

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel B. Heimovics, *Managing Editor*

Eric L. Goldstein, *Book Review Editor*

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HISTORIAN PROFILE

In Distinguished Company:
A Profile of Solomon Breibart

by

Harlan Greene and Dale Rosengarten

It is well known that Charleston, South Carolina, has had a distinctive Jewish history and has contributed much to the evolution of American Judaism. Less well known are the individuals who have researched and written that history. The mantle of “Historian of Charleston Jewry” today rests squarely on the shoulders of Solomon Breibart, who continues a tradition of gifted lay scholarship that began before the Civil War. A brief examination of those who came before will help put Sol Breibart and his contributions into perspective.

Historians of Charleston Jewry

The first historian of note was Nathaniel Levin (1816–1899). Levin spent his days working as an import inspector and collections clerk in the customs house of Charleston. In his spare time he performed in amateur theatricals and wrote about the history of the city’s first congregation, Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (KKBE). As a member of KKBE, Levin was a consummate insider. According to Breibart, he “knew many of the old-timers and their immediate descendants” and was privy to early congregational records that survived the great Charleston fire of 1838 but are unknown today.¹ Levin’s essay on “The Jewish Congregation of Charleston” ran in four parts between October 1843 and January 1844 in Isaac Leiser’s new publication, *The Occident*. This was a period of extreme discord among Charleston’s Jews. KKBE had split in two and the famous “Organ Case” was under way. Levin

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had seceded along with the traditionalists to form a new congregation, Shearit Israel. Alarmed by the woeful state of affairs, he began his discourse with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., progressed quickly to the founding of KKBE in 1749, and ended with a lament for “the present situation of our congregations,” which he described as “a disjointed tribe, rent asunder by fierce party strife, and arrayed in hostile position against each other.”² Levin’s history was reprinted with revisions and addenda in Charleston’s centennial *Year Book* of 1883.³

The next important historian of South Carolina Jewry was not only a member of KKBE, but its rabbi. A native of the German town of Eydkuhnen, Barnett Abraham Elzas (1867–1936) had trained for the “Jewish ministry” at Jews’ College, London, and studied secular subjects and Semitic languages at the University of London and the University of Toronto. During his tenure as KKBE’s rabbi (1894–1910), Elzas earned degrees in medicine and pharmacy from the Medical College of South Carolina, in Charleston, and an honorary doctorate of law from South Carolina College, in Columbia, all the while churning out monographs and histories on the Jewish settlers of his adopted home state.⁴ But before Elzas became undisputed master of the field with his 1905 publication, *The Jews of South Carolina*, he had to battle a competing scholar, Leon Huhner, a non-South Carolinian.⁵

In 1899, Huhner had delivered a lecture on South Carolina Jewry to the American Jewish Historical Society that reached circulation in its *Publications*, and he subsequently contributed an essay to *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. Reading the encyclopedia entry, Elzas found it “without parallel in the number of errors that it contains.” Not content simply to note the fact, he wrote to the Charleston newspapers about it. No fading violet himself, Huhner answered back. Elzas fired off a rebuttal and had the newspaper articles on both sides published in pamphlet form. “Who on earth but Mr. Huhner,” Elzas asked with biting sarcasm, “would ever dream of writing the history of the Jews of Charleston in New York?” He stopped just short of accusing Huhner of plagiarism, declaring, “he appropriated my silver and forgot to rub off the hallmark.”⁶ The war of words raged on for several months in 1903,

until Elzas claimed victory by publishing comments of South Carolina historians who sided with his views. He went on to produce numerous pamphlets on topics of Jewish interest, reprinting them from the newspapers where they first appeared (a tactic Breibart, too, would follow) before publishing his magnum opus.⁷

Elzas left Charleston in 1910, and, although he complained bitterly that South Carolinians failed to appreciate (or buy) his book,⁸ the volume remained the standard work in the field until 1950. From a modern perspective Elzas's approach to history seems Victorian and tending toward ancestor worship, yet even today the work is frequently consulted and considered a classic.⁹ The publication that came next did not supplant Elzas but amplified his work, bringing the story forward four decades. Focusing only on the city, *The Jews of Charleston* by Charles Reznikoff and Uriah K. Engleman was commissioned to celebrate KKBE's two hundredth anniversary. While the occasion conflated the founding of the congregation with the history of Charleston's Jews, this work was the first to take into account the city's Ashkenazic Orthodox community. (In a footnote, Elzas had dismissed the "Polish congregation" Brith Sholom as having "no history, communal or otherwise, worth recording."¹⁰) Elzas might have criticized the poet Reznikoff and the historian Engelman for being outsiders (both writers were from New York), but surely he would have approved of the assistance they received from KKBE's Rabbi Allan Tarshish and its president, T. J. Tobias (1906–1970), who would become the congregation's next historian and Breibart's immediate predecessor.¹¹

Descendant of a dozen first families of Charleston and great-great-great-great-grandson of KKBE's first president, Joseph Tobias (1684–1761), T. J. Tobias was an avid collector of genealogical material. He maintained a correspondence with two of America's great rabbi-historians, Jacob Rader Marcus and Malcolm H. Stern, and during the 1950s and 1960s published slim hardback volumes on Charleston's Hebrew Orphan Society and Hebrew Benevolent Society, numerous pamphlets and articles about KKBE and its Coming Street cemetery, and profiles of notable early Jewish settlers, such as Revolutionary War patriot Francis Salvador, Joseph

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Tobias, a “linguister” or interpreter, and “The Many-Sided Dr. [Jacob] De La Motta.”¹² T. J. Tobias also helped bring the American Jewish Historical Society to Charleston in 1964. To commemorate the occasion he assisted Helen McCormack, director of the Gibbes Art Gallery, in mounting a landmark exhibition on southern Jewish history and art. Tobias saw to the restoration of KKBE’s historic burial ground, setting the stage for Sol Breibart, who would become keeper of the Coming Street cemetery and would complete a number of research projects that Tobias had begun.

