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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel B. Heimovics, *Managing Editor*

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AS TOLD TO MEMOIRS

Ruth and Rosalie:
Two Tales of Jewish New Orleans

by

Bobbie Malone

Since I began research in southern Jewish history a decade ago, Ruth Dreyfous, now 97, and Rosalie Cohen at 88, have served as my chief informants. For many years I had known and admired these remarkable women from afar, but through conversations and interviews throughout the 1990s, they became two of my dearest friends. Both native New Orleanians—their homes not a mile apart—they grew up in two totally different Jewish worlds. Together Ruth and Rosalie provide insights into twentieth century Jewish New Orleans, really the story of two communities that have only begun to come together in the last thirty years. Both the secular, assimilated Reform Jewish community and the more traditional Orthodox sector, however, shared certain attributes and aspirations—an emphasis on mitzvot, philanthropy and education. Ruth and Rosalie have lived full, public-oriented lives that reflect these concerns.

Although Jews began moving to New Orleans at the end of the eighteenth century, the New Orleans Jewish community as an organized entity with its own institutions actually dates from the 1820s when a Jewish cemetery was established and the first synagogue founded. The city's first Jews were single males who came from the Caribbean islands and had Sephardic roots. Most assimilated completely when they found Catholic wives and allowed their children to be brought up in the Church. After the War of 1812 as the cotton frontier moved west, more Sephardic Jews began moving from earlier settlements in South Carolina as

well as from the Caribbean. German Jews, part of the first wave of the German migration, traveled directly to New Orleans from Alsace-Lorraine, Bavaria, and other sections of southwestern Germany. These two early arriving groups assimilated easily and made up New Orleans' Jewish elite.¹

At the turn of the century, the major wave of the less-assimilable eastern European Jewish immigrants completely reshaped the American Jewish community by forcing it to accommodate large numbers of more traditional Jews. But because of its periodically devastating yellow fever epidemics and economic problems in the mid-1890s, New Orleans attracted relatively few eastern Europeans. The city thereby retained its German Jewish character, remaining one of the few American urban centers not thoroughly transformed by this third Jewish immigrant wave.²

Ruth Dreyfous' paternal grandfather, Abel, was one of those who hailed from Alsace; the parents of his New Orleans' born wife were from Germany. At the Abel Dreyfous home, French was spoken, and like many Creoles, Ruth's father grew up completely bilingual. When Abel established himself as a notary, the Dreyfous family became members of prosperous antebellum Jewish New Orleans. By the time Ruth was born in 1901, her father, Felix, had emerged as one of the city's leading notaries and attorneys, a civic-minded Progressive reformer who had served a stint in the first "reform" state legislature after Reconstruction. There he fought the Louisiana Lottery, established the New Orleans police department and founded the levee board which began building the famous levee system to protect the city from flood devastation. As Ruth consistently reminds me, "The most important influence in my life was Father." She is equally proud of her prominent relatives and says, "It's interesting to look back and realize how fortunate I've been." The family lived in a stately three-story home on Jackson Avenue in the heart of the city's lovely Garden District.

The massive wave of eastern European Jewish immigrants reached its peak about 1907, the year Rosalie Cohen's parents immigrated to New Orleans from Bialystok, then Poland, now

*Rosalie Cohen
in the 1950s*

Russia. Bialystok according to Rosalie, was “a seat of Jewish learning, [and]. . . economically, it was a prosperous place” which benefited from the textile industry introduced by Jews into Poland years before. Rosalie’s parents were well-educated. Her father, a chemist, experimented with textile dyes, and her mother graduated from a secular gymnasium, the equivalent to an excellent preparatory school. Distantly related, they married after their arrival in New Orleans, and Rosalie was born just three years later.

Rosalie’s mother was one of six siblings all brought to America by her mother’s oldest brother, Jacob Brener. Having arrived first, Brener had entered the furniture business on Dryades Street, the “bustling” center of the uptown Jewish business district and the commercial headquarters of the Orthodox Jewish community. The furniture business in the city is still dominated by the same turn-of-the-century families of eastern European Jews. Rosalie’s father, Leon Palter, traveled from Poland with her uncle, one of three brothers who married three sisters.

