

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

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2023  
Volume 26



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# 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)).

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## In Memoriam Lee Shai Weissbach (1947–2022)

**T**he community of American Jewish historians received the word in late September that our friend and colleague Lee Shai Weissbach had passed away. We all enjoyed being with him and learned so much from him.

Briefly in terms of biography, Lee Shai was born in British Mandatory Palestine, did his undergraduate studies at the University of Cincinnati, received his doctorate from Harvard University, and taught during his entire career at the University of Louisville, where he held a number of administrative positions. At Louisville his students and colleagues respected him. He taught in Israel and attended conferences in England, South Africa, and so many other places, combining his zest for scholarship with his zest for travel.

We were saddened by the news, recognizing that we had lost a dedicated scholar, an enthusiastic participant in all of our gatherings and publication projects, and a warm human being who loved nothing better—other than being with his wife Sharon, children Kobi and Maya, and their children—than being at a conference chatting with everyone and anyone, brimming with the joy of making connections and learning from others. Those who met Lee Shai at the meetings of the Southern Jewish Historical Society, the American Jewish Historical Society, or the Association for Jewish Studies, whether other academics or members of the interested public, could not but notice his spark.

Lee Shai always found something to discuss with nearly anyone. He found out who in his extraordinary and always expanding network of friends and contacts connected to whom, and he derived such joy from

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regaling people, whether he just met them or whom he had known for decades, with stories about the many webs that linked him to them and them to others. He was truly a “people person.”

Lee Shai Weissbach contributed much to our field. He began his career studying French history, focusing particularly on child labor and the state and philanthropic efforts to reform it. No doubt he loved the subject. His book, gracefully written, revealed his commitment to meticulous scholarship and, as in his later writing, he cleverly derived much meaning from small, previously ignored details buried in French documents and archives.

But those of us who knew Lee Shai well—and I met him when he and I, at aged fourteen, attended the same summer camp—knew that his heart lay with Jewish subjects, history in particular, but the contemporary community as well. His commitment to the Jewish world, past and present, was nothing but passionate, and his writings, particularly on Jews in small-town America and the synagogues of Kentucky, where he lived,

*Lee Shai Weissbach with his wife, Sharon, at the SJHS conference in Asheville, 2012.  
(Courtesy of Sharon Weissbach.)*

reflected his understanding of himself as a scholar but also as a Jew who believed that by studying the past, Jews in the present would not only learn facts but would strengthen their commitments to Judaism and the Jewish people. As in his first book, his later ones, including his annotated version of his grandfather's memoir, which Lee Shai translated from Hebrew, brimmed with excitement and wonder. He showed how matters that others considered mundane and not of historical significance indeed revealed much about the times and places in which Jews went about the process of building communities and living in them.

Lee Shai Weissbach taught us about the importance of maps and places. After all, he would have said, our subjects lived in real places, and they moved around the world. To know them we had to literally see where they had been. He also attended to material objects, architecture, and other visual documents more than as mere illustrations but as central to his project of trying to understand how Jews lived and how they related to that which Lee Shai loved so much – their Jewish identities.

Since I go so far back with Lee Shai, I may feel his passing with a different kind of sadness and poignancy than the many others whom he met in his adult decades as a scholar of American and southern Jewish history. They, like I, recognize that we have lost a genuine human being.

Hasia Diner, New York University

