

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Dana M. Greene, *Book Review Editor*

2007

Volume 10



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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*, and *Journal of Southern History*.

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

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ISSN 1521-4206

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Reflections on the Past and Future of The Southern Jewish Historical Society

by

Eli N. Evans

I recall so well the conference in Richmond in 1976 that was the rebirth of the Southern Jewish Historical Society. I first met the ringmaster and convener, Saul Viener, in 1969 to get his advice and names of people to see and places to go as I began my two year journey across the South interviewing for what would become *The Provincials*.¹ And I saw him numerous other times over the years, particularly as I spent many weeks in Richmond retracing the steps and life of Judah P. Benjamin.² Saul was a rare combination of so many of the early enthusiasts who kept the flame of southern Jewish history alive. They were the amateurs whose avocation was to research and write and who immersed themselves in southern Jewish history out of a love of the subject. Saul was a constant gardener, the daily learner who might have been leading a yeshiva in earlier times, and he knew everyone in the field and beyond. He radiated special qualities of the natural leader—trust, certitude, wisdom, charm—and had it not been for him, the society may never have had a second beginning.³

During the conference Saul was the catalyst, the heart, the beloved father figure, the mensch in the middle, the all important philanthropist who could not only give but ask, and whose invitation to come together in Richmond drew more than two hundred people from across the country and the region. All sensed that the time was right and that Saul was the person who could make it happen. Saul was a quintessential southern Jewish gentleman, really a sweet man, radiating a quiet charisma who, as I remember

him through those years, could have been the inspiration for a character in a novel. Impeccably dressed, tall and slender with perfect bearing and a soft accent that sounded as warm as the fresh breeze in a Virginia spring, over the years he invited guests like me into his beautiful library of Jewish history where he loved to converse about the major Jewish figures in southern history but particularly in Richmond during the Civil War. They were, as Saul introduced them, not musty figures buried in the dusty files of history, but old friends he knew and wanted to share with a guest in his home. He spoke with intimacy and relish of such figures as:

- Gustavus Myers, the major Jewish figure in Civil War Richmond, a leading lawyer married to the daughter of the Governor of Virginia, a member of the Richmond City Council for thirty years and its president from 1843 to 1855, and Judah P. Benjamin's closest friend in Richmond.
- Rabbi Maximillian J. Michelbacher of Beth Ahabah who had written General Robert E. Lee requesting furloughs for Jewish soldiers during the High Holy Days, and Lee wrote back stating "no exceptions for soldiers of the Jewish persuasion" and then added with an adroit touch of patriotism "I feel assured that neither you or any other member of the Jewish Congregation would wish to jeopardize a cause you have so much at heart by the withdrawal even for a season of a portion of its defenders."⁴
- Saul's favorite was an artist, Moses Jacob Ezekiel, the first great American Jewish sculptor who was born in Richmond but lived forty years in Rome and whose life work portrayed the memory of the heroic past with a series of classic marble statues along Monument Avenue. Saul drove me down the wide expanse of the avenue pausing at every statue—Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Jeb Stuart, Jefferson Davis. (He also insisted I go to the Confederate Museum to see the pathos in Ezekiel's *Virginia Mourning her Dead*, and urged me to visit the Virginia Military Institute where the original is located, pointing out that Ezekiel was a cadet who fought with the

“Baby Corps” at the battle of New Market where so many cadets were killed).⁵

In inviting me to the conference, Saul had asked me to prepare keynote remarks and to think about the future of the society. I was deeply honored; *The Provincials* had been published in 1973 and had been getting review attention in major newspapers, north and south, with comments from southern literary lights like Willie Morris and later Pat Conroy as well as the national Jewish press. But I was very uneasy about talking in front of such a knowledgeable audience. I actually argued with Saul, pointing out that I was an inappropriate keynoter, a newcomer to Jewish history, a first-time author without a Ph.D. (only a law degree) who had written a single book, and not such a scholarly one at that. I wondered how most of the attendees, individuals who had nurtured the field for years, would react. But Saul was insistent and urged me not to think of it as an academic paper with footnotes, but just to be myself and imagine the society of the future.