Rosalie's maternal grandparents also immigrated to New Orleans. Although her grandmother died shortly after arriving, Rosalie's grandfather lived until she was about six years old, and she remembers him "very distinctly." Rosalie learned to speak Yiddish because of him, although not as her first language; her parents spoke English at home. Rosalie's father, a talmudic scholar, also was completely literate in Hebrew. While English dominated their daily lives, Yiddish was the *mamaloschen* of their family reunions. Rosalie is "very thankful" for the experience of being a child while her grandfather was still alive since "the Yiddish that I learned then I still remember." Her parents spoke Russian fluently, the language used "when they didn't want me to understand," something Rosalie still resents because she feels that "children should be encouraged to speak second languages."

While Ruth's and Rosalie's parents occupied separate social and religious orbits, their main social contacts were Jewish. Ruth's father, for example, was an active member and long-time president of the Harmony Club, an elite Jewish men's organization which not only provided elegant rooms for card-playing and billiards but presented Jewish debutantes—Ruth's mother, Julia, among them. The Harmony Club gave "fancy balls" with programs and souvenirs, and Ruth recalls her parents' returning home from these affairs and placing "all the little souvenirs on our beds." A prominent non-Jewish associate had "insisted on Father joining the [New Orleans] Yacht Club" which included only a handful of Jews. Although her parents became members, when her brothers were old enough to apply, they were turned down. "Father resigned. It's just queer . . . he was begged to belong, but then we got to the point where they weren't wanted." In spite of this kind of social discrimination, Ruth and Rosalie claim that neither has experienced any overt anti-Semitism. Perhaps this denial stems from their stressing personal altruistic commitments above all else, and their refusal to admit to social anti-Semitism is a function of their devaluing it as a stumbling block to their own accomplishments.

Rosalie spoke of the exceptionality of growing up where the Reform community was the overwhelming majority, the self-appointed maintainers of secular Jewish organizational leadership which centered in an early forerunner of the New Orleans Jewish Federation, the major funding agency.³ Reform Jews continue to dominate local federation leadership, but such dominance was more pronounced in the early years of the twentieth century, when, as Rosalie put it, "You might say my father was the token Orthodox."

By the time Rosalie had assumed a leadership role in federation in the 1950s, many of those who grew up in the Orthodox community now held dual memberships in both the congregations of their youth and in the Reform congregations where they often sent their children for religious education. As Rosalie recalls with a tone more descriptive than her words, "the socializing was not especially close, shall we say. People had their own friends—in both communities." Ruth also recognizes the problems she witnessed "in Orthodoxy not mixing." Rosalie and her husband, Dr. Joseph Cohen, were the first Orthodox couple she met, and by then, Ruth was a young woman, and Joe had become a family friend and her brother's physician. It was easier for Orthodox Jews, like Joe Cohen, who were well-respected for their professional affiliation, to gain acceptance among the Reform Jewish elite than it was for non-professionals.

Ruth remarked that while non-Jews dominated her father's legal practice, he also had many Orthodox clients. As Ruth puts it, "when one Orthodox Jew comes to America, he finds somebody . . . [to] trust; that's the first thing." Her father knew a great deal about property and advised his clients on real estate investments in addition to legal matters. "Father called them the 'mechula crowd' because they . . . came over here with nothing" and then prospered from his advice.

The youngest of four children, Ruth is proud of her family heritage, proud that her paternal family did not have a merchant past. She, too, was deeply influenced by a grandparent, her father's mother, who lived with the family and whose bedroom was next door to Ruth's. Highly acculturated, the family nevertheless

*Ruth Dreyfous in the late
1980s*

maintained an active membership in the prestigious, Classically Reform Temple Sinai, and her first specifically Jewish memory is attending Sabbath services in the old temple with her grandma, who liked to “go every Saturday to temple in the morning, until she couldn’t make the steps” any longer. Afterward, she remained home on Saturday mornings, “in her rocking chair . . . reading the service to herself.” When her grandmother died in 1914, Ruth recalls that the family had a minyan come to the house for prayers, a ritual more traditional than the family normally would have practiced. Her grandmother’s devotion to prayer impressed Ruth, but her devotion to Ruth’s well-being is an especially dear memory, “When I was sick. . . she’d come in and sit by my bed all day. She was wonderful, and. . . she was always home.”

