

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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In Memoriam Eli N. Evans (1936–2022)

“**A**ll research is me-search” is a cheeky little rhyme that academic scholars sometimes throw around—although not everyone likes it. In an intellectual environment that holds objectivity as a value of the highest order, to admit that scholarly investigation is driven by an urge to understand one’s place in the world seems like an act of sheepish self-deprecation, or a confession of self-absorption. When we adjust our assumptions about scholastic detachment, however, this catchphrase can offer significant insight: it reminds us of the inescapable potency of subjectivity, of the influence our contexts and circumstances exert over us. Even while we strive for the objective view, we cannot help but see the world through our own eyes. In some instances, it is more productive to embrace the impulse than to spurn it.

Eli Nachamson Evans, who passed away in July of 2022 at the age of eighty-five, knew the truth of this maxim better than most. Born to a Jewish family that settled in the South in the first decade of the twentieth century, Evans focused his historical lens on the community he grew up in and on southern Jewish identity writ large. His career ranged formidably: professionally trained in law, he found success as a political aide, as a journalist and essayist, and as leader of several philanthropic organizations. But he achieved special distinction (particularly for readers of this publication) as one of the founders of the modern scholarly field of southern Jewish history.

It might be said that Evans’s pivotal role in the origin story of the Southern Jewish Historical Society (SJHS) stemmed from his departure

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Eli Evans at the SJHS conference in Austin, 2014.

(Courtesy of Barbara Green Stone.)

from the South. His childhood and adolescence in Durham, North Carolina, instilled deep affection for the region, as well as curiosity about how growing up southern had molded his world view. He was also keenly aware that being Jewish in the South – accepted and privileged in some respects but excluded and distrusted in others – had shaped him just as acutely. By the late 1960s he had relocated to New York City, where he found himself again, as he later described it, “a minority in a majority culture” – this time among northeastern Jews who regarded “Jew” and “southerner” as distinct categories without the possibility of overlap.¹ Enter Willie Morris, a friend and fellow southern transplant to the city, who had recently taken the reins as editor of *Harper’s Magazine*. Morris

encouraged Evans to write about his heritage and family history, assigning him a series of articles on the subject.²

The magazine assignment eventually became his first book. Published in 1973, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South* reveals its me-search intentions in its subtitle. "I have attempted to bare the soul of the Jewish South," he proclaims in its first pages, by probing "the subjective edges of the experience."³ *The Provincials* interweaves memoir and stories of Evans's kinfolk with journalistic profiles of Jewish southerners past and present, deftly shifting between intimate self-reflection, historical narrative, and engagement with contemporary sociological study. His investigations traverse geographically from Virginia to Texas and temporally from the colonial era through the late 1960s.⁴ But autobiography and family history serve as his primary framing devices, as he seeks to place his and his family's experiences within their broader regional context as both Jews and southerners.

Evans was not the first author to give account of Jewish life in the American South; the bibliography of *The Provincials* lists more than thirty books and articles on the subject. But nearly all of these focused on elite Jewish institutions and "founding" families in urban settings and were largely celebratory in tone. *The Provincials* stood out as something new in three important ways: its recognition of diversity and complexity within southern Jewish history; its sprightly style and wry humor, which enhanced its appeal to a general reading public; and a willingness to employ a critical perspective when the situation merited, even as Evans made clear that he was a native of the tribe under scrutiny.

The Provincials was issued in the same year as *Jews in the South*, a collection of nearly two dozen essays coedited by Leonard Dinnerstein, an academic historian who had recently published a book about Leo Frank. The following year, *Our Southern Landsman*, written by Harry Golden—a New York-born humorist and political liberal who founded and edited the *Carolina Israelite*—hit the shelves. Academic scholars and community historians found inspiration in these three books, which ranged widely in tone and methodology even as they collectively focused on a seemingly narrow topic. Evans's friend and informal historical advisor Saul Viener, who had attempted to create an association of southern Jewish historians in the late 1950s, recognized an opportunity to try again. Leveraging his contacts at several local and national Jewish organizations, Viener

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successfully reconvened the organization, and in October 1976, the SJHS held what would turn out to be its revival conference in Richmond, Virginia. Evans, whose book had been so pivotal to the organization's rebirth, delivered the conference's keynote address.⁵