The excitement about the conference was palpable with probably the largest gathering ever of our small field, harboring great expectations that something important would happen. I did not want to let Saul or the moment down, but my anxiety was understandable. After all, attending were the fabulous Sam Proctor, the dean of southern Jewish historians from the University of Florida, who would later be so crucial to me in my Judah P. Benjamin biography by giving me access to the papers of Senator David Levy Yulee; Bernard Wax, the director of the American Jewish Historical Society, who enthusiastically supported the idea of the rebirth of a regional society in the South; Rabbi Malcolm Stern, universally regarded as the father of American Jewish genealogy who had already published his monumental *Americans of Jewish Descent*⁶ and would serve as my intellectual mentor for over twenty years (and whom I invited to preside over my wedding as well). And there were so many others, seasoned historians in the field and young scholars who over the coming years would write a prolific number of books and articles—Stephen Whitfield from Brandeis with his infinite curiosity about Jewish and American culture and a fascination with the South; the unconventional Louis

Schmier who would teach for forty years at Valdosta State University in Georgia and was elected as an officer at the meeting; and Melvin Urofsky from Virginia Commonwealth University who was "Saul's historian" because he taught in Richmond and had a dependable and solid work ethic that turned out a steady stream of high quality academic work both at Saul's request and on his own. All would later become colleagues and leaders in the society.

To reread my remarks today is to revisit another time, to remember both how innocent and optimistic we were about the future of the field and the possibility of the society, to consider what it has become and to imagine how it might evolve over the coming decades.⁷

Looking back, it is remarkable in a way that the society has not only survived all of these years, an accomplishment on any level given its early history, but it can count among its leadership a number of the renowned personalities who were eyewitnesses to history and who lent their considerable reputations and prestige to the validation of its mission. Serving as presidents (and active members for thirty years) have been the beloved Sol Breibart (in 1983–1984), the patriarch and living encyclopedia of Charleston, who spent a lifetime making certain that the documents, letters, and ephemera of that city's earliest history, as well as its many stories and legends filed away in the total recall of his remarkable memory, would not be lost to indifference or to the Coming Street Cemetery; and Janice Rothschild Blumberg (in 1985–1986), the widow of the legendary Rabbi Jacob Rothschild, who inspired us because she lived the history of Atlanta we were writing about.⁸

In recent years, the society seems to have found a niche that enables it to maintain its place and lay the groundwork for future growth if it can find the funds to expand its mission and enable itself to think in a more visionary way about its purpose. It already gives a book prize to "the most significant contribution in the field," provides a newsletter, offers small grants for travel, research, and "project completion," and of course publishes the highly regarded *Southern Jewish History*. The society is trying to

Eli N. Evans.

(Credit: Anne Marie Rousseau.

Courtesy of the University of North Carolina Press.)

help create a literature of the region and deserves much more money for that mission. It is essential to increase the size and number of grants for research and travel so more writers can explore region-wide subjects; and to enable *Southern Jewish History* to publish more frequently each year.

There is a more exciting Jewish world emerging in the South today. What has changed dramatically is the growth of the Jewish community in the South and its institutional framework in cities across the region. Looking at the last thirty-five years, the Jewish population has tripled since I first started writing about it in

1970—from 382,000 to an estimated 1.2 million in 2004. But the growth in the urban South has been accompanied by the continuing economic woes of the small-town rural South where the textile mills have fled and the chain stores have displaced family businesses that have been steamrolled by the Wal-Mart colossus.

Paradoxically, Jewish studies in the South is coming of age at universities across the region, a phenomenon which now provides an opening for the society to create a partnership with these popular programs.⁹ There is a growing audience of interest on college campuses among Jewish and non-Jewish students and faculty.¹⁰ This expansion of activity represents the opportunity to build a broad community of interest through the Internet, by embracing the revolution in telecommunications. One major goal should involve transforming the society website from being a source of information about the society into a digital resource for research on Jews in the South, linked as a partner with every other archive, society, and university-based Jewish studies program in the region and the nation.