Writing at the same time as Breibart, College of Charleston professor James W. Hagy brought to Charleston’s Jewish history the full force of modern scholarship. For his 1993 work, *This Happy Land: The Jews of Colonial and Antebellum Charleston*, Hagy conducted an exhaustive search of primary materials. Approaching the subject as an outsider, he drew upon new sources, including five articles by Sol Breibart, employed quantitative analyses, and addressed new questions, examining, for example, the roles of Jewish women and the controversial issue of Jews and slavery. He constructed thirty-six tables that detailed the origins of Charleston’s Jews, their occupations, legal disputes, and allegiance to the traditionalist and reform factions of KKBE. Hailed by Malcolm Stern as “the definitive history of America’s largest colonial-federal-period Jewish community,” *This Happy Land* concludes just short of the Civil War. Hagy left Charleston a few years after the book’s publication, while Sol Breibart, with a master’s degree in history, long membership in KKBE, and a dedication to his chosen avocation, continued to mine the field.¹³

A Journey to Scholarship

Born in Charleston in 1914, Breibart did not “cross the dividing line” that brought him to Charleston Jewish history until 1976. Before then he taught high school, served on the boards of a variety of educational agencies, historical societies, and civic and religious groups, and raised a family.

Sol’s father, Sam Breibart, had been born in Russia in 1892 and had come to the United States about 1906 or 1907, not long

Sol Breibart at the Coming Street Cemetery, Charleston, October 2000

*(Photo by Bill Aron,
courtesy of the Jewish Heritage Collection,
College of Charleston Library)*

Beth Elohim acquired its first cemetery in 1764 when Isaac Da Costa conveyed to the congregation his family burial ground on Coming Street for 70 pounds, "for the use of Jews residing in Charles Town or elsewhere within the province of South Carolina." The oldest surviving Jewish cemetery in the South, it is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The burial ground contains over 500 graves, many unmarked. The oldest identifiable grave is that of Moses D. Cohen, first religious leader of Beth Elohim, who died in 1762.

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after his bar mitzvah. Sam lived in New York with his father, Beryl Breitbard, and his stepmother. His mother, Zlate Friedman, had died in Europe. As a young boy, Sol visited his father's family in a typical, crowded tenement on Cherry Street in New York's Lower East Side. Sam worked in this area as a tailor. On December 20, 1913, Sam married Ida Goldberg, who had been born in 1894. Both most likely came from the area near Minsk.

Ida's brother, Harry Goldberg, left New York for Charleston, where a growing Jewish population, the promise of economic opportunity, and his relatives, the Doobrows, awaited. Goldberg started a grocery store and, a short time later, his brother-in-law, Sam Breibart, and Ida, pregnant with their first child, joined him. The Breibarts were living with the Goldbergs on Alexander Street when Sol was born. He was delivered at home by Kivy Pearlstine, the only Jewish doctor in town, and was followed over the next seventeen years by four siblings, George (1917), Mildred (or Mickey) (1923), Sidney (1928), and Jack (1931).¹⁴ The Breibart children were raised in the midst of a large extended family. Like many immigrant families, *mishpocha* followed *mishpocha*, and for a time the Goldberg grandparents, Ida's sister and two brothers, and more than a dozen of their offspring lived in Charleston.¹⁵ One of Sol's cousins, Harry Goldberg's son, Ben, became an attorney and also studied and wrote about Charleston's Jewish history.

Growing up in the city, young Sol often crossed Wragg Mall where he would be greeted by KKBE's rabbi, Dr. Jacob Raksin, who lived on the north side of the mall in Aiken's Row in a house that his wife's family had inhabited for six generations.¹⁶ Recent arrivals, the Goldbergs and Breibarts worshipped in the newest of Charleston's three congregations, Beth Israel, also known as the "Little Shul" or "Kaluszyner Shul," after the hometown of a core group of Polish immigrants. Beth Israel was founded in 1911 by members of Brith Sholom who broke away from the older Orthodox synagogue, which they did not consider Orthodox enough. The more established congregants of Brith Sholom, for their part, looked down on the greenhorns as social inferiors.¹⁷

Sol's Bar Mitzvah, Beth Israel, Charleston, South Carolina, 1927
(Gift of Solomon Breibart, Jewish Heritage Collection,
College of Charleston Library)

Sol's family were members in good standing of Beth Israel and kept strictly kosher at home. However, Ida opened the grocery store on Maple and Meeting streets on the Sabbath and on lesser Jewish holidays, while Sam went to shul. On the High Holidays the whole family walked the mile-and-a-half or two miles to Beth Israel. Sol remembers his new shoes raising blisters on his feet. Catering to a largely African American clientele, the grocery carried such *treyf* items as pickled pigs feet.¹⁸

In 1916, the Breibarts settled into a recently developed neighborhood near a new Standard Oil refinery. The residents, black and white, tended to be working class, a world apart from inhabitants of the lower peninsula, where most of KKBE's membership lived, and distant even from the immigrant households of Upper King Street. Consequently, most of Sol's childhood friends were not Jewish and, although he became a bar mitzvah at Beth Israel, he was not thoroughly grounded in Hebrew, Jewish customs, rituals, or Torah. He attended James Simons Elementary School, the High School of Charleston, and the College of Charleston. While in college, he played saxophone in a band to make extra money.