Ruth claims that while her father “never was much of a church-goer,” her own value system was nonetheless shaped by her Jewishness. In recognizing the primacy of education in the panoply of Jewish culture, she claims that “Jews have survived. . .

because education was . . . the most important thing in life, really." All four Dreyfous children obtained advanced degrees—the older three in architecture, law, and psychology. After Ruth's undergraduate degree from Newcomb College, she obtained a master's degree from Columbia University in Child Development. She never married and, from 1938 to 1965, pioneered in child development at her alma mater and the city's finest preparatory school, Isidore Newman,⁴ where she established the first remedial reading program in the city and initiated psychological testing and counseling. Ruth remained active as a volunteer, especially in organizations concerned with civic, racial, and political affairs like the American Civil Liberties Union, the Urban League and the League of Women Voters, which Ruth helped organize locally. Again, she consciously "tried . . . to follow Father in his interest in people and in doing things for them." After leaving Newman, Ruth worked for the local poverty program by initiating Head Start classes in the predominantly black Lower Ninth Ward and in a large public housing project in Algiers. Ruth worked as a professional, but she never took a paycheck home. Her father's sound advice and investments provided the financial security she needed, and she donated her salary to Newman and, later, to Total Community Action, the local program funded during the War Against Poverty era of the Johnson administration.

Although Rosalie's father, Leon Palter, his brothers and brothers-in-law started what became a large moderately-priced furniture business, Palter was more interested in the richness of Jewish learning than in material wealth as an end in itself. The Palters lived on the corner of Baronne and Euterpe Streets, within walking distance of her father's store and, more importantly, a few short blocks from the city's largest Orthodox congregation, Beth Israel. The web of marriages which bound three of her mother's brothers to three sisters enlarged an already sizable family. Each of those three families had seven or eight children, so that "there were innumerable cousins." In the morning they "would troop to [public] school," walking uptown, "girls going to the Magnolia School on the left, and boys going to McDonogh #10

School on the right." In the afternoon, they reversed their route as they headed for Communal Hebrew School, a community-managed, rather than a congregational-based, institution. After World War I, Rosalie's father and a "minyan of householders" brought Ephraim Lisitzky to New Orleans from Milwaukee where he had taught Hebrew to Golda Meir, later prime minister of Israel, by inducing him to head the nascent school in an effort to bring traditional Jewish culture to the Crescent City—a task that attracted few Reform Jews. Lisitzky, Rosalie rhapsodizes, was "one of the important Hebrew poets of that period." He remained in New Orleans forty years. Rosalie's childhood coincided with the adolescent years of political Zionism, heightened by the issuance of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 that promised a Jewish homeland in Palestine, years that ushered in a "renaissance" of the Hebrew language as it entered into the modern world of daily discourse after centuries of being reserved as a sacred tongue. Lisitzky's poetry made him a key figure in this reawakening,⁵ although most secularly well-educated Reform Jews in the city knew nothing of his significance—if they were aware of his existence at all.

Unlike most Orthodox Jewish males in the early years of the twentieth century, Rosalie's father took an enlightened view of women's education. Rosalie grew up believing that women were in no way "inferior to men or had less of a responsibility to be educated." She became, first, a Hebrew scholar, star pupil of Communal Hebrew School under Lisitzky's direction, then a journalism and English major at Tulane, and later a Zionist and Jewish communal leader in organizations like Hadassah and the New Orleans Jewish Federation. In 1959, Rosalie became the first woman to be elected president of the federation, a post she held during a prolific three years of intense community institution-building under her persistent guidance. During her presidency, she established a young leadership cadre within federation and worked to build a bridge between Orthodox and Reform contingents to found a Jewish home for the elderly. She never considered the mantle of leadership "remarkable," however, just something "right. . . something that should have happened."