The Society in the Digital Age

Think of the current website dramatically redesigned as the society's window to a world-wide community and imagine its future in a digital world. Think of its power as a vehicle to create a community that joins together the scholarly world and a public with teachers and educators across the South and beyond who have an interest in our work. Imagine it as a hub with pathways to other sites wherever there is information on our subject. It is not so difficult to foresee a time when anyone with an interest in Jews in the South will turn first to the society's twenty-first century website for insight, guidance, and information. For scholars, it should contain a comprehensive guide to collections around the country, mapping out in detail the locus of papers, photographs, and collections so the user will be able to call up articles and references from an on-line world.

For example, the Center for Jewish History in New York City received a \$2 million federal grant to digitize the collections of the constituent partners, and the American Jewish Archives in

Cincinnati has built a new hi-tech building to house its collections. Mark K. Bauman paved the way for the society by publishing a list of articles relating to southern Jewish history that have appeared in the publications of the *American Jewish Historical Society*, the *American Jewish Archives Journal*, and *Southern Jewish History*, and we should seek funding to help make that material an early priority for digitizing to assist research in our field.¹¹ There is already much on the web and material is growing. For example, the Jacob Rothschild papers at Emory University were central to Melissa Fay Greene's remarkable book, *The Temple Bombing*.¹² The society can provide a guide and a unifying presence that can enable users and researchers to assemble the information from many sources as the digital movement gallops ahead in the coming years.

The digital resources are already growing in other overarching ways—The Library of Congress exhibition, *From Haven to Home: 350 years of Jewish Life in America*, is now available on line; *A Portion of the People: Three Hundred Years of Southern Jewish Life* exhibit about the history of Charleston and of South Carolina (which owes its creation to Dale Rosengarten) is available through the University of North Carolina website with guides for teachers and students and course suggestions for adult education.¹³ Soon, the Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina project, sponsored by the Jewish Foundation of North Carolina and headed by Leonard Rogoff, will have its major documentary film, museum exhibition, photographs and essay book, and traveling exhibition available for schools and the public. Eventually, it too will migrate to the Web.

In 1976 I urged the society to take the oral history form seriously because I had experienced it in my own work through my grandmother's oral history in 1939, dictated to one of her eight daughters; I discovered it twenty-five years later, which inspired *The Provincials*. Atlanta has a long-standing oral history project as do many other cities, towns, and congregations, stimulated partially by the 350th celebration. These local and family histories were of vital use to me in my research on the South because they treated not just facts of families, but how

*Eli Evans at a SJHS conference, probably in Hot Springs, 1997.
Evans speaking with Gertrude L. Samet, right.
In the center are Carolyn LeMaster, left, and Rachel Heimovics Braun.
(From the managing editor's collection.)*

previous generations felt and dreamed, hoped and remembered. Just recently, the society made a prescient grant to assist the Institute for Southern Jewish Life and the Jewish Women's Archive to conduct oral history interviews about the Jewish experience during and after Hurricane Katrina. These first-person narratives will be of vital importance to present and future historians to understand what happened to the hearts and souls of Gulf Coast Jews in the aftermath of one of the greatest natural disasters in American history.

In that regard, the society should spread its wings through its website and think about other forms than academic research as its province. Three of the most difficult forms for which to find a publisher are poetry, short stories, and photography. Yet, for a field that is evolving, all three forms are well suited for the Internet, and the society's website could be a source of on-line

publication giving creative and talented people in these forms some visibility and status.

In order to reach into new generations, every student who takes a course in southern Jewish studies should be given a free membership in the society and receive its publications. The society should run occasional competitions to attract college students and should work closely with Jewish studies departments to publish on its website outstanding student work.

The Research Agenda for a New Century

In 1976, I wrote, "I suggest that scholars and lay people reactivate and reinvigorate the Southern Jewish Historical Society, not just for academics and amateur historians and rabbis who have an interest, but for everyone who lives in the South." I would amend that today, with the perspective that the audience of interest in southern Jewish history is national, as well, because the religious South has arrived in the national psyche—emotionally, psychologically, and politically—in part because of the rise of fundamentalism and the assertive nature of religious politics. Jews have always played a complicated role in the southern religious narrative. Immigrants who came to the South as peddlers stayed to raise their families, began their congregations, and built centers of education in the American Bible Belt, where religious affiliations were expected. As they practiced their faith in town after town across the South, they were, merely by their presence and their interaction with neighbors, serving as "teachers" who every day illustrated the power of religious pluralism in an otherwise Christian region of America.

