

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Eric L. Goldstein, *Book Review Editor*

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## Book Reviews

**Stein Mart: An American Story of Roots, Family, and Building a Greater Dream.** By David J. Ginzl. Tampa: University of Tampa Press, 2004. 162 pages.

Stein Mart, the Greenville, Mississippi, clothing store that grew into a multimillion dollar designer-discount chain, adapted its name from another southern upstart—Wal-Mart. In the jargon of the times, “mart” meant “markdowns,” and the Stein family business was not only *au courant*, but in the forefront of retailing trends. From Sam Stein, the Delta peddler, to grandson Jay Stein, the CEO, the Stein Mart story exemplifies the challenges faced by a family-run enterprise expanding to keep pace with America’s business and consumer culture.

Historian David J. Ginzl’s centennial history of Stein Mart is both a business primer and biography. It illuminates the transition from a mom-and-pop shop where the family members dip into the register for petty cash into a publicly traded company accountable to Wall Street. Billed as “an American story of roots, family, and building a greater dream,” this five-chapter book places the development of Stein Mart within larger business trends, such as the rise of discount stores and the decline of department stores. It also dissects entrepreneurial styles, from the Horatio Alger personalities of one generation to the professional business schooling of the next.

Ginzl, a teacher and banking consultant, seeks to write an objective narrative, rich with regional context and multiple family viewpoints. He sees the store’s evolution as a success story infused with the values of extended family. While the volume is well written and balanced, this is a commissioned institutional history with minimal interpretation. To his credit, Ginzl does not shy away from chronicling negative Wall Street analyses, sibling

rivalries, and father-son tensions. Faced with inevitable family conflicts, Ginzl strikes a dispassionate stance, exploring participants' viewpoints and biases. He augments his analysis with references to memoirs of other southerners, among them Eli N. Evans, who wrote the book's foreword, and David L. Cohn, one of Greenville's native sons.

Ginzl approaches his subject chronologically, emphasizing key personalities, such as grandfather Sam Stein; his children Jake, Joe, Sadie, and Bernard; and Jake's only child, Jay. Through oral histories and financial records, he examines the backgrounds and track records of key managers recruited since the 1980s. He profiles the original Boutique Ladies—socialite saleswomen who helped transform Stein Mart into a magnet for upscale shoppers. The author presents each personality profile against the backdrop of the ups and downs of the economy, both regionally and nationally. He also meshes the chronology of the store with historical events such as the World Wars, New Deal agricultural programs, the Civil Rights movement, and the mergers-and-acquisitions climate of the 1980s.

The Stein Mart story begins with Russian soldier Sam Stein (1882–1933) who flees to the United States in 1904. Initially, he works as a courier for a New York cousin in the coat industry but later relocates to Memphis where he peddles costume jewelry. During business trips down the Mississippi River, he is drawn to Greenville, where Hebrew Union Congregation is constructing a new temple. Sam Stein finds his niche there, opening a shop with merchandise prices lower than that of other Jewish storekeepers. This sets the pattern for the next two generations.

On the eve of Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidential inauguration, Sam Stein unexpectedly dies. His oldest sons, then twenty-two and twenty-one years old, take over. Although inexperienced at business, the brothers were high school football heroes. The town rallies behind them. After sitting *shiva* for seven days, Jake places a full-page ad in the *Delta-Democrat Times* announcing an "administrator's sale" (27). The ad signals an aggressive change in style. Sam Stein was a low-key entrepreneur. Jake Stein (1911–1989) is the opposite, reveling in promotions, come-ons, and

events that draw crowds. Jake is also an intuitive, hands-on merchant who keeps inventory in his head and a markdown pen in his hand.

World War II alters the family dynamics. Jake, discharged as a second lieutenant from the U.S. Army, can no longer boss around his kid brother, Bernie, who achieved the rank of captain. The siblings divide their business into two commercial entities – Sam Stein’s and Stein’s Outlet Store (forerunner of Stein Mart). Both shops operate within a family partnership and split net profits. Jake continues as the discounter who shops for closeouts, overruns, and irregulars. He builds a rapport with retailing representatives in New York. In Greenville, he expands into ever-larger storefronts.

