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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

Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South. By Marcie Cohen Ferris. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. 327 pages.

The University of North Carolina Press and the cataloging division of the Library of Congress have rendered their judgments about the content and nature of Marcie Cohen Ferris's *Matzoh Ball Gumbo*. The former decided to list and market this book under its "cookbook" rubric, directing potential readers first and foremost to the recipes included within its pages. As to the latter, the ultimate arbiter of where books get placed in libraries, it decided to give these "Culinary Tales of the Jewish South" a "TX" call number. With that designation now emblazoned on the book's spine, *Matzoh Ball Gumbo* will be accessed by students and other readers in the food sections of their libraries, amid other works containing recipes and cookery instructions. Neither the publisher of the book nor the Library of Congress's cataloging division considered this work as a piece of history or as a scholarly study of the Jews of the South.

All determinations of this kind have a certain arbitrariness to them. If we cared to, we could debate the designations of all books, arguing whether their goals, methodologies and intellectual accomplishments had been accurately represented in the descriptive material by which they are presented to the public or in the call numbers that have been assigned to them. What does it mean, particularly to students of American and southern Jewish history, that *Matzoh Ball Gumbo* has been classified primarily as a cookbook and, as such, has been removed from its scholarly mates, from the other works in these two fields? Is this a fair

categorization of what this book accomplishes? To what extent ought we to consider this a piece of scholarship and to what degree has the structure, tone, and content of the book pushed it towards the cookbook side of the equation?

Before describing the book and answering this question, I want to note that scholars who venture on to the terrain of food studies and food history enter into an academic mine field. They rightly understand that food matters greatly in history, that it reveals multiple issues of identity, class position, migration, and conflict, and that however much it involves pleasure and sensuality, it constitutes a serious subject. Yet the public, publishers, reviewers, writers of promotional material, as well as the authors themselves, at times fall into the trap of watering down the critical edge necessary for scholarship by employing words and themes that convey the lightness of the subject. Using "journey" as opposed to "study," "tales" instead of "histories," employing words such as "savor" and "delicious," among others, moves the work away from a more academic orientation. Likewise, much food writing, even when informed by scholarly considerations, tends to be written in a breezier style than most serious history writing. This, then, confirms the skepticism quite rampant among many scholars that studying food lacks gravitas and has little conceptual merit.

Matzoh Ball Gumbo's inclusion of recipes for each one of its chapters offers a case in point. While the recipes may in fact be excellent and well worth preparing, their inclusion detracts from the book as a somber historical project. Similarly, the decision to fill the footnotes with much of the contextual historical material nudges the book towards the cookbook genre and justifies its placement in both the library and the University of North Carolina's catalog.

So too the book's justification of the subject in terms of the personal food memories of the author, beautifully written, removes the book from the scholarly berth such a serious subject deserves. Long passages on the tastes, smells, and appearance of the foods, as experienced by the author both in her own childhood and on her journeys through the Jewish South in search of

"culinary tales," adds to the rightness of the designation of this as a cookbook and not a book of history.

A scholarly study of Jewish foodways in the American South had much potential and certainly deserved to be written. Marcie Cohen Ferris in this book offers a number of compelling points and they need to be taken seriously, including her charting of the multiple Jewish migrations into the region, the influence of the region's racial system upon the foodways of its Jews, the connections between Jewish entrepreneurship and food, and the role of food in building of Jewish community life. These, however, ultimately get short shrift as the book spends more time and energy recording memories and leading readers upon this "culinary tour led by a daughter of the Dixie diaspora" (23-24).

At the most basic level, *Matzoh Ball Gumbo's* goals of being a popular cookbook *and* a piece of scholarship fall short because these goals essentially contradict each other. Like many writers of food books, and particularly of those which seek to appeal to a wide audience, *Matzoh Ball Gumbo* not only engages the senses as it tells of the various foodways of southern Jews, but it tends to romanticize the world of cooking and kitchen. Its insistence that certain dishes constituted Jewish food "traditions" or that certain foods operated as the "basic Jewish cuisine" avoids the fact that all food systems have long, complicated histories and evolved over time. "Knish, salami and corned beef" only became "basic" to Jewish food culture in America in the early twentieth century, but in this book they constitute the core of Jewish food life (144). Ferris seems comfortable listing "pound cake" as a traditional Jewish baked good, without speculating on how American or western foods folded into Jewish diets and came to seem, to some, to be traditional. Likewise, we learn that in Atlanta of the twenty-first century, "second- and third-generation Sephardic women still cook as their grandmothers did on the island of Rhodes and in Turkey" (170). While Ferris's informants may believe that to be the case, it is highly unlikely that their foremothers had access to refrigerators, gas stoves, and measuring cups, let alone all-purpose flour and tilapia. The book does not in fact interrogate with dispassion or analytic depth ideas about tradition and

innovation, the origins and functions of food memories and the purposes behind such fictive food tales.