In his sophomore year Sol joined an organization that he now recalls changed his life. "That was where my Jewish education began," Breibart noted in a recent interview. Rather than pledge a fraternity on campus, he chose to join the local AZA chapter, many of whose members were not in school. AZA had a "Five-fold and Full Program," which emphasized personal improvement and community involvement. Working with AZA strengthened Sol's ties to Judaism and reinforced his commitment to social service. "We did charitable work. We did athletics. . . . That's how I got involved in Jewish organizations. . . . Rabbis would come and teach . . . and men in the community would come and talk to us and things of that kind." Breibart traveled to national AZA conventions and met such leaders as Sam Beber, regarded as the founder of the organization, and Julius Bisno, its executive secretary. At age twenty-one, Breibart became AZA's southeastern field secretary, covering the newly organized district from Washington, D.C., to Florida. As secretary he helped launch

several chapters and continued to expand his range of acquaintances across the South.¹⁹

After finishing college, Breibart knew he wanted to teach. His brother George stayed in the family business while Sol pursued a graduate degree in history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He wrote his master's thesis on the South Carolina constitution of 1868. Analyzing the membership of the convention which had an African American majority, Breibart concluded that the constitution was the most democratic the state had ever had.²⁰ At the College of Charleston, historian J. Harold Easterby impressed Breibart with the value of writing monographs on local organizations and of conducting primary research. (Easterby wrote about the college itself and the St. Andrews Society.) At the University of North Carolina, Fletcher Green, a distinguished historian, deepened Breibart's interest in southern history and stressed the importance of accuracy and clear expression.

"When I left Charleston to go to North Carolina, I was very provincial. I mean, in all meanings of the word," Sol recalls. He had spent his youth in the "narrow environment" of South Carolina. The College of Charleston "was . . . no great liberal institution. When I went to North Carolina, I had an eye-opener, a real eye-opener. . . . I knew I had latent liberal tendencies because . . . I didn't mind shaking hands with a black man. But when I went up there, I really blossomed forth liberally. My ideas changed a great deal, almost radically."

Vocation and Avocation

In 1938, Breibart returned to Charleston with a master's degree and a teaching certificate. He soon landed a job at the High School of Charleston, where he worked for eighteen years as a social studies teacher, guidance counselor, and student council advisor. Toward the end of his tenure he published an essay in the bulletin of the Charleston County Teachers Association titled "Why do I teach?" "As a breadwinner in this time of inflationary trends," Breibart wrote, "I've asked myself this question." Teaching was the best way he knew to help his "fellowman," to influence boys and girls to become good citizens and "reach for

the stars." No matter how difficult it was "to provide . . . those things that would give my family a full life," Breibart remained committed to the profession. "I have faith in education. . . . I am in large measure, for better or for worse, one of its products."²¹

"Yes," Breibart, confessed, "I am altruistic." But he also needed to support his family. At an AZA function Sol met Sara Bolgla, a young woman who was born in Poland in 1920 and raised in Augusta, Georgia. They were married on October 8, 1942. Their children, Carol and Mark, were born in 1947 and 1950, respectively. In 1956, Breibart moved to James Simons Elementary as assistant principal. A year later he returned to teaching at Rivers High School. There, in the 1960s, he counted among his students the future attorney and historian Robert Rosen, who credits Breibart with inspiring his own passion for history.²² At Rivers Breibart taught social studies, worked as a guidance counselor and student council advisor, and served seven years as department head and seven as assistant principal. He augmented his income by lecturing in secondary education at the College of Charleston and by directing youth and camp activities at the Jewish Community Center.

As a teacher of American history, he did not need to look far to find lessons in civics and civil rights. Rivers was the first high school in Charleston County to be racially integrated. In 1963, in response to a court injunction, two African American students enrolled in the high school, while nine other youngsters integrated four elementary schools.²³ Breibart remembers being sought out for advice by Millicent Brown and Jackie Ford, the young women who broke the color barrier at Rivers that year. "My inclination was to do what I could to help them." He is still angry about the way school integration was handled. It would have succeeded, Breibart believes, if the courts had not enforced school attendance zones. With demographic shifts, suddenly whole schools went from white to black, overwhelming the process.

"What I'm saying here," Breibart insists, "is an indictment of the white community. The school system in Charleston would never have degraded as much as it did had there not been white flight. . . . That killed it; that killed the school system for a long

*Sol and Sara Bolgla Breibart at Union Station, corner of
Columbus and East Bay streets in Charleston, on their way to
Washington, D.C., for their honeymoon, October 1942
(Gift of Solomon Breibart. Jewish Heritage Collection,
College of Charleston Library)*

time." In 1976, he decided to take early retirement. "I walked out of Rivers High School, [out] the front door on the last day of June when I turned my records in . . . and I never looked back. Not one minute of regret."

The Scholar Activist

Breibart looked about for something else to do. Over the years he had held various offices including president of the Central Council of Charleston Teachers and served on the executive board of the Charleston County Education Association, and he had performed considerable volunteer work through AZA, B'nai Brith, and the Jewish Community Center. He and Sara were now affiliated with the Reform temple, KKBE. Earlier in their married life they had attended services there as well as at both Orthodox synagogues. They joined KKBE in 1943, Breibart explains, because "they were the first to ask me." The next week, Brith Sholom tried to recruit them, but the Breibarts had already become members of Rabbi Raisin's congregation. True to form, Sol soon was elected to the board of trustees and served for eleven years as its secretary. In fact, he quips, KKBE was the only organization in which he was active that did not elect him president. He ran unsuccessfully for the post one time, during the period when his friend Rabbi Burton Padoll was under fire, but Breibart claims not to regret his defeat. It was a job he really did not want, and, besides, he preferred to serve the congregation in other capacities.

After retirement, Breibart considered starting a new job. He vowed to say no to everyone who asked for help except for the synagogue and was weighing his options when Rabbi Padoll, then living in New York, suggested a project. "'You know,'" Sol recalls Padoll saying, "'Thomas Tobias was interested in writing something about Penina Moïse. . . . I think someone can write a biography . . . that the Jewish Publication Society might publish.' So, I said, 'that bears looking into.'"²⁴

Penina Moïse was KKBE's second Sunday school superintendent and a prolific writer of hymns for the congregation. She may have been the first American Jewish woman to publish a book of poems. "The first thing I had to do," Breibart realized, was to

“find Thomas Tobias’s materials.” When Tobias died in 1970, his widow, Rowena, boxed up his research and stored his papers above Jack Patla’s antiques store on King Street in downtown Charleston. “I went up there very frequently,” Breibart recounts, “and I began to make a catalog of all the things that were in those folders. So I really had, in effect, a listing of all T. J. Tobias’s writings.” Breibart found the material Tobias had gathered on Penina Moïse and another idea came to him as well. “I had the vision in my mind [that] one of these days . . . as soon as possible, we should get all that material from Thomas’s collection over to the synagogue.”