At the height of Jake Stein’s expansion in the summer of 1965, civil rights marchers target his business – unfairly, Ginzl argues. According to the *Delta-Democrat Times*, Stein Mart was “a leader not a laggard” in hiring African Americans and selling to a mixed clientele (60). Jake Stein had also played a “critical” role during a “heated meeting” at Hebrew Union Congregation over whether or not the city’s Jews would endorse the White Citizens’ Council (50). They did not. The Civil Rights Movement contributes to the exodus of young Jews from the Delta. During the initial years of public school integration, many children head out of state for schooling, including Jay Stein, who goes to Jacksonville, Florida, from 1961 to 1963, where he attends a private high school. After that, he enrolls in New York University’s business school and completes internships at Saks Fifth Avenue and Fruit of the Loom. Jay is the only one of Sam Stein’s ten grandchildren who cares to return to the Greenville family business. He is so eager to work alongside his father that he leaves school before completing his degree.

From 1967 to 1984, Jake and Jay endure an uneasy partnership as they wage a father-son tug-of-war. Jay argues for inventory controls and annual audits. He urges his father to dissolve the inequitable partnership with his brothers. He pushes for upscale, brand name merchandise, “to sell steak at hamburger prices” (69). Father and son squabble on the sales floor. Despite

these disputes, Ginzl stresses that Jay seeks “affirmation from a father he respected” (71). The father is both adversary and mentor. Together, Jake and Jay attend trade shows. From his dad, Jay learns negotiating strategies. He bonds with his father’s longtime friends in the manufacturing sector. He learns about promotion and the art of orchestrating a shopping event. When, in 1977, Jay convinces his father to give him leeway to open a second Stein Mart in Memphis, Jake thinks his son is doomed to failure. The rest is contemporary consumer history – 150 Stein Mart stores by 1995 and 260 by 2004. Even so, Jake winces one season as he signs a \$1 million line of credit for fall merchandise.

From peddling in 1904 to initial public offerings in 1992, the *Stein Mart* story adds to the narrative being told by a growing number of scholarly works on southern Jewish business, including Bernard Rapoport and Don Carleton’s *Being Rapoport: Capitalist with a Conscience* (2002) and Harold M. Hyman’s *Oleander Odyssey: The Kempners of Galveston, Texas, 1854–1980s* (1990). The Stein Mart book provides an excellent model for future work in this area by grounding its story in business history without downplaying its subjects’ Jewish connections in Russia, in Greenville, and in retailing. The Stein Mart centennial journey also includes an insightful bibliographical essay, forty-one photos, and reproductions of thirteen Stein Mart ads and promotions. These contribute to the value of this history, which has roots in the South and branches throughout the country.

*Hollace Ava Weiner*

Fort Worth, Texas

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**Orthodoxy in Charleston: Brith Sholom Beth Israel and American Jewish History.** By Jeffrey S. Gurock. Charleston, South Carolina: College of Charleston Library in association with Brith Sholom Beth Israel, 2004. 119 pages.



In *Orthodoxy in Charleston*, noted historian of American Jewry Jeffrey Gurock turns his attention to Brith Sholom Beth Israel Congregation (BSBI) of Charleston, South Carolina. The result is a study that illuminates how one Orthodox congregation has surmounted the ongoing challenges to Orthodoxy that the American environment has presented through the decades.

Gurock's intent is to explore how national trends in American Judaism have played out at the local level. He describes seven phases in the congregation's history and analyzes how these phases "fit into the larger saga of American Jewish life between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries" (xiv). Confining his source material largely to the records of the congregation supplemented by memoirs of some key leaders, Gurock keeps the study narrowly focused on institutional history, rarely straying beyond the goings-on within the congregation to consider broader topics regarding the Orthodox Jewish community. Yet this slim volume makes two notable contributions. First, it adds to our knowledge of Orthodoxy in the South, a topic that has been under examined until fairly recently. Second, Gurock's analysis of how BSBI has exemplified national trends in American Judaism offers a welcome antidote to the tendency toward southern exceptionalism that often guides discussions of southern Jewry, as it does southern history in general. The study reminds us that the day-to-day issues that Orthodox Jewish congregations have dealt with in the South have been the same as elsewhere: factions based on old country origin or degree of Americanization, the need to negotiate change, difficulties in finding suitable religious leadership, and the impact of suburbanization and mobility.