Still facile in her language skills, Rosalie bemoans the present when “over 90 percent of Jews in America have no knowledge of Hebrew.” Many of those “who read it, don’t understand it,” she laments, a sad commentary on “the people of the Book [who] can’t understand the Book in the original, and what they know about Jewish life, they know only in translation.” She feels strongly that “you can’t really understand a culture if you don’t understand the language” and recognizes “the great good fortune of being brought up in a family in which Yiddish was an important language, and which Hebrew. . . was important because it was the language of our people. . . the language of the Torah.” Rosalie credits this firm foundation in enabling her “to understand the Torah as I do. . . understand my Jewish people as I do. . . Judaism as I do.” Even though she rarely has the opportunity to speak in Hebrew in New Orleans, she reads the Torah’s weekly parashah and relishes her Hebrew conversations in Israel. As she says, “I have had the rare opportunity—in a place so far removed from the mainstream of Jewish life as New Orleans is—to have been able to grow up in this environment.” Like Lisitzky, Rosalie was nurtured by the closely-knit Orthodox community that lived, studied, worked and prayed in the Dryades Street area, almost directly across St. Charles Avenue from the Garden District where Ruth lived.

Ruth never attended Hebrew school and learned few Hebrew words in Temple Sinai’s religious school, even in her training for confirmation, a Reform ritual originally designed to replace the more traditional bar mitzvah. Ruth remembers well her confirmation class under Rabbi Max Heller, Sinai’s first liberal and progressive rabbi. Heller was a leading Reform Zionist at the time when most Reform Jews, including most of his congregation, were bitterly opposed to Zionism. Ruth and her parents were among them, and she has never given money to Zionist programs. She insists that while Heller was a good teacher, “I didn’t believe I was learning history; I was learning myths, and we learned things by heart. . . Judaism should be taught as a very living thing, and it wasn’t.” The problem of communicating Jewish culture without complete reliance on the language, rituals, and traditional texts

was a major dilemma of the Reform movement of her generation. Like many secularized Jews, Ruth feels little that binds her to the specific obligations of Jewish belief, although Jewish ethical values have shaped her worldview.

Rosalie's social world was home-centered, and she remembers it as "a wonderful place" where her father used to bring home from the shul "a Jew from any community, any part of the world" who happened to be visiting the city. Her father's welcome and her mother's gracious hospitality brought Rosalie's future husband into her life. While he was a young student from New York attending Tulane Medical School, her father saw him in shul and invited him home for dinner. Because he was fifteen years her senior, Rosalie says that he had to return for several years to give her time to grow up so that they could marry, having "decided early on that I was for him, which I knew nothing about." For Rosalie, the Palter home was particularly radiant on a Shabbat night when friends and family visited. While most of the children played outdoors, Rosalie liked to stay with the adults who brought the various Yiddish newspapers to which they subscribed and short stories by famous Yiddish authors which they read aloud as they sat around the table. She recalls her fascination: "I just drank it all in, and I felt this was a world! This was a world! The secular world outside was a different kind of world, but here I was living in two worlds." Even though she was too young "to fully analyze what was happening," she recognized that "this world had its values and its importance . . . just as important as anything I was going to do or find out there." She had found a literal shield of David to protect her from social affronts as she championed causes on behalf of her people.

Less observant, the Dreyfous family lit no candles on Friday night and ate no traditional Shabbat meal, but Ruth does remember Passover as the one annual occasion when the entire extended family gathered at their home, "and Father would read the services. . . I was the youngest for a long time, and I'd ask the [Four] Questions. . . We had a good time; Father would cut it short, and then we'd have fun singing songs and hiding things. . . I

remember [it] vividly every year. . . a very charming holiday, . . . the one holiday I think of now."