In 1976, America was celebrating its bicentennial and public interest in history was at an all-time high. In that year, at a meeting in Richmond, Virginia, a long inactive Southern Jewish Historical Society was reorganized. When word got out that Breibart was working on Penina Moïse, he was asked whether he could have a paper ready for the first conference following the society’s creation, to be held in Raleigh, North Carolina, the following year.

Breibart began the research in earnest. Determined to find every poem Moïse had written, he tracked down descendants of the family who had a few manuscript verses. He found a first edition of *Fancy’s Sketch Book* at Duke University and a memorial volume of Moïse’s poetry with a short biographical sketch published in 1911 by the Charleston Section of the National Council of Jewish Women.²⁵ Realizing that most of Moïse’s work had first appeared in Charleston newspapers, Breibart began the arduous task of scrolling through seemingly endless microfilms and perusing fragile pages of nineteenth-century newsprint to discover previously uncollected poems. He eventually amassed an inventory of her output, noting on index cards which pieces appeared where and when.

Breibart did present a paper on Moïse at the SJHS conference, taking no offense at being called an amateur historian. (His cousin Ben Goldberg was outraged for him, but Sol says the description never bothered him.) In 1984, the essay was published in the SJHS collection *Jews of the South*.²⁶ This set a pattern: he would develop a

subject for oral presentation, rework it over the years, and then commit it to print. Beginning with this first conference, Breibart also committed himself to the Southern Jewish Historical Society, serving on the board of directors from 1976 to 1990, as president in 1983 and 1984, and as editor of the newsletter from 1981 to 1990.

While Breibart was working on *Moïse*, he occasionally volunteered as a docent at KKBE, giving tours of the historic sanctuary. Prompted by questions he could not answer, he went back to surviving congregational records and to the Charleston Library Society, searching newspapers for data on how the temple changed over the years, especially after the 1886 earthquake. He even got on hands and knees, looking under pews, where patches revealed the footings of columns that once supported a balcony. His research led to a publication on the buildings where Jews had worshipped in Charleston. In the process he found evidence of a hitherto unknown congregational split between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, a late eighteenth-century schism that Elzas and those who followed him had missed entirely. Breibart published his discovery in the quarterly of the American Jewish Historical Society and later reprinted it as a pamphlet, providing a new look at the city's early Jewish community, all from laborious digging in early newspapers and probate documents.²⁷

Breibart makes no great claims for his breakthrough. He is content to nail down the facts for others to analyze and interpret. Intent on getting the story right, he would correct not only others but himself as well. When an offprint of his "Synagogues of KKBE" was exhausted, and the congregation's sisterhood wanted to republish it,²⁸ Breibart went back to the drawing board and revised the text. He confirmed his suspicion that Cyrus Warner, credited as architect of the National Historic Landmark on Hasell Street, was not the building's designer but rather a draftsman who had developed work plans for contractor David Lopez. Agreeing with architectural historian Gene Waddell, Breibart acknowledged that Tappan & Noble of New York were the true architects.²⁹ The unassuming historian cautions, while paraphrasing Jacob Rader Marcus, "there is never a final word on something."

Sol Breibart with his homeroom class at Charleston High School, 1940
(Photo courtesy of Solomon Breibart)

For twenty-five years Breibart has been investigating Charleston Jewish history, and with careful, patient sleuthing, he has unraveled many mysteries. In the 1980s he was a regular contributor to KKBE's bulletin, the Jewish Community Center's *Center Talk*, and the newsletter of the Southern Jewish Historical Society, where his interests ventured beyond state borders into Georgia and Florida.

Meanwhile, in reviewing Elzas's publications on Jewish cemeteries, Breibart found puzzling information that led him to conclude there was another unknown congregation in the city, Shari Emouna, also spelled Shaare Amouna, literally, Gates of Faith, but known locally as Perfect Faith. Its members had seceded from Brith Sholom circa 1886. Breibart unveiled this finding in the *Charleston Jewish Journal*, where between 1993 and 1996 he published a dozen articles on diverse subjects, including a five-part series, "Women Who Made a Difference." From his work on Penina Moïse to his 1984 article, "The Status of Women in KKBE to 1920," to these profiles of notable women, Breibart paid serious attention to women's history.

Breibart did not neglect the Orthodox community. For example, he profiled Louis M. Shimel, first president of Charleston's JCC and the first Jewish U.S. Assistant District Attorney in South Carolina, appointed by President Warren Harding in 1922. Breibart's writing is characterized by precise wording, clear references, and silent emendations that draw attention to the topic, never to himself. He revised Jeffrey Kaplan's history of Brith Sholom Beth Israel, carefully crediting the original author.

To compile a list of Charleston Jewish servicemen in World War II, he turned to the community for additional names and published the new information in subsequent issues. Once an elderly Jewish Charlestonian claimed there were no sites of Jewish interest in the city. To prove him wrong, Breibart undertook years of research on sites tied to specific Jewish people, societies, and events. The resulting list of Jewish historical sites and his one-page "Chronology of Jewish Congregations," first published in the *Charleston Jewish Journal*, have guided thousands of tourists who have visited Charleston and KKBE over the years.