By examining the history of BSBI, Gurock provides us with an institutional chronicle of Charleston's "other" Jews: the ones who did not attend its famed Reform congregation, Beth Elohim. We learn first about the original Orthodox Brith Sholom congregation, founded in the 1850s by Jews from Lithuania and (Gurock surmises) Prussian Poland. A national Jewish publication's 1860 reference to Charleston's "Polish congregation," Gurock points out, offers evidence of the diversity of nineteenth-century American Jewry and confounds the facile periodization of American

Jewish history into a mid-nineteenth century “German” era and an “East European” era typically seen as starting in the 1880s. We also learn about other congregations whose histories intertwined with that of Brith Sholom: Beth Israel, a congregation of later-arriving eastern Europeans that eventually merged with Brith Sholom after many decades; Emanu-El, a Conservative congregation that split off from Brith Sholom in the 1940s; and Minyan House, a suburban branch formed in the 1960s. Clearly, there was more going on in Charleston than Reform innovation.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of Gurock’s story is his description of the ongoing battle between Yeshiva University and the Jewish Theological Seminary for the hearts and minds of traditional-oriented Jews. From the 1920s to 1940s, the two seminaries vied to place rabbis in traditional congregations across the nation. For those of us accustomed to reading about Hebrew Union College’s influence on congregations in the American hinterlands, Gurock’s discussion of this battle—and how it was fought in Charleston—adds a new dimension to the relationship between southern congregations and the national infrastructure of American Judaism.

However, the study’s main strength is also its main flaw. While keeping his eye on the national context, Gurock provides virtually no local context. Brith Sholom, with its strong personalities and its infighting over such issues as Sabbath observance and mixed seating, could be anywhere in America; there is nothing that roots the story to a particular place. This is the natural result of Gurock’s choice of source material; he would have had to reach beyond congregational records to find out what influence, if any, Charleston had on BSBI and its members. Gurock does not really give us a profile of Charleston Jewry, or even of the Orthodox Jewish community, aside from a general explanation of the waves of immigrants who settled there. We learn about some of BSBI’s leaders, but we get only the briefest sketches of the Orthodox rank and file. It would have been particularly interesting to learn something about the congregation’s second and third generation Jews. Why and how, within the Charleston environment, did they make the decision to keep BSBI in the Orthodox fold?

Without rooting the study in a particular place, Gurock's description of the congregation's struggle to uphold Orthodoxy falls a bit flat, simply becoming a story of one faction winning out over another. In order to be impressed by BSBI's ability to maintain traditional Judaism, we need to know something about local conditions and the challenges congregation members may have faced. We need to know what, if anything, made Charleston's Jews different from their counterparts in small cities across the country in order to comprehend the significance of their embodiment of national trends. Perhaps place had no bearing on the congregation, but since the subject is not pursued, we are left to wonder. Jews in many small cities were unable to hold onto an Orthodox shul at all, and given that Charleston had not only an early Reform congregation but *the* early Reform congregation, it seems an oversight not to consider what bearing the city and its storied Jewish community had on the Orthodox Jews of BSBI.

Although a broader local view would have enhanced this book, Gurock does fulfill his stated aim, made explicit in the book's subtitle, to explore the links between BSBI and the national scene. In pursuing this goal, he offers a saga of American Orthodoxy as evidenced by one congregation's march through time. His study reminds us of the diversity of southern Jewry, past and present (a day school in Charleston founded in the 1950s—who knew?) and deepens our understanding of the connections that have existed between the local and national scene.

*Deborah R. Weiner*

Jewish Museum of Maryland

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**White Girl: A Story of School Desegregation.** By Clara Silverstein. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2004. 149 pages.

Clara Silverstein's wistful and evocative memoir of her schooldays recounts the experience of school integration as a racial, religious, and regional outsider in Richmond in the early

1970s. Clara was a transplanted northerner in a southern city, a white student in a racially tense and overwhelmingly black public school, and a lone Jewish girl among Christian classmates. Drawing on her childhood diaries, Silverstein chronicles the day-to-day difficulties of being a subject in what was an ambitious experiment in social transformation. Her memoir reveals the pain and confusion of a time when her mother's idealism conflicted with her own desire for the "familiar script of playing school sports or watching games, achieving a class rank, and attending school with the same group from kindergarten through high school" (145-146).

The awkwardness and discomfort of Clara's teenage years were compounded by concurrent personal and social crises. Her stable family life in Chicago ended in 1968 with the sudden death of her father. Reeling from this tragedy, Clara's mother, Ann Silverstein, returned to her hometown of Richmond, uprooting her two young daughters from an integrated neighborhood in Chicago to a city still grappling with court mandated desegregation. Clara's school years in Richmond coincided with early efforts to fully integrate the city's public schools. Although by the late 1960s legal barriers to desegregation had disappeared, the freedom of choice plan adopted by the Richmond School Board in effect preserved the racial status quo in the classroom. In response to a lawsuit filed by the NAACP, in 1970 the U.S. District Court charged the city with implementing measures to end the de facto segregation of the public school system. The School Board complied half-heartedly, reassigning teachers and introducing busing to ensure that each school reflected the racial balance of 30 percent white and 70 percent black, but canceling after-school activities that would entail interracial social mixing.