Jews are shaped by the ethos of the South they live in. No one would have imagined in the 1970s, that the fastest growing Christian churches in the twenty-first century would be Evangelical and Pentecostal, already representing more than twenty-five percent of the Christian population in the South. There are many nuanced complexities to facts like that, since Jews understand that there is a continuum among the different churches that ranges from tolerance toward others to religious fanaticism.

I was recently interviewed by a journalist who grew up in a Christian family in a medium sized southern town who told me that as an adolescent, at the insistence of her mother, she attended a religious school in a synagogue for a year so she would know the kind of childhood that Jesus experienced. Rabbis in the South have told me how respected they are in cities of all sizes in that they are invited to take turns with Sunday morning "devotionals" on radio and television, are expected to become head of the local ministerial associations, invited to churches for guest sermons, and generally are respected as in no other part of the country. As I have traveled the South, Jews have repeatedly told me that "the biggest supporters of Israel in this town are the Christians." Yet, in questions like prayer in the schools and a range of issues surrounding separation of church and state, Jews in the South are at opposite poles with many of their Christian neighbors.

Of course, I realize the degree to which these stories may be linked to an apocalyptic and Messianic vision, but respect and affection exist as well, and as researchers and scholars we need to explore the deeply human interface in the daily interactions between races and religions. We need to know not only what white and black congregants believe, but how they act and feel toward Jews and how Jews react toward them. It is a subject that echoes in the oral histories of the peddler generation that draws us deep into southern Jewish history but which takes on a new dimension today. Earlier generations have labeled it "philosemitism," a love of the Jews through a special attraction to the Old Testament and to Israel. This idea, experienced by Jews in the region, emerged in the last eight years as a major force in U.S. policies toward the Middle East and in our national politics, and deserves monitoring and exploration. In the great debate as to whether being Jewish in the South is distinctive or the same as other regions of the country, the nature of the Christian world around us and the Jewish relationship to it deserves detailed attention and examination.

An unusual recent book is *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed* by Mark Pinsky.¹⁴ Pinsky became the openly Jewish religion editor of the *Orlando Sentinel* and found himself at

the center of the nationwide evangelical movement with headquarters in the city. It is a surprising book that takes the reader into the heart of Sunbelt evangelicalism and discovers a diversity of opinions and attitudes that make it an informed and very human contribution to the literature of a changing America. *Publishers Weekly* selected it as one of the ten best religion books of 2006.

Finally, there is the ever present question of Jews and their relationship to the black community in the South. How has the relationship changed after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 brought millions of black voters to the ballot box and transformed southern politics not only with regard to representation, but by changing the tone and language of the public dialogue and moderating the very atmosphere of society itself? Even the definition of what it means to be a southerner has changed, making it easier in some ways to be a Jew, or any other minority, in the South. The South has been defined so deeply by films and books about it, by novels and reporting of its racial politics that the typical northern view still is that it is a place simmering with hatreds. In certain areas of the South race still permeates like the mist hanging in the marshland that echoes with the sounds of night creatures. I have often thought of the many ways that my own life was defined by race, growing up in the transition from segregation into a new South with a better future for all races. There are still elements of the southern soul that do have a dark side, but, all in all, Jews in the South are energetically part of their communities where to be openly religious is the norm. They know that a better community for everyone is a better community for Jews.¹⁵

It is an exciting time to be a southern Jewish historian—and writer, journalist, playwright, novelist, poet, and filmmaker—to continue to unravel the blended identity of what I have called a “unique Southern Jewish consciousness.” In the end understanding southern Jewish life is a continuing puzzle, made up of deeply intertwined strands of religion, race, gender, varying state-by-state “markers” like Katrina, and different eras and generations swept by economic and social change. And don’t overlook

memory and storytelling. It is, in the end, what binds us to each other and to the immigrants who preceded us.

NOTES

¹ Eli N. Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South* (New York, 1973; Chapel Hill, 2005).

