

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

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2019

Volume 22



# 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; *Immigration and Ethnic History Society Newsletter*; and the *Berman Jewish Policy Archive* ([www.bjpa.org](http://www.bjpa.org)).

*Southern Jewish History* acknowledges with deep appreciation grants from the Helen Marie Stern Memorial Fund, the Jay & Dean Stein Foundation Trust, and the Deanne & Arnold Kaplan Foundation.

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ISSN 1521-4206

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## Website Review

**Jewish Heritage Fund for Excellence Jewish Kentucky Oral History Project**, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries, <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7w6m33529z>.  
Reviewed March 11, 2019.

The Jewish Kentucky Oral History Project (JKOHP) is a distinct collection housed in the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky (UK) Libraries in Lexington. The Nunn Center has an international reputation for collecting, preserving, and presenting oral histories, and the more than eleven thousand interviews in its collection focus largely on Kentucky history. Since 2008, the Nunn Center has provided digital access to oral history interviews through an online system called the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS), which helps make the Jewish Kentucky Oral History Project a standout collection in southern Jewish oral history. The project was cofounded by Janice W. Fernheimer, Zantker Professor and director of Jewish studies and associate professor of rhetoric, writing, and digital studies; and Beth L. Goldstein, associate professor of educational policy studies and evaluation. They collaborated with Douglas A. Boyd, director of the Nunn Center, and Sarah Dorpinghaus, director of digital services at the UK Libraries Special Collections Research Center.

As of March 2019, the JKOHP consisted of ninety-one interviews, nearly all of which were conducted between 2015 and 2018. Fifty-two interviews were available online, and thirty-nine were available by request from the library. Narrators (interviewees) include college students, business people, historians, and a former University of Kentucky basketball player.

Interview with Lee Shai Weissbach, October 20, 2015

Louie B. Hunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries  
Janice W. Fernheimer, Interviewer | 2015OH433\_1K009  
Jewish Kentucky Oral History Project

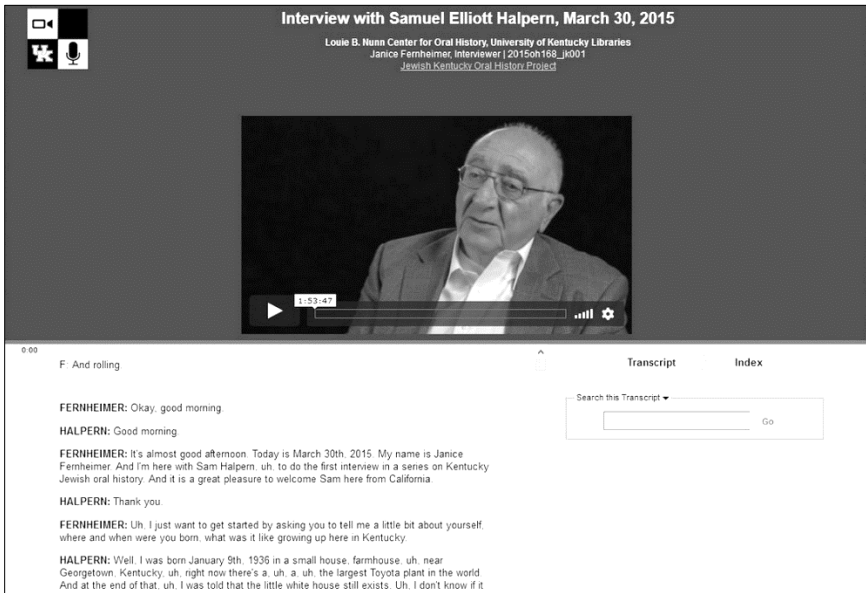
0:00 - Family and upbringing  
13:45 - Immediate family and arrival in Louisville, Kentucky  
24:29 - Jewish life and the Jewish Studies program at the University of Louisville  
35:35 - Working in the field of Jewish history  
45:41 - Researching small-town Kentucky Jewish communities  
62:12 - Kentucky Judaism  
83:16 - Personal and Jewish community life  
100:40 - Family's Jewish observance

Transcript  Index

Search this Index

*Interview with Lee Shai Weissbach, showing interview index.  
(Jewish Kentucky Oral History Project.)*

The OHMS interface is easy to navigate. Each interview includes an abstract, keywords, and a subject index, so that users can preview the content or search for pertinent subjects. The “Play Interview” tab brings up an embedded video with a panel below that displays index and transcript information. Users can toggle between the full, time-coded transcript (when available) and an index of interview topics. Each index breaks the interview into segments and provides a time code, synopsis, key words, and subjects for each segment. The index segment may also include GPS coordinates and links to related external websites. Additionally, the index system allows users to jump to the beginning of a specific segment or copy a link to play the segment in isolation. A search box below the transcript/index toggle provides full-text searches of the transcript or index. The keyword system is helpful and well organized, and the interview indexes facilitate quick browsing by topic, even when full transcripts are not available.