The enrollment of white children in Richmond's public school system dropped precipitously in 1971 and continued to decline throughout the decade. While many white parents moved to the suburbs or opted to send their children to private schools, Ann Silverstein chose to keep both of her daughters in the troubled public system. Clara was among a small group of white students assigned and bused to predominantly black schools with

the intention of redressing the racial imbalance. The memoir describes in painful detail her fraught teenage years, made even more difficult by the racial tensions in her middle and high school—the resentment of many of her black peers, exclusion because of her skin color, petty humiliations, and the “glares, elbows in my side, and occasional outstretched foot trying to trip me” in the corridors (55). Silverstein faults the school administrators and her teachers for avoiding topics that involved racial controversy and failing to address the psychological barriers that perpetuated social segregation in the school room. She also grapples with the role and responsibility of her mother, who had idealistic (and financial) motives for keeping her unhappy daughter in public school but was “oblivious to its emotional consequences” (145).

Although her prose is occasionally cloying and her use of imagined dialogue sometimes stilted, Silverstein has written an engaging account of her unhappy childhood. Moreover, her intensely personal reflections on this troubled time serve as an important addition to the existing literature. While the civil rights era, particularly the period of massive resistance, has been the subject of considerable popular and scholarly focus, the later period of adjustment and adaptation to desegregation has received much less attention. Articles on the response of Richmond’s Jewish community to civil rights questions—for example, the work of Murray Friedman, and Adele and David Bernstein—have generally followed this pattern. Silverstein reminds us of the difficulties and disruption of dramatic social transformation on the individual level. None would dispute the social and moral advances brought by the civil rights movement, but as this poignant memoir reveals, “being in the vanguard of social change can be a lonely, not a heroic, place for a child” (145).

*Adam Mendelsohn*  
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**Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History.** By Lee Shai Weissbach. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. 448 pages.

Like a peddler exploring new territories, Lee Shai Weissbach has been trekking the Jewish byways of small-town America. In a series of articles he has purveyed new ways of looking at American Jewry. With the publication of *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History*, Weissbach, a professor of history at the University of Louisville, has collected his merchandise and opened a store.

In his research on small-town Jews, Weissbach has contributed significantly to our understanding of American Jewish community development. He has been innovative in his uses of census data, and his quantitative approach has provided a balance, and often a corrective, to the folkloric approach often taken to small-town studies. His insights into mobility and population turnover have raised questions about the character of Jewish communities. Importantly, he has demonstrated the role of eastern European immigrants in sustaining small-town Jewish life, contesting the stereotype that it was German and Reform. Those of us who have benefited from his research have awaited this book with anticipation.

As with virtually every study of small-town Jewry, Weissbach begins with a justification. Statistically, he concedes, Jews are an urban people. In 1878, 71 percent of American Jews lived in cities with more than one thousand Jews, a figure that rose to 92 percent a half century later. But a large number of communities counted less than one thousand, and they have been less studied. Small towns provide insight into what is often regarded as the "authentic America," those mythic rural communities that are the nation's "heart and soul" (5-6).

What exactly is small-town Jewry? For the Union of American Hebrew Congregations the criterion was one temple and fewer than 150 families. Howard Epstein, in his anthology *Jews in Small Towns: Legends and Legacies*, looked at places with general populations under 25,000. Weissbach takes a far more nuanced approach: "Specifically, this study focuses on the communities of

those 490 urban places in the United States with reported Jewish populations of at least 100 but fewer than 1,000 individuals in 1927" (28).

Why these criteria? First, Weissbach contends that a minimum of one hundred Jews are needed to sustain communal life. Of 151 towns with fifty to one hundred Jews in 1927, about one half had congregations. By contrast, of the 490 towns with one hundred to one thousand Jews, nearly 90 percent had at least one congregation. The 1919 *American Jewish Year Book* used one thousand as a dividing line between small and primary communities.

Why 1927? In that year the Bureau of Jewish Statistics undertook a city-by-city Jewish census. More importantly for Weissbach, it represents the pinnacle of what he labels the "'classic' era of small-town Jewish life" (7). Small-town America itself was most salient from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. These were also critical years for American Jewry. Mass migration had ended, and Jews were developing communities. The small town's influence persisted until soon after World War II.

Jewish settlement follows economic opportunity. Communities form along transportation networks. By 1910, 480 of the 490 communities were on rail lines. Although communities might begin with single men, often peddlers, they typically consist of families who arrive in a chain migration as pioneers draw relatives and *landsleit*. The size of a Jewish community correlates strongly with the size of its general population, and its vitality follows the trajectory of the local economy. Jewish communities in oil and mining towns rose and fell with boom and bust. The small-town story is not one of "stability and continuity but rather one of fluidity and change" (71).