Growing up, Ruth had both Jewish and non-Jewish friends. "We didn't start with mostly Jewish friends until adolescence when they started having clubs and parties. [But] as you were growing up, you went to everything." The shift came "about the second or third year of high school. . . [when] you weren't included in their big social things." Ruth's involvement after graduation, mostly in civic affairs beyond the Jewish community, placed her in more contact with non-Jews. Today her closest friends are the few remaining elite Jews with whom she grew up and those, Jewish and gentile, she met through her civic and philanthropic endeavors. Ruth maintains she feels "very loyal to Judaism. . . [although] I don't really practice."

Rosalie, on the other hand, places no emphasis on her social life. "I didn't have too much time for fooling around. I was always involved, and to me, this seemed like a very satisfactory way of life. If I was missing anything, I wasn't aware of it . . . I really had no sense of losses . . . because I was in a rich environment. . . in addition to which, because of Lisitzky's importance, there was a trail of celebrities of the day—the great teachers, the great writers, the important personalities who would come to New Orleans to visit with him. These were all so absorbing! . . . So that you see, my life was so interesting that I wouldn't have wanted anything different from what I had." Throughout her life, Rosalie says, she has gained her "greatest satisfaction" in "the personalities that I was able to meet as a result of the interests that I had."

Ruth, too, feels privileged to have known outstanding personalities, including the many prominent attorneys and jurists in her large and well-connected family, and those she has met through her work and travels. Like Rosalie, Ruth is an active Democrat, and both follow the news with passion, completely devoted to the issues of civic improvement—for Rosalie, mainly the international Jewish community, for Ruth, mainly the local secular community—and social justice which knows no boundaries. Zionism remains the heart and soul of Rosalie's devotion, while Ruth still resists supporting Israel. Both, from their separate

vantage points, are anxious for any sign of Middle Eastern peace. Only issues of health and aging inhibit their involvement.

Even though only those born in New Orleans—or some would say, who are second- or third-generation—can ever claim “insider” status, more than thirty years of living as an active member of the local Jewish community informs my perspective and appreciation of Ruth Dreyfous and Rosalie Cohen. Someone less familiar with the historic tensions in this environment might miss the subtle nuances of their lives which, in defining two divergent traditions, illustrate the strangely bifurcated Jewish community that originally stimulated my interest in southern Jewish history. Because Ruth and Rosalie still champion positions forged in the first decades of the twentieth century, they offer memorable snapshots of intense intra-ethnic tensions that have slowly defused since the 1967 Israeli Six Day War. That watershed event stimulated support of Israel among younger members of the Classical Reform community and led many to embrace more traditional religious observances than their parents did. At the same time, younger members of the Orthodox community have moved into Reform or Conservative congregations. In their lifelong commitments and concerns, Ruth and Rosalie therefore dramatize the unfolding of twentieth-century New Orleans Jewish history as few other women in the community could.

N O T E S

¹ Bertram Wallace Korn, *The Early Jews of New Orleans* (Waltham, Massachusetts, 1969).

² Bobbie Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller: Reformer, Zionist, Southerner, 1860–1929* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1997).

³ The New Orleans Jewish Federation is a much more recent organization. When the WPA compiled an Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives of Louisiana (Baton Rouge, 1941), researchers noted a Central Council of Jewish Organizations that existed briefly in 1939 and left no records. The Jewish communal organization to which Rosalie refers dates to the pre-World War I era.

⁴ Isidore Newman was a local turn-of-the-century Jewish philanthropist who originally established Isidore Newman Manual Training School as an institution to educate the children

from the nearby Jewish Children's Home, but from the beginning, the school's excellent academic department attracted students from wealthy families, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

5 Born in Minsk in 1885, Ephraim Lisitzky immigrated to the United States after World War I. After living in various northern, Canadian, and midwestern cities, he spent the remainder of his career in New Orleans as an educator and poet. He demonstrated his interest in the culture of his adopted region and sympathy with its oppressed African American population in poetry that celebrated black folk culture and music. Interview with Annette Brown, Lisitzky's daughter, New Orleans, 1993; interview with modern Hebrew literature scholar, Yair Mazor, Madison, Wisconsin, 1998; *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 304ñ305.