the meeting you'd have [encouraged other contributions]. That only occurred once during my entire tenure. It occurred just at the time that I told you about, the last board meeting prior to the final [completion of the] construction of the building [in Waltham], and we were walking through the building and people were so

amazed by how well it looked, and people sat down and within ten minutes we had two hundred and fifty thousand dollars raised.

MENDELSON: Who else, beyond those who are frequently credited, were active during the early stages of the Southern Jewish Historical Society?

WAX: Someone whom people haven't heard of, because he stepped away, was Louis Schmier. He was at Valdosta State University. Louis played a very important administrative role, as well as an inspiring role. Here was a guy who came from New York, [lived] in the South, became interested in southern Jewry, published a couple of books, a number of articles, was very active in our organizational efforts at the very beginning. I think he in many ways held the society together because of that. Somehow he managed to fall off a number of years ago, and I haven't been in touch for quite some time. He hasn't come to conferences in quite some time. Another would be Sol Breibart of Charleston. Sol was also very, very important. He edited the original newsletter, although there was [also] a David Goldberg in Charleston who handed out sheets, summaries at one point. I had tried very hard at the American Jewish Historical Society to compile every single thing that was published about or from the SJHS and I had kept it in our ephemeral collections, which have now become ephemeral: we have no idea where they are. It's a tragic loss. Nathan Kaganoff, who was our librarian, tried very, very hard to maintain this kind of material, because it is ephemeral. You know that things like this simply don't last, and if an institution like ours makes it a point to collect it, it would be retained. I have no idea what happened to it.

Abe Kanof, who was the former president of the AJHS and was a very prominent physician in New York City, wrote about Uriah P. Levy in a wonderful article. He had moved from New York to Raleigh, North Carolina, [when] he retired and became interested in southern Jewish history and in helping create a section of the [North Carolina] Museum [of Art] in Raleigh with a Jewish component. Both he and his wife were very generous to the AJHS and the SJHS. Saul Rubin, the rabbi in Savannah,

Georgia, also was a key player at one time. A gentleman from Jacksonville, Florida, named Jack Coleman played an important role for a number of years [and] was also a public relations oriented person, so he helped the organization with getting membership.

MENDELSON: Who were the dominant personalities in the early years of the society?

WAX: Other than Lou Schmier? Rachel Heimovics was president and then editor [of the journal]. Mark Bauman has never become a formal head, but in his role as [journal] editor he has played a very dominant role, I think, very strong-willed. Janice Rothschild Blumberg was an early president, [and] she remains very much involved. [But] I don't think there was anybody who

*Bernie Wax at the podium at the 14th annual SJHS conference, Jackson, Mississippi, 1990. Society president Rachel Heimovics is at right.
(Courtesy of Rachel Heimovics Braun.)*

you could consider to be dominant. I think Sam Proctor, professor of history at the University of Florida, in his own quiet way was a very forceful personality. I dealt with him with great respect; he was a close personal friend of mine. But there was nobody that I can recall who in a sense could be called dominant. Even Saul

[Viener] in his own way could be hard as nails but was diplomatically very good about doing anything. Once, informally, he told me [his approach was to] “dress British but think Yiddish.” It was in a great sense a very democratically operated institution. Even I, having been the director of the AJHS, and having been treasurer [of the SJHS], and associated with the society from its very beginnings, I found that the organization has this special aura around it, and is such a democratically run kind of institution. Everybody can make an input and suggestions, but there’s nobody who’s controlling the purse strings. In a sense [as treasurer and longtime financial adviser] I do but I don’t, and I couldn’t, dominate what goes on. Sumner Levine probably has been in recent years the most attentive and involved in every single aspect of the society’s organization. But he’s very temperate about it.¹⁰

*Bernie and Dolly Wax at their sixtieth wedding anniversary,
March 2013. (Courtesy of Bernard Wax.)*

NOTES

¹ See Bernard Wax, "Ruminations about the SJHS," *Southern Jewish History* 10 (2007): 1-4, as well as the other essays on the early history of the society in the same issue. Urofsky headed the department of history at Virginia Commonwealth University and arranged to have the conference at that institution.

² Bernard Wax interview conducted by Adam Mendelsohn, 2007. The interview focused on Wax's career at the AJHS and role in founding the SJHS. Interview in the possession of the author. All uncited quotations in this essay were drawn from these interviews.

³ For a description of the difficulty of using the collections prior to the appointment of Kaganoff and the move to Waltham, see Abram Kanof, "Days of Stress—Days of Progress," *American Jewish History* 71 (June 1982): 488; Jeffrey S. Gurock, "The Society in Turmoil: A Steady Course for *Publications*," *American Jewish History* 81 (Winter 1993): 226. For histories of the society, see Nathan Kaganoff, "AJHS at 90: Reflections on the History of the Oldest Ethnic Historical Society in America," *American Jewish History* 71 (June 1982): 466-485, and the special issue of *American Jewish History* 81 (Winter 1993) devoted to the history of the society's journal. On Kaganoff, see Jonathan D. Sarna, "Nathan Kaganoff's Legacy," *American Jewish History* 81 (Spring-Summer 1994): 432-434.

⁴ Gurock, "Society in Turmoil," 226.

⁵ For a firsthand account of the rift and its consequences, see Kanof, "Days of Stress," 489-491. The most complete account is in Gurock, "Society in Turmoil," 228-230.

⁶ Jeffrey Gurock, "Quarterly, History or Heritage," *American Jewish History* 81 (Winter 1993): 245; on the expansion of the field in the 1970s, see 246-247.

⁷ Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky, eds., *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry* (Charlottesville, VA, 1979).

⁸ Henry L. Feingold, ed., *The Jewish People in America* (Baltimore, 1992).

⁹ Dr. Isidore Meyer was editor, librarian, and archivist at the AJHS from 1940 to 1968.

¹⁰ Sumner Levine, a long-time member and former president of the SJHS, passed away in June 2014.