Appalled that local synagogues kept few, if any, records of the vital statistics of their members, and anxious to update research on Charleston's Jewish cemeteries begun by Elzas, Tobias, and others, Breibart scoured old newspapers, genealogical publications, and county death records. He created an index card for each burial, noting, to the extent possible, name, date and place of birth, date and place of death, where buried, names of parents, and source of information. He also accumulated twenty-five years of obituaries, providing an invaluable resource for family research.

Breibart has written about nineteenth- and twentieth-century Charleston Jews in law enforcement, showing here and in other pieces his long view of history. He has focused on famous historical figures, writing biographical sketches of Revolutionary War hero Francis Salvador, David Lopez, builder of KKBE's second synagogue, and KKBE's Rev. Gustavus Posnanski, "First American Jewish Reform Minister." Often what started out as talks or as contributions to the temple bulletin were later expanded and published for wider distribution. Breibart also has served

as a compiler and bibliographer, producing a long list of articles on southern Jewish life that appeared in the American Jewish Historical Society and the American Jewish Archives journals through 1986. A movement to collect Breibart's work in a single volume is now under way, spearheaded by Sol's former student Robert Rosen and historian and journalist Jack Bass.

Asked how he decided what topic to pursue, Breibart responded, "I had no set goals. Every now and again, I'd get something to pique my curiosity. . . . This was purely at random." Once settled on an idea, "I began focusing on that—first of all, trying to think of all the sources, really the usual procedure. Where am I going to get the information on this? [I'd] follow the trail, gather as much information as I could, and when I felt that I had sort of exhausted [the topic] and couldn't find anything else to add to it, I would start to write. And I would write and I would write and rewrite and rewrite."

Breibart took every opportunity to conserve and collect historical materials, addressing various groups around town on Jewish topics and always encouraging individuals and community organizations to find their papers and save them. The primary materials would provide clues for later historians to add to the story. At the Jewish Community Center, he started an archives committee to solicit and collect materials, record oral history interviews, and create inventories of existing collections. He arranged for the transfer of three major manuscript archives to the College of Charleston Library and promised to donate his own voluminous research papers. Indeed, Sol Breibart might be called the godfather of the college's Jewish Heritage Collection, but titles are something he cares little about. Dubbed "Historian of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim," he plays down the honor: "It's just something that they threw at me, and I accepted it." Titles aside, Breibart's contribution to the archival record of South Carolina's Jews is monumental. From the moment he first dove into T. J. Tobias's materials, Breibart has applied himself to two complementary tasks: researching and writing southern Jewish history, and conserving the archives that facilitate future research and writing. Anxious to assure the safety and accessibility of the

Tobias papers, Breibart prompted their removal from Patla's antique shop to KKBE's "archives room," set up under the auspices of Rabbi William A. Rosenthal, an avid print collector and art historian.³⁰ "Archives room" is somewhat of a misnomer, for the facility consisted of a small gallery lined with display cabinets downstairs, and an over-heated storage space upstairs. When scholars wanted access, it was Breibart who ferreted out the document they sought. When visitors wanted to see KKBE's historic Coming Street cemetery, Breibart brought the key and unlocked the gate.

Recognizing what sound archival principles mean to both the records and the historians, he began looking around for a suitable home for the archives of the three organizations to which he was most devoted: KKBE, the Jewish Community Center, and the Southern Jewish Historical Society. As an old, established, state-supported institution, open at no cost to researchers and students, the College of Charleston Library seemed a logical choice. First he encouraged SJHS to donate its archives to the college; then began the slow, painstaking process of transferring KKBE's papers. With this acquisition, clearly one of the most important collections of Jewish historical material in the South, it was a short step for the library to make its Jewish archives a major, permanent collection.

As project archivist and curator of the Jewish Heritage Collection, the authors of this essay owe a tremendous debt to Sol. In a scant decade, the acorn he planted has grown into a mighty oak. The collection has been processed and made accessible in record time, thanks to a Preservation and Access grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. With the remainder of the Tobias papers finally transferred to the college and into the hands of professional archivists, the rich treasure trove Breibart unearthed above Jack Patla's shop is now available to the public.

As this article goes to press, JHC staff members are publishing two essays based on papers Breibart brought into the library's Special Collections department: the annual reports of Moses Henry Nathans, chief of Charleston's fire department during the destructive 1861 blaze; and the diary of Joseph Lyons, a young man who witnessed the emergence of Reform Judaism in KKBE,

but did not live to see its establishment.³¹ The college library also has undertaken publication of a history of Brith Sholom Beth Israel that draws heavily on the recent acquisition of that congregation's archives.³² None of this would have been possible without the foresight and devotion of Sol Breibart.

Sol brushes aside praise for his accomplishments. Speaking of the Jewish Heritage Collection, surely one of his greatest legacies, he declares, "What's there . . . is there and I'm happy that it's there. Whether I get a credit for it or not, I don't care." He is not, he says, an emotional person. Is it a passion for history that drives him? "I don't think it's quite that strong," he demurs. "But it's in that neighborhood."

As for his own writing, he believes that his work "in connection with the history of the synagogue [KKBE] is probably the most important thing I've done." The booklet commemorating KKBE's 250th anniversary, which the congregation published in 1999, he regards as "an overview," "a skeleton" waiting "for somebody to put the flesh on the bones." The text to which he refers is a model of scholarship, clear, accessible, accurate, and beautifully illustrated, yet unsigned. That the publication does not bear Breibart's name is characteristic. "I really am not a professional historian," Breibart states. "Even though I have a degree in history, history is my avocation. I have never charged anybody for any services." Yet, as one cannot make bricks without straw, one cannot reconstruct history without making use of the building blocks assembled in archives and in print. With the patience and skill of a master artisan, Breibart has created and collected the blocks. Not content with resting on his laurels, he continues his research and writing as he approaches his ninetieth birthday. Sol Breibart has joined the distinguished company of Charleston's Jewish historians, despite his protestations to the contrary.

