

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

MarkKBauman@aol.com

Bryan Edward Stone, *Managing Editor*

bstone@delmar.edu

Scott M. Langston, *Primary Sources Section Editor*

sclangston@charter.net

Stephen J. Whitfield, *Book Review Editor*

swhitfie@brandeis.edu

Jeremy Katz, *Exhibit and Film Review Editor*

jrkatz@thebreman.org

Shari Rabin, *Website Review Editor*

rabinsl@cofc.edu

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Founding Managing Editor*

rheimovics@cfl.rr.com

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).

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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In Memoriam Leonard Dinnerstein (1934–2019)

Leonard Dinnerstein passed away at his home at age eighty-four on January 22, 2019. Dinnerstein pioneered in the modern study of southern Jewish history. His Columbia University dissertation, revised and published in 1968, served as the standard work on the Leo Frank case until the publication of Steve Oney's *And the Dead Shall Rise* in 2003. As Stephen J. Whitfield observes, "With the assistance of a coeditor (Mary Dale Palsson), Dinnerstein then activated the scholarly study of the southern Jewish past with an anthology, *Jews in the South* (1973). It is by far the best of the early anthologies, a base camp from which others could depart to write not only articles but books about the Jewish experience in the region." Dinnerstein's numerous articles and chapters in anthologies included "A Note on Southern Attitudes Toward Jews," *Jewish Social Studies* 32 (January 1970); "A Neglected Aspect of Southern Jewish History," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 62 (September 1971); and "Jews and the Desegregation Crisis in the South," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 62 (March 1973).

Yet, like so many of his cohort, southern Jewish history was a part of broader interests. He became known for *America and the Survivors of the Holocaust* (1982), *Uneasy at Home* (1987), and *Anti-Semitism in America* (1994), which won the National Jewish Book Award, as well as a series of anthologies dealing with immigration and ethnicity, often coedited with fellow graduate students who remained friends through life. Still, unlike numerous books on national phenomena that largely ignore the South, Dinnerstein integrated southern Jewish experiences into his studies of prejudice. He gave the banquet presentation at the SJHS meeting in 1988,

2 SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

*Leonard Dinnerstein, left, at the 1988 SJHS conference in Birmingham with
SJHS president Samuel Proctor and president-elect Rachel Heimovics.
(Photo by Beryl Weiner, courtesy of Rachel Heimovics Braun.)*

served on a panel in 1998, and attended other society conferences besides reviewing a book and manuscripts for *Southern Jewish History*.*

Dinnerstein spent most of his career at the University of Arizona (1970–2004), where he taught courses in American history and directed the university's Center for Judaic Studies (1993–2000). Historians often explore the elusive concept of southern identity. Although Dinnerstein spent most of his adult life in Arizona, he considered himself a son of the Bronx.

The brief summary of a distinguished academic career fails to account fully for a person's life. Leonard was a friend and mentor, a humble person always with a smile and a good word to encourage others. I first met him at the SJHS conference in Atlanta in 1993, and my wife, Sandy, and I spent substantial time with him at the Hot Springs conference in 1997. As program chair of the Pacific branch of the Organization of American Historians, he invited me to comment on a session that he had developed and in which he served as a presenter (2003). Always generous, he remarked that my comment was better than his presentation.

Bryan Stone reminisces:

Leonard played a pivotal role in my early scholarly career and provided crucial guidance and moral support as I stumbled through my first attempts at research in southern Jewish history. I met Leonard at the SJHS meeting in Hot Springs, where I presented a paper about Kinky Friedman. It wasn't my first conference presentation but very nearly so, and it *was* my first on the research I had only recently begun for my dissertation. I read much too quickly from a text that was much too long, and the moderator had to shut me down before I finished. Leonard pulled me aside after the panel, sat me down out of the hearing of the other attendees, and told me it was a good paper. I was stunned. I was a graduate student, unpublished and unprepared, and he was Leonard Dinnerstein.

He didn't mince words, telling me bluntly that I had tried to read too much too fast. "Don't ever read your papers," he instructed. "Speak from an outline only, or from memory, extemporaneously. No one wants to hear you read." Nonetheless, he said, he had heard every

* For more on Dinnerstein and his career, see Clive Webb, "'What Was on Your Mind Was on Your Tongue': A Profile of Leonard Dinnerstein," *Southern Jewish History* 7 (2004): 27–45.

4 SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

word—“not everyone is a good listener, but I’m a good listener”—and he could tell I was “a comer.” He said this intently, a finger pointed right at me. He asked about my dissertation plans, recommended some reading (pretending to be impressed when I told him I had already read the books he named), and offered to read anything of mine I wanted to send him. That conversation—which I remember nearly word-for-word more than twenty years later—was one of the high points of my career and gave me a boost I badly needed.

When an opportunity arose, I invited Leonard to join my dissertation committee, which he agreed to do despite being a faculty member at a different university. For several years as I wrote we sent manuscript pages back and forth by mail, and he generously read and commented on many miserable early drafts. It was Leonard who first told me about the research fellowships available at the American Jewish Archives, and he insisted I apply for one. I had taken a job by this time in Montana, putting me far from sources and colleagues I needed; the AJA’s fellowship program was a lifeline. The research, conversation, and time to think I gained in the four weeks I was awarded in Cincinnati, on Leonard’s recommendation, led directly to the completion of my dissertation and the book that followed it.

There is certainly no shortage of scholars whose work and careers were strengthened by contact with Leonard Dinnerstein. I was not his student, not his advisee, not a mentee in any official capacity. I don’t believe we ever met in person again after Hot Springs. But as no one more than a guy he once met at a conference, Leonard reached out to me when he didn’t have to, offered advice as sound as any I’ve ever received, and changed the course of my life.

Leonard is survived by his wife Myra Rosenberg Dinnerstein and his son, daughter, and granddaughter. May his memory be a blessing to all who respected, knew, and loved him.

Mark K. Bauman