Evans intended that his speech to the revived SJHS would serve as a call to action. While countless books and articles had been written about Jewish life in America, he pointed out, too few took southern Jews and their histories into consideration. The time was ripe to "look more energetically at the gaps in our knowledge." He endorsed the method he had relied on most heavily in his research for *The Provincials*, urging his audience to become amateur oral historians. The last of the generation of Jewish immigrants who had ventured south at the turn of the century would not be around much longer, he warned; so buy a tape recorder, schedule some interviews, and prepare questions that will encourage your subjects to "unravel memories at their own pace." Ask them about their reasons for coming south and staying there; ask how they maintained Jewish identity and practice in spaces where Jews were rare. Ask their American-born children about their childhoods and neighborhoods, the foods they ate, the clothes they wore, the friends they made. Inquire about politics, economic crises, wars, race, and antisemitism. Most important, he declared, find out "the psychological experiences of being Jewish in the South, the emotional experiences . . . *how did they feel?*"⁶

So, according to Evans, *how did southern Jews feel?* *The Provincials* offers something like a unifying theory of southern Jewish experience and presents the author as himself a representative specimen. First and foremost, Evans wrote, southern Jews were "molded by the ethos they grew up in," identifying fervently with their region and "rooted deep in the soul of southern history." At the same time, they felt "the Jewish longing for a homeland" in an environment shaped by Christianity and white supremacy, which created an "emotional reality of religious isolation" and cultural outsidership. This contradiction, in a section known for its "foreboding distrust of the foreigner," had encouraged in southern Jews a "habit of low profile—an instinctive shyness" and a tendency to assimilate.⁷

The pressure to fly under the radar exerted particular force when it came to race. According to Evans, southern Jews of European descent were assumed to be white, and they did not challenge the assumption. But

Evans insists that Jews' absorption of white southern attitudes only went so far. "From their earliest encounters," he wrote, "Negroes and Jews in the South have had a special relationship." This connection first played out in commercial transactions, when Jewish retailers and employers treated their Black customers and workers more agreeably than did other whites. It blossomed into affinity over their shared identification with the Exodus story, as well as their "mutual fear of the white society they lived in." But fear compelled southern Jews to "keep their attitudes to themselves" and assimilating into whiteness provided sufficient cover. Thus Jews who ran for public office in the New South could regularly count on Black voters as a bloc; yet when Jewish candidates won, they usually served as moderates on racial issues and steered clear of direct alliance with Black civil rights advocates.⁸ (Evans's family history bears on this phenomenon: his father was mayor of Durham from 1951 to 1963—the first Jew to be elected to that position.)

These racial tensions and psychological dissonances fell away, however, when it came to the state of Israel. Earlier southern Jewish orientations toward Zionism had been diverse and contentious. Attitudes began to shift midcentury, however, as the horrors of the Holocaust were fully revealed. "All came to realize," Evans insisted, in one of the book's most egregious overgeneralizations, "that identification with Israel was the only hope for the American Jewish community." However, it was not only southern Jews who expressed vigorous support of Israel after the Six-Day War, when Evans was doing research for his book; Christians, and especially white southern Baptists, also embraced the cause. Evans recognizes that the region's overwhelming political support for Israel offered southern Jews an opportunity to develop shared attachments with their white gentile neighbors, though he sees non-Jewish southerners' affection for Israel emerging from different political and cultural concerns than, for instance, his grandmother's (who in 1919 had founded the first southern chapter of Hadassah). White southern Christians, on the other hand, admired Israel in the late 1960s and early 1970s because of its dogged militarism; its strategic position in the global fight against communism; its role in fundamentalist Christian belief as fulfillment of biblical prophecy; and, by their perception, its presence in the Middle East as "a white enclave encircled by dark and heathen peoples."⁹ (Evans does not air the

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possibility that southern Jews might also admire Israel for three of those four reasons.)

Evans's interest in the emotional and psychological experiences of "everyday" southern Jews coincided with the growth of oral history, and "history from the bottom up," in the 1960s and 1970s. Unsurprisingly, his first book exerted a profound impact upon the field's development. Yet this preoccupation could also lead him astray—especially when he leaned into the imperative to analyze southern Jewish subjectivity as a historical category. In 1988, he published *Judah P. Benjamin: The Jewish Confederate*. A Sephardic Jewish immigrant and Louisiana slave owner who held three different positions in Jefferson Davis's administration, Benjamin is one of the more enigmatic historical figures of the Civil War era—not least because he destroyed all of his personal papers before he died. By the time Evans developed an interest in Benjamin, two substantial biographies had already been produced, although neither had taken up Jewishness, much less southern Jewishness, as a topic of analysis. Benjamin's Jewish identity, Evans declared, would be the primary line of inquiry and historiographic contribution of his work. His book's introduction makes clear that he was personally invested in the question: "Part of my fascination" with Benjamin, he admits, "comes from my own life as a Jewish southerner. . . . He is somehow familiar to me because there are certain changeless verities to growing up Jewish in the Bible Belt and passing for white in that mysterious underland of America."¹⁰