Interview with Samuel Elliott Halpern, March 30, 2015

Loie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries  
Janice Fernheimer, Interviewer | 2015oh168\_j001  
Jewish Kentucky Oral History Project

0:00 F And rolling

Transcript Index

Search this Transcript  Go

FERNHEIMER: Okay, good morning

HALPERN: Good morning

FERNHEIMER: It's almost good afternoon. Today is March 30th, 2015. My name is Janice Fernheimer. And I'm here with Sam Halpern. uh. to do the first interview in a series on Kentucky Jewish oral history. And it is a great pleasure to welcome Sam here from California.

HALPERN: Thank you.

FERNHEIMER: Uh. I just want to get started by asking you to tell me a little bit about yourself where and when were you born. what was it like growing up here in Kentucky.

HALPERN: Well. I was born January 9th. 1936 in a small house. farmhouse. uh. near Georgetown. Kentucky. uh. right now there's a. uh. a. uh. the largest Toyota plant in the world. And at the end of that. uh. I was told that the little white house still exists. Uh. I don't know if it

*Interview with Samuel Elliott Halpern, showing interview transcript.  
(Jewish Kentucky Oral History Project.)*

The system does have a few shortcomings. First, the interview listings do not immediately identify which recordings are accompanied by full transcripts. Instead, users have to navigate to the interview page and then check. Second, there is no easy way to browse interviews by geographical location, which would be useful for users interested in a particular place. Third, the full-screen link is located somewhat out of the way, above the right side of the interview frame. Additionally, some users might be disappointed that the OHMS system does not provide downloadable transcripts. Up to now, OHMS has prioritized recordings over transcripts, thereby encouraging users to engage with the orality of the historical testimony, which is, after all, the distinguishing feature of oral history. The Nunn Center does plan to update the system with downloadable transcripts in the near future.

In terms of content, the interviews document the experiences of Kentucky Jews of different generations and denominational affiliations, and

the collection features both Kentucky natives and those who have moved to the state from elsewhere. Natives include Sam Elliott Halpern, who grew up as a white, Jewish sharecropper in Georgetown, Kentucky, and went on to practice and teach medicine in California. (Halpern also wrote a novel, *A Far Piece to Canaan*, based on his experiences as a child, and his son Justin was the originator of “Sh\*t My Dad Says,” a popular Twitter account that spawned a book and a short-lived sitcom.) Non-natives include Lee Shai Weissbach, who taught history for many years at the University of Louisville and wrote the books *Synagogues of Kentucky: Architecture and History* and *Jewish Life in Small-Town America*. The interview topics vary according to narrators’ life experiences. Jack Miller of Lexington discusses his family’s involvement in the Reform Jewish community and the former social divide between members of their congregation and the more traditional Ohavay Zion Synagogue. John and Jean Rosenberg describe their decision to move to eastern Kentucky in 1970, where he served as the founding director of the Appalachian Research and Defense Fund. Other interviews touch on Jewish history in Louisville, Jewish fraternity and sorority life at the University of Kentucky, Jewish Kentuckians’ relationships with African Americans, and Jewish involvement in the bourbon business.

At present, interviews about north central Kentucky—especially Louisville and Lexington—dominate the collection. This is not surprising, as Louisville is by far the largest Jewish center in the state, and the project is based in Lexington. Recent and upcoming interviews from Paducah and eastern Kentucky will add to the collection’s geographic range, according to JKOHP cofounder Janice Fernheimer.

In addition to the JKOHP, the Nunn Center also hosts two related collections: the Camp Shalom 50th Year Reunion Recollections Oral History Project, which was completed under the auspices of the JKOHP, and the Lexington Jewish Community Oral History Project. The thirteen Camp Shalom interviews, all available online, took place in August 2018, and, although they do not all boast the same audiovisual quality as the JKOHP collection, the short interviews provide interesting reflections on the history and significance of the Jewish day camp in the Lexington area. The Lexington Jewish Community Oral History Project, comprising thirty-eight interviews, combines a series of audio interviews from the early and mid-1980s with more recent oral histories related to the local Jewish

community. Half of the Lexington Jewish interviews, all from the older tapes, are accessible through the website.

In total, the Nunn Center's holdings on Jewish history in Kentucky represent a significant collection that will grow in importance with the addition of new interviews from across the state. The OHMS interface makes the interview recordings more accessible, navigable, and searchable than any other Jewish oral history collection in the South and sets the standard for online oral history dissemination. Additionally, the JKOHP team has developed a "sustainable stewardship" model for the collection that engages undergraduate and graduate students in the collection and processing of interviews. As a result, the project may serve not only as a useful classroom tool and scholarly resource, but also as an example for instructors, researchers, and archivists who wish to conduct oral history interviews elsewhere in the Jewish South.

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