Appendix

Solomon Breibart: A Select Bibliography

Books and Pamphlets

- Articles on the Southern Jewish Experience in the Journals of the American Jewish Historical Society and the American Jewish Archives.* Valdosta, GA: Southern Jewish Historical Society, 1986.
- Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Synagogue, 250th Anniversary: 1749–1999.* Charleston, Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, 1999.
- The Rev. Mr. Gustavus Poznanski: First American Jewish Reform Minister.* Charleston: Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, 1979.
- Some Places in Charleston, S.C. of Jewish Interest.* Rev. ed. Charleston: Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, 2001. Original edition: 1995.
- Tombstones That Tell Stories: The Historic Coming Street Cemetery of Congregation Beth Elohim, Charleston, S.C.* Rev. ed. Charleston: Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, 2000. Original edition by Thomas J. Tobias.

Book Chapters

- “The Inspiring Story of the Historic and Beloved Temple Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim.” In *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Synagogue Sesquicentennial Dedication (1841–1991), 150th Anniversary Commemorative Program, March 22–23, 1991.* Charleston: Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, 1991.
- “An Overview – The First Fifty Years.” In *Golden Reflections: Looking Forward through the Past.* Fiftieth anniversary booklet, the Charleston Jewish Community Center, 1945–1995. Charleston: 1995.
- “Penina Moise, Southern Jewish Poetess.” In *Jews of the South: Selected Essays from the Southern Jewish Historical Society,* edited by Samuel Proctor and Louis Schmier with Malcolm Stern. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984.

Articles

- "Beth Elohim and the Earthquake." *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Bulletin* (October 1986): 4-5.
- "Beth Elohim's Second Organ." *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Bulletin* (January 1986): 3.
- "Isaac Harby of Charleston, 1788-1828." Book review. *SJHS Newsletter* (March 1995): 7-8.
- "BSBI Celebrates 140th Anniversary." Part 1 and part 2. *Charleston Jewish Journal* (April 1995): 17; (May 1995): 16.
- "Charleston Jewish Service Men in World War II." Part 1 and part 2. *Charleston Jewish Journal* (June 1995): 15; (August 1995): 16.
- "Charleston Jews and the Earthquake of 1886." *Charleston Jewish Journal* (March 1994): 18.
- "Chronology of the Jewish Congregations of Charleston, S.C." *Charleston Jewish Journal* (December 1993): 18.
- "The Community Reflector." *Charleston Jewish Journal* (September-October 1993): 32.
- "Correcting the Chronology of the Presidents of K. K. Beth Elohim." *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Bulletin* (June 1984): 3.
- "A Courageous Stand." *Charleston Jewish Journal* (November 1994): 18.
- "David Lopez, Builder." *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Bulletin* (March 1991): 8-9.
- "Early Jews of Augusta, Ga." *SJHS Newsletter* (October 1983): 3-4.
- "Forerunners of the Charleston Jewish Community Center," Parts 1 through 4. *Center Talk, Publication of the Jewish Community Center of Charleston* (January 15, 1980): 16; (April 15, 1980): 19; (May 15, 1980): 11, 23; and (June 15, 1980): 8.
- "Francis Salvador, Revolutionary War Martyr." *Charleston Jewish Journal* (July 1996): 18.
- "The Jewish Cemeteries of Charleston." *Charleston Jewish Journal* (January 1994): 18.
- "The Jewish Cemeteries of Charleston." *Carologue: A Publication of the South Carolina Historical Society* 9 (summer 1993): 8-9, 14-16.

- "KKBE: The Transition from Orthodox to Reform." *Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina* newsletter (fall 1999): 3-6.
- "Levy not a Yulee: Moses Elias Levy." *SJHS Newsletter* (October 1986): 3-4.
- "A Long-Unknown Congregation." *Charleston Jewish Journal* (February 1994): 18.
- "Louis M. Shimel, First JCC President." *Charleston Jewish Journal* (February 1995): 18.
- "Some Charleston Jews in Law Enforcement." *Charleston Jewish Journal* (April 1996): 22.
- "The Status of Women in KKBE to 1920." *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Bulletin* (April 1984): 3-4.
- "The Synagogues of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, Charleston." *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 80 (July 1979): 215-235. Revised as *The Synagogues of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim*. Charleston: Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, 1999.
- "This Synagogue Is Our Temple." Parts 1 through 4. *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Bulletin* (March 1980): 3; (April 1980): 3; (May 1980): 3; (June 1980): 4-5.
- "A Timeline of Charleston's Jewish History," on the Charleston Jewish Federation website, http://www.jewishcharleston.org/content_display.html?ArticleID=81048 (accessed July 17, 2004.)
- "Two Jewish Congregations in Charleston, S.C., before 1791: A New Conclusion." *American Jewish History* 69 (March 1980): 360-363.
- "Women Who Made a Difference," Parts 1 through 5. *Charleston Jewish Journal* (April 1994): 28; (June 1994): 22; (July 1994): 21-22; (October 1994): 18.

NOTES

¹ Solomon Breibart, "Correcting the Chronology of the Presidents of K. K. Beth Elohim," *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Bulletin* (June 1984): 3. For a list of Breibart's publications, see the Appendix on pages 20–22.

² N[athaniel]. L[evin]., "The Jewish Congregation of Charleston," *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* 1 (October 1843–January 1844): 7–10. Available at <http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/> [accessed May 7, 2004].

³ Nathaniel Levin, "Historic Sketch of the Congregation 'Beth Elohim' of Charleston, S.C., established 1750," prepared by Levin "at the request of the Mayor," and published in *Year Book: 1883: City of Charleston, So Ca.* (Charleston, n.d.), 301–316. On the errata pages (579–580), Levin notes, "The writer of the article on The Congregation 'Beth Elohim,' of Charleston, S.C., has had since its publication, and consequently too late for correction in the body of the article, some errors pointed out to him by a friend, which he desires to correct." Seven points are listed.