Evans's claim that Benjamin's identity as a southern Jew not only influenced every aspect of his life but was a causal factor in his choices as both a civilian and as a leader failed to convince reviewers. While they recognized the antisemitic vitriol of many of Benjamin's contemporary detractors, the general consensus—at least among academic historians—was that Evans presented insufficient proof for many of his assertions. Instead, one reviewer wrote, the biography wielded "unsubstantiated and highly questionable conjectures" as evidence of Benjamin's Jewish soul.¹¹ Another lamented that Evans's hypothesis "must remain an undemonstrated if intriguing theory."¹² Clearly, in his hope of finding universality and continuity of southern Jewish identity (as he understood it), he had assumed knowledge of Benjamin's inner life. But his assumptions ran further than the available evidence allowed—an ambitious endeavor that was bound to annoy historical specialists.

David Brion Davis, whose historical studies of Anglo-American slavery were in the process of transforming and modernizing the field, was especially stinging in his critique. Davis condemned the book as a work of “Lost Cause” mythology, brimming with discredited stereotypes of enslaved Black people and claims that Benjamin was a “benevolent” slaveowner, and guided by a “Confederate perspective” on the military history of the Civil War.¹³ One assumes that Evans, a committed liberal, would have been horrified by such accusations. However, he occasionally reveals similar tendencies in *The Provincials* too; in one glib and cringeworthy aside, he describes male Jewish college students’ choices of female sexual partners—*haimish* Ashkenazi Jews, or exotic and forbidden white Christians—as akin to “the ‘massa’ in the sweet arms of his lady in the manor house secretly yearning for the wild taboos in the slave quarters.”¹⁴

Nonetheless, Evans did recognize the South’s ugly history of racial oppression. He celebrated changes in southern urban politics, as increasing numbers of Black voters reshaped the political landscape—a phenomenon he examined in his third book, a collection of essays titled *The Lonely Days Were Sundays*.¹⁵ Meanwhile, he promoted southern Jewish history as a subject of academic and popular interest. His generous support was crucial to the founding of the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, his alma mater, and he graciously served as mentor and friend to scholars and fellow history enthusiasts. In his 1976 keynote address to the SJHS, he counseled his audience that collecting old community stories “will be a contribution to history but that’s incidental; it will leave a treasure for your family.”¹⁶ Five decades since the publication of Evans’s first book, the field is not only a space for me-search (or we-search); it’s also a site of analytic rigor and internal debate, which is as it should be. As he had hoped, communities and ways of life previously invisible in histories of the region have been rendered visible. His contributions to southern Jewish history, and thus to both southern history and American Jewish history more broadly, have been the true treasure, valuable beyond measure.

Marni Davis, Georgia State University

NOTES

¹ Eli N. Evans, *The Lonely Days were Sundays: Reflections of a Jewish Southerner* (Jackson, MS, 1993), 5.

² Eli N. Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South* (New York, 1976), ii.

³ *Ibid.*, iv.

⁴ The 2005 edition of *The Provincials*, published by UNC Press, added a new introduction by Evans and five additional chapters, including one on Jewish Atlanta since Sam Massell's mayoral defeat in 1973, and several about the death of Evans's parents.

⁵ Eric L. Goldstein, "Making History: An Interview with Saul Viener," *Southern Jewish History* 10 (2007): 67–72.

⁶ Eli N. Evans, "Southern-Jewish History: Alive and Unfolding," in "Turn to the South": *Essays on Southern Jewry*, ed. Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky (Charlottesville, 1979), 158–67, emphasis in original. The essay is noted in the text as "based on" the 1976 keynote address.

⁷ Evans, *Lonely Days were Sundays*, 5; Evans, *Provincials*, iv, 40, 260–61; Evans, "Southern-Jewish History," 160.

⁸ Evans, *Provincials*, 304, 141.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 108–10.

¹⁰ Eli N. Evans, *Judah P. Benjamin: The Jewish Confederate* (New York, 1988), xvii.

¹¹ Edward S. Shapiro, "Review: Evans, *Judah P. Benjamin*," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 82 (January–April, 1992): 563.

¹² Stephen E. Maizlish, "Review: Evans, *Judah P. Benjamin*," *Journal of Southern History* 55 (August 1989): 499.

¹³ David Brion Davis, "Review: Evans, *Judah P. Benjamin*," *American Jewish History* 78 (December 1988): 304.

¹⁴ Evans, *Provincials*, 184.

¹⁵ Evans, *Lonely Days were Sundays*, 80–84, 130, 318.

¹⁶ Evans, "Southern-Jewish History," 167.