² Eli N. Evans, *Judah P. Benjamin: The Jewish Confederate* (New York, 1988).

³ For a detailed tribute to Saul Veiner's life, see Eric L. Goldstein, "In Memoriam: Saul Viener, 1921 to 2006," *American Jewish History* 93 (March 2007): 85-90, and Goldstein's article in this volume of *Southern Jewish History*.

⁴ Evans, *The Provincials*, 60.

⁵ Once, after our discussion of Judah P. Benjamin, the Jewish "brains of the Confederacy," I remember asking him, "Could JPB ever be added to Monument Avenue?" Interesting idea but "little chance," Saul replied. "The Jewish community probably would not support it." I could write a twenty-five page essay on the meaning behind that answer but not here.

⁶ Malcolm H. Stern, *Americans of Jewish Descent: 600 Genealogies 1654 to 1838* (Cincinnati, 1960).

⁷ The Richmond conference proceedings were published in Melvin I. Urofsky and Nathan Kaganoff, eds., *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry* (Charlottesville VA, 1979). A more expansive version of my original remarks can be found in a chapter titled, "Southern Jewish History, Alive and Unfolding," in Eli N. Evans, *The Lonely Days Were Sundays: Reflections of a Jewish Southerner* (Jackson, MS, 1992).

⁸ For his most recent contribution, see Solomon Breibart with Robert N. Rosen and Jack Bass, *Explorations of Charleston's Jewish History* (Charleston, SC, 2005); see also, Harlan Greene and Dale Rosengarten, "In Distinguished Company: A Profile of Solomon Breibart," *Southern Jewish History* 7 (2004) 1-26. For her first-person account of the life she and her husband led in the caldron of racial drama in Atlanta and their relationship with Coretta and Martin Luther King, Jr., see Janice Rothschild Blumberg, *One Voice: Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild and the Troubled South* (Macon, GA, 1985).

⁹ Two recent books that stimulate inquiry and new research will facilitate the creation of new courses on the graduate and undergraduate levels: Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg, eds., *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History* (Hanover, NH, 2006); Mark K. Bauman, ed., *Dixie Diaspora: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History* (Tuscaloosa, 2006). See also individual state books: Hollace Ava Weiner and Kenneth D. Roseman, eds., *Lone Stars of David: The Jews of Texas* (Hanover, NH, 2007); Theodore Rosengarten and Dale Rosengarten, *Portion of the People: Three Hundred Years of Southern Jewish Life* (Columbia, SC, 2003); Leonard Rogoff, *Homelands: Southern Jewish Identity in Durham-Chapel Hill and North Carolina* (Tuscaloosa, 2001).

¹⁰ The growing interest in women's studies across the country and its fascination with understanding history through the eyes of women provide appealing doorways for a southern Jewish perspective on the female encounter with gentile culture in the South. See Emily Bingham, *Mordecai: An Early American Family* (New York, 2003). Bingham spent ten years analyzing over ten thousand letters of three generations of one family animated by the voluminous correspondence of the highly literate Jewish Mordecai women. The collection radiates a special warmth, emotion, and poignant turmoil in the souls of these women as they struggle with love, marriage, faith, and home. With a different perspective, see Marcie Cohen Ferris, *Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South* (Chapel Hill, 2005), which explores southern Jewish food culture and the nexus between southern and Jewish customs—foods rejected and embraced—as a reflection of dual southern and Jewish identities.

¹¹ Mark K. Bauman, "Articles relating to Southern Jewish History Published in *American Jewish History*, *American Jewish Archives Journal*, Their Predecessors, and *Southern Jewish History*," *Southern Jewish History* 6 (2003): 163-185.

¹² Melissa Fay Greene, *The Temple Bombing* (Reading, MA, 1996).

¹³ For the beautiful catalogues accompanying the exhibitions, see Michael W. Grunberger, ed., *From Haven to Home: 350 Years of Jewish Life in America* (Washington, DC, 2005); Rosengarten and Rosengarten, *A Portion of the People*.

¹⁴ Mark Pinsky, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Louisville, KY, 2006).

¹⁵ For an earlier perspective, see Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews Race and American Identity* (Princeton, 2006).