In arguing that small-town Jewry has a distinct character that generalizes across the country, Weissbach challenges many assumptions that underlie claims of distinctly regional Jewish identities. Such claims are especially true of the South and the West. Weissbach cites Mark Bauman in arguing that "regional variations in the American Jewish experience can easily be exaggerated." He is not dogmatic on this point. Weissbach sees "a



certain amount of truth" behind the generalization that "small-town Jewish life was the norm" in the South and the West (69). In 1927, for example, North Carolina had thirteen communities with more than one hundred Jews but none over one thousand; on the other hand, Georgia and Louisiana more closely resemble the national Jewish settlement pattern of metropolitan areas and outlying small towns. In the South, too, Jews were distinguished by their closer contact with African Americans, who were often their customers.

Weissbach shows that many characteristics often regarded as typically southern are typically small town. Small-town Jews found opportunity to be self-employed and independent. Jewish retailers, wholesalers, livestock dealers, and skilled artisans in small towns were middle class, in contrast to their working-class peers in the city. More so than urban Jews, they united across ethnic and religious lines. In a small town Jews could not be anonymous, and they were ambassadors to gentiles. They participated in civic societies and won political office, but they were discomfited by a latent antisemitism that excluded them from country clubs. They preferred their own social circles.

The "vast majority" of interwar, small-town Jewish communities arose with the eastern European Jewish migration (244). Prior to their arrival, only 11 percent of the triple-digit Jewish communities of 1927 had one hundred or more Jews. Even in those communities, German Jews had often moved on. The eastern Europeans came largely for the same reasons as the German Jews before them, and they entered similar retail trades. Their pervasive influence can be seen in the ethnic cohesion, the *Yiddishkeit*, that marked small-town Jewish life. The Germans looked warily at the eastern Europeans, who in turn spurned the German's assimilationism. Zionism, he notes, differentiated the two communities. By the 1920s, with acculturation and the rise of the native born, eastern European Jews, too, integrated into their host societies.

Typically, but not always, the first act of religious organization was the creation of a cemetery or benevolent society, followed by a congregation. By 1878, 83 percent of the triple-digit Jewish



communities had congregations. By the twentieth century, nearly all had turned toward Reform, an evolution marked by conflicts between liberals and traditionalists. Weissbach notes, as have other observers, that small-town congregations were willing to compromise and accommodate. Thus, a single congregation was typical of small towns. The pattern of religious liberalizing that Weissbach describes—laxity toward *kashrut* or the *mikvah*, for example—follows American Jewish trends, although the process may have worked more slowly in small towns. He also regards small town Jewish communities as distinctive in the difficulty they had in hiring rabbis.

What is the fate of small-town Jewry? By the early 1980s, Weissbach notes, 10 percent of his 490 communities had grown into significant towns with Jewish populations over one thousand. Jewish growth today is into the Sunbelt South, Southwest, and West. Rural towns have seen their college-aged youth migrate to metropolitan areas, a trend that accelerated as the past century ended. By 1991, 62 percent of the 490 triple-digit communities of 1927 had disappeared from the *American Jewish Year Book* listings (some because they had merged with other communities or into metropolitan areas). New communities, led by mobile professionals, were forming in expanding post-industrial towns, retirement centers, and college towns. “The fate of America’s smaller Jewish communities,” Weissbach concludes, “has mirrored the fate of small-town America” (311).

The book concludes with summarizing chapters on “Reading the Manuscript Census” and a “Bibliographic Essay” as well as appendices with invaluable statistical charts. Weissbach has done inestimable service in building quantitative foundations for many assumptions about small-town Jews, and his comparative approach is sorely needed in a field where the singular community study is more the norm. He has also demonstrated that suburban communities were unique and should not be subsumed into metropolitan areas.

Formidable and exhaustive, the book nonetheless invites debate. Is the choice of the 490 triple-digit communities of 1927 sufficiently encompassing of the small-town Jewish experience?

Do not places with fewer Jews have something to tell us? And what of regional differences? Cannot it still be argued that southern Jews encountered a distinctive racial and religious environment? And where data is lacking, as in the case of intermarriage, are anecdotes, often cited to the point of surfeit, sufficient? It is a tribute to Weissbach that he impresses not just for what he has accomplished but also for the further reflection that he inspires. *Jewish Life in Small Town America* will be a touchstone for all subsequent studies in the field.

*Leonard Rogoff*

Jewish Heritage Foundation of North Carolina