⁴ "Barnett Abraham Elzas" in *Men of Mark in South Carolina II*, ed. J. C. Hemphill (Washington, DC, 1908), 128.

⁵ Leon Huhner, a Berlin-born New York City lawyer, wrote and lectured on subjects of American Jewish history. John Simons, ed., *Who's Who in American Jewry: A Biographical Dictionary of Living Jews in the United States and Canada III 1938–1939* (New York, 1938), s. v. "Leon Huhner." Huhner was a curator of the American Jewish Historical Society for half a century. Jeffrey Gurock calls Huhner the "most prolific contributor" to the journal during this era. Jeffrey S. Gurock, "From *Publications* to *American Jewish History*: The Journal of the American Jewish Historical Society and the Writing of American Jewish History," *American Jewish History* 81 (winter 1993–1994): 173.

⁶ Elzas published his debate with Huhner in *The Jews of Charleston: A Review of the Article 'Charleston' in Vol. 3, of the Jewish Encyclopedia* (Charleston, n.d.), reprinted from the *Charleston News and Courier*, December 1902, (first quotation); *Huhner vs. Elzas: The New Yorker Objects to Dr. Elzas's Criticism* (Charleston, n.d.), 11 (second and third quotations); and *Elzas vs. Huhner: A Final Word in the Jewish Encyclopedia Controversy* (Charleston, n.d.). Photocopies of these pamphlets are available in the South Carolina Room of the Charleston County Public Library. See also Leon Huhner, "The Jews of South Carolina from the Earliest Settlement to the End of the American Revolution," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 12 (1904): 39–61 (this paper was read before the society in 1899); L. Huhner, *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (1902–1903), s. v. "Charleston, S.C."

⁷ Barnett A. Elzas, *The Jews of South Carolina* (Philadelphia, 1905; reprint: Spartanburg, SC, 1983). Elzas's other publications from this period include *A Century of Judaism in South Carolina* (Charleston, 1904), originally published in the Centennial Edition of the *Charleston News and Courier* (May 1904); *[The 1820] Constitution of the Hebrew Congregation of Ka'al Kadosh Beth-Elohim or House of God. Charleston, S.C. MDCCCXX* (Charleston, 1904); *Documents Relative to a Proposed Settlement of Jews in South Carolina in 1748* (Charleston, 1903); *A History*

of *Congregation Beth Elohim of Charleston, S.C., 1800–1810* (Charleston, 1902); *Jewish Cemeteries at Columbia, S.C.* (Charleston, 1910); *Jewish Cemeteries of Congregation Berith Shalome at Charleston, S.C.* (Charleston, 1910); *Jewish Cemetery at Camden, S.C.* (Charleston, 1910); *Jewish Cemetery at Georgetown, S.C.* (Charleston, 1910); *Jewish Marriage Notices from the Newspaper Press of Charleston, 1775–1906* (New York, 1917); "Jewish Merchants in Charleston in the Revolutionary Era," *Charleston News and Courier* (c. 1903); *The Jews of South Carolina: A Record of the First Naturalization in the Province* (Charleston, [1903]); *Joseph Salvador: Jewish Merchant Prince who Came to South Carolina* (Charleston, [1903?]); *Leaves from My Historical Scrapbook* (Charleston, 1907); *New Jewish Cemetery of K. K. Beth Elohim at Charleston, S.C.* (Charleston, 1910); *Old Jewish Cemeteries of Charleston, S.C. A Transcript of the Inscriptions on Their Tombstones, 1762–1903* (Charleston, 1903); "New Material on the First Reform Movement in America," *American Hebrew* (literary supplement) 80 (December 7, 1906): iv; *The Organ in the Synagogue: An Interesting Chapter in the History of Reform Judaism in America* (Charleston, 1902); *The Sabbath Service and Miscellaneous Prayers Adopted by the Reformed Society of Israelites* (Charleston, 1830; reprint by Elzas, New York, 1916); "A Triumph of Tolerance," *Charleston News and Courier* (c. 1902).

⁸ In a letter to Jacob S. Raisin, rabbi of KKBE from 1915 to 1944, Elzas complained that his expanded edition of *The Jews of South Carolina* (1917) had cost him two hundred dollars, while the Charleston community had purchased only sixteen dollars' worth of books. "If anyone had done for the Jews of any other place what I have done for these people," he grumbled, "he would have made a fortune out of it." Letter from Barnett A. Elzas to Jacob S. Raisin, February 19, 1917, Barnett A. Elzas papers, New-York Historical Society.

⁹ In "Jews and the American South, 1858–1905" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1999), ix–x, Leah E. Hagedorn identifies Elzas's 1905 study as the beginning of the field of southern Jewish history and notes that, like local histories produced by other southern rabbis such as Henry Cohen of Galveston, Texas, and Alfred G. Moses of Mobile, Alabama, Elzas's scholarship was filiopietistic and tended to celebrate "Jewish notables and achievements," rather than focus on the differences that set Jews apart from the dominant society. Cited in "Southern Jewish Foodways: A Report on Research in Progress," a talk given by Marcie Cohen Ferris to the Culinary Historians of Washington, DC, March 10, 2002, unpublished manuscript available at Jewish Heritage Collection, College of Charleston Library, Charleston, South Carolina. [hereafter, JHC].

¹⁰ "A Polish congregation," Elzas noted, "was organized in Charleston as early as 1857. Though this element of the community now far outnumbered the older element, it has no history, communal or otherwise, worth recording. It has never had a leader and bids fair to continue in its present condition." Elzas, *The Jews of South Carolina*, 261, n. 1.

¹¹ Tarshish contributed significantly to Charleston Jewish historiography with the publication of his essay, "The Charleston Organ Case," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 54 (June 1965): 411–449.

