

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Exhibit Reviews

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Equal Justice Initiative. Montgomery, Alabama. On permanent display.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice sits on a hilltop over Montgomery, Alabama. It is sited in a neighborhood cleared by urban renewal and overlooking both civil rights sites and the few extant remains of one of the largest centers of the American domestic slave trade. The memorial builds on this complicated sense of place. It is a powerful site of interpretation and remembrance essential for scholars of the Jewish South for its overlaps with both global and regional patterns of violence, remembering, and forgetting.

The new memorial builds on the work of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a stalwart of social justice advocacy for the past three decades. Engagement with the memorial site is typically preceded by a visit to the nearby EJI-run museum, which opened simultaneously with the memorial in April 2018. The academically named space (The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration) forthrightly announces its uncharacteristically specific argument. There is very little ambiguity in either the title or the well-crafted, densely informational exhibits. The museum makes generally excellent use of digital exhibition and storytelling tools. For example, a series of holograms of enslaved people rendered into jail cells greet visitors as they enter the museum. They tell not historically verified stories but rather composites of the experience of enslavement and particularly of the slave market. It serves as a powerful and visceral tool, although I found myself wanting the familiar if flawed “true” story of real historic individuals rather than these anonymous ciphers. The rest of the museum offers more specificity. After a timeline that progresses through historical eras, the museum leads visitors into a

*The caption reads: "Thousands of African Americans are unknown victims of racial terror lynchings whose deaths cannot be documented, many whose names will never be known."
(Courtesy of Jeremy Katz.)*

series of semi-open spaces populated with reproduced historical texts, digital exhibits, and first-hand testimony from currently incarcerated individuals. This provides a good balance of the aggregate and the individual, although the timeline does little to mitigate the chronological collapse of the many historical eras covered by the museum. More overtly argumentative than almost any other museum I have been to, the space carries the intentions of its parent organization in its DNA.

The memorial likewise wears those influences. At my last visit, the entrance was marked by a memorial garden in full bloom, illustrating the paradox of the landscape of remembrance as one of both beauty and trauma. The first steps inside more fully encompass the latter. A powerful series of statuary shows enslaved people in chains. This abstraction of the individual here prepares the visitor for the stark presence of the memorial markers. Aside from brief explanatory text as you wind your way

(Courtesy of Jeremy Katz.)

up a gravel path toward the memorial, there is very little of the almost overwhelming context of the previous site. Instead visitors are presented with the monuments – large, hanging slabs of metal engraved with various county names and enumerating the names and dates of people lynched there. Hundreds of these columns hang at various levels throughout the core of the memorial. It is a unique form of memorialization for the United States, akin more to abstract European representations of the Holocaust. The path through the memorial takes you through additional artwork and a series of doubles of the hanging markers, here lying in ordered rows resembling coffins. Part of perhaps the most unique component of the memorial, this section attempts to extend the space of commemoration beyond the confines of its location by engaging communities in the process of accounting for their lynching histories. The idea is that one by one the markers will be removed

and placed in these communities as part of efforts at reconciliation and remembrance.

Scholars of the Jewish South will perhaps be disappointed not to see commemoration for Leo Frank or other, less infamous, prejudicial murders of Jewish southerners. It is an omission in one sense, but the memorial also offers a provocation to visitors. It asks that we continue and extend its work into our communities and into the new contexts that they invite. This is a memorial that demands that its viewers bring their own historical lens and cultural experience. For those studying the Jewish South, that experience encompasses both the significant acts of ethnic prejudice and violence that Jews have faced in this region and the complicity or participation by Jews in the injustices of Jim Crow. The memorial asks us to reckon with these complicated entanglements. It is a call to action as a form of remembrance.

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Gone 2 Texas: Two Waves of Immigration, Soviet and South African.
 Congregations Beth-El and Ahavath Sholom, Fort Worth, Texas, continuing at
 Ahavath Sholom through May 2020. Curated by Hollace Ava Weiner.

These two exhibitions intertwine the histories of Jewish migration from South Africa and the Soviet Union from the 1970s to the 1990s. Global advocacy exerted pressure on the Soviet Union to allow Jews to leave the country. Eventually, nearly five hundred thousand Jews, known as refuseniks, left. In South Africa, racial politics led to tension, riots, and international economic sanctions. More than sixty thousand of the country's 120,000 Jews emigrated. Curator Hollace Ava Weiner intersects these distinct narratives with the immigrants' arrival in Texas. What likens the Jews of Johannesburg with the refuseniks was not only their wish to leave their former homes behind, but that they made Texas their new home.

The exhibit begins with a timeline that parallels the history of Jews in the two countries. The pogroms of the 1880s, World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Holocaust, and the political and cultural reorientation of



Copper kettles carried from Poland to South Africa by Zilla and David "Pincus" Zilberg in about 1920. (Courtesy of the Fort Worth Jewish Archives.)

the 1970s and 1980s shaped both chronologies. The assassination of Alexander II in 1881 ushered in the mass migration of eastern European Jews across the Atlantic, but also about forty thousand Jews exchanged tsarist Russia for South Africa. Hitler's rise to power brought Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany to the United States and to South Africa.

Much of the exhibit is actually not about the traditional push and pull factors of immigration. The small, almost intimate exhibition



Suitcase containing items taken to Texas by immigrants from the Soviet Union. The caption asks, “What would YOU take?” (Courtesy of the Fort Worth Jewish Archives.)

illustrates how relocating involves not only change and the retooling of both old and new cultures and identities but demonstrates continuities as well. On display are paintings by two Texas-based artists. Denis Benjamin’s watercolor subject and his color palette are reminiscent of South Africa, whereas Izakil Goldin’s “Girls Gathering Mushrooms in Forest” is modernist and invokes Russian landscapes. Beyond notable differences, there are also similarities. The itinerary of the Zilberg family

showcases an almost global Jewish middle-class culture. There is Pincus Zilberg dressed in a suit in a photo before he fled Lithuania after the Bolshevik Revolution. He arrived in Cape Town and brought along a set of copper pots. His son, the young Bernard Zilberg, standing next to his father in Wellington, South Africa, in 1939, poses wearing *tallit* and knee-length pants. Other relatives are seen in fashionable clothing in Cape Town in the 1930s.

The exhibit is also about the items immigrants brought with them. Russian Jews could bring two hundred pounds of household goods to the United States. What immigrants pack says much about their past and the way they envision their future. Some objects help them remember, others are intended to have a role in their new home. Passports on display, for example, serve as reminders of the immigrants' former selves. One family shipped several kitchen stools, which were small and easy to fit into whatever space would be available to the family. A Russian manual meat grinder would have proven useful also in Texas. There is a suitcase filled with Russian toys, dolls, and towels that invites visitors to think about what they would take if they had to leave their homes. At Ahavath Sholom, in the smaller exhibit, a similar suitcase is displayed; here religious objects instead of cultural artifacts fill the trunk.

The carefully curated exhibitions showcase many smaller objects, and there is much for visitors to explore. These objects connect beyond the parallel timelines the distinct experiences of Jews in both the Soviet Union and South Africa. They illustrate how much objects furnish not just our homes but fashion also our cultures and identities.

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