¹² Thomas J. Tobias, *The Hebrew Benevolent Society of Charleston, S.C. Founded 1784, the Oldest Jewish Charitable Society in the United States: An Historical Sketch* (Charleston, 1965);

The Hebrew Orphan Society of Charleston, S.C. Founded 1801: An Historical Sketch (Charleston, 1957); "A Congregation 200 Years Old: An Old Charlestonian Looks At His Community," *The National Jewish Monthly* (December 1950): 116, 138, published in conjunction with Allan Tarshish, "A Congregation 200 Years Old: A Newcomer Looks At Historic Old Charleston," *The National Jewish Monthly* (December 1950): 117, 138-139; *Since 1749 – The Story of K. K. Beth Elohim of Charleston, S.C.: American Judaism Through More Than Two Centuries* (Charleston, 1976); *Tombstones That Tell Stories: The Historic Coming Street Cemetery of Congregation Beth Elohim, Charleston, S.C.* (1958[?]); revised by Solomon Breibart, (Charleston, 2000); "This Cemetery We Rededicate," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 53 (June 1964): 352-370; "Charles Town in 1764," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 67 (April 1966): 63-74; *Historical Diorama: Francis Salvador (1747-1776)*, (Washington, DC, [1970]); "Joseph Tobias of Charleston: Linguist," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 49 (September 1959): 33-38; "The Many-Sided Dr. De La Motta," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 52 (March 1963): 200-219.

¹³ James W. Hagy, *This Happy Land: The Jews of Colonial and Antebellum Charleston* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1993). Meanwhile, Richard and Belinda Gergel were pursuing the history of Jewish settlement in Columbia, South Carolina, and the Tree of Life congregation. They followed in the footsteps of Helen Kohn Hennig, who had published a fiftieth anniversary history of the congregation in 1945. Gergel and Gergel, *In Pursuit of the Tree of Life: A History of the Early Jews of Columbia and the Tree of Life Congregation* (Columbia, 1996); Hennig, *The Tree of Life* (Columbia, 1945).

¹⁴ Interview with Solomon Breibart, April 18, 1995, conducted by Dale Rosengarten, JHC. Biographical material contained in Solomon Breibart Papers, JHC.

¹⁵ Solomon Breibart to Dale Rosengarten, personal communication, May 6, 2004.

¹⁶ Built after 1832 by Governor William Aiken, Aiken's Row consisted of seven identical houses; rent from each was supposed to pay Aiken's expenses one day a week. Interview with Mordenai Lazarus Raisin Hirsch and Rachel Marla Raisin, July 16, 1996, conducted by Dale Rosengarten, JHC.

¹⁷ Breibart interview, April 18, 1995.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Interview with Solomon Breibart, March 16, 2004, conducted by Harlan Greene, Dale Rosengarten, and Carol Breibart, JHC. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotes from Breibart come from this interview.

²⁰ Solomon Breibart, "The South Carolina Constitutional Convention of 1868" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, 1938). Photocopies are available at JHC and the South Carolina Room of the Charleston County Public Library.

²¹ Solomon Breibart, "Why Do I Teach?" *The News Bulletin*, Official Publication of Charleston County Teachers Association, Charleston, S.C., February 1953, Solomon Breibart Papers, JHC.

²² Works by Robert N. Rosen include *Confederate Charleston: An Illustrated History of the City and the People during the Civil War* (Columbia, 1994); *The Jewish Confederates* (Columbia, 2000); *A Short History of Charleston* (1982; rev. ed., Columbia, 1997).

²³ Millicent Ellison Brown, "Civil Rights Activism in Charleston, South Carolina, 1940–1970" (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1997), 90–91; tape recorded phone interview with Millicent Ellison Brown, April 20, 1998, by Kirk Heidenreich, JHC.

²⁴ Breibart interview, March 16, 2004; interview with Rabbi Burton Lee Padoll and Solomon Breibart, October 21, 1999, conducted by Dale Rosengarten, JHC.

²⁵ Penina Moïse, *Fancy's Sketch Book* (Charleston, 1833); *Secular and Religious Works of Penina Moïse, with Brief Sketch of Her Life* (Charleston, 1911).

²⁶ Solomon Breibart, "Penina Moïse, Southern Jewish Poetess" in *Jews of the South: Selected Essays from the Southern Jewish Historical Society*, ed. Samuel Proctor, Louis Schmier, with Malcolm Stern (Macon, GA, 1984).

²⁷ "Two Jewish Congregations in Charleston, S.C., before 1791: A New Conclusion," *American Jewish History* 69 (March 1980): 360–363.

²⁸ "The Synagogues of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, Charleston," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 80 (July 1979): 215–235 (revised and published as *The Synagogues of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim* [Charleston, 1999]).

²⁹ Gene Waddell, "An Architectural History of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, Charleston," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 98 (January 1997), 24–25; Waddell, (24, n. 29) cites Mills Lane as first noting that Beth Elohim accepted the plan of Tappan & Noble. See Lane, *Architecture of the Old South: South Carolina* (New York, 1989), 207. In *Charleston Architecture 1670–1860 I* (Charleston, 2003), 209, n. 55, Waddell adds that Breibart originally pointed out "the complexity of the problem" and identified three of the architectural firms, including Tappan & Noble, that had submitted plans for the new synagogue.

³⁰ William A. Rosenthal, "Jewish Artists in Early Charleston," *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Bulletin* (September 1981) reprinted in *SJHS Newsletter* (October 1982): 2–3, and "Instrumental Music in the Synagogue," *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Bulletin* (January 1981).

³¹ Marie Ferrara, "Moses Henry Nathan and the Great Charleston Fire of 1861," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* (October 2003); "The Diary of Joseph Lyons (1833–1835)," edited, annotated, and introduced by Marie Ferrara, Harlan Greene, Dale Rosengarten, and Susan Wyssen, *American Jewish History* (forthcoming).

³² Jeffrey S. Gurock, *Orthodoxy in Charleston: Brith Sholom Beth Israel and American Jewish History* (Charleston, 2004).