Of all the conceptual themes laid out in this book, none is more constant or significant than the fact that the food culture constructed by southern Jews in the five culinarily distinctive zones delineated here—the Low Country of Savannah and Charleston, the Creole region of New Orleans and Natchez, Atlanta, the Mississippi Delta, and Memphis—involved eating non-kosher food. As Ferris notes, as a result of either the lack of facilities to obtain kosher food or their lusting after the “*most* delectable dishes in the world,” which happened to be “among the *most* forbidden by Jewish standards,” southern Jews ate outside the boundaries of Jewish law (7). This is an important point, and we are treated to numerous stories of Jews eating pork and shellfish.

Yet all the recipes included in *Matzoh Ball Gumbo* conform to the standards of kashrut, making it manifest that the book has sought to be first and foremost a cookbook, to be used by like-minded cooks, and not a work that needs to conform to the standards of scholarship. Likewise, since all the recipes have come from living informants, southern Jews still actively cooking, they also involve the use of ingredients, measurements, preparation processes, and pieces of technology available only in the contemporary world. These are not historic recipes but instead guides for making “Shirley’s Cup Custard,” “Corn-Fried Fish Fillets with Sephardic Vinagre Sauce,” or “Barbecued Black Pepper Beef Ribs” today.

Matzoh Ball Gumbo contains much historical material (although often flattened out), has a rich bibliography, and clearly has been informed by much of the contemporary American Jewish historical scholarship. From it students of American Jewish history could learn about the inner regional differences within the vast region of the South. From this book scholars of American Jewish history could gain some insights into the importance of small business and the purveying of foodstuffs as a key element in the American Jewish economy. But ultimately the book’s cookbook quality, its offering of tours, journeys, and tales instead of the stuff

of scholarship, renders it less significant to historians than it could have been. It may represent, in fact, a lost opportunity.

Hasia R. Diner

New York University

Voices of Savannah: Selections from the Oral History Collection of the Savannah Jewish Archives. Compiled by Valerie Frey, Kaye Kole, and Luciana Spracher. Savannah: Savannah Jewish Archives, 2004. 286 pages.

For the last dozen years, the Savannah Jewish Archives, housed at the Georgia Historical Society, has preserved and provided public access to the history of Savannah Jewry. More than 2,300 identified photographs, synagogue and organizational records, newspapers, family and business papers, a small number of artifacts, and now oral history interviews make up the important collection.

The Savannah Jewish Archives' oral history project began in 1997 to provide, according to the editors of *Savannah Voices*, "a rich supplement to print materials, filling in gaps of knowledge and complementing existing sources" (ix). By 2003, thirteen volunteers had conducted over one hundred oral history interviews, many now presented in this volume in ways that will appeal to the Jewish community, Savannah residents generally, "as well as anyone who had a special childhood game, a favorite grandfather, a first love, a family business, or who simply enjoys wandering down 'Memory Lane'" (ix). More than half of the completed interviews resulted from the hard work and dedication of local historian Harriet Meyerhoff. Other people helped transcribe and edit.

The volume's editors read all of the transcripts, chose chapter topics, and excerpted portions based upon their compatibility, quality, and format. They also selected accompanying photographs and included a helpful glossary of Hebrew and Yiddish

words, Jewish holidays and organizations, and a finding aid to the oral history collection.

Passages from the oral histories presented by the editors span much of the twentieth century and include a vast number of topics. The ten chapters include "The Old Country and Immigration" (covering the ocean passage, name changes, the language barrier, and settling in Savannah), "Making a Livelihood" (which addresses common Jewish economic niches), "Political and Social Relationships" (including antisemitism, race relations, and war), "Religion" (covering Savannah's three historic congregations, religious holidays and observances, and education), "The Jewish Educational Alliance" (Savannah's equivalent of a Jewish community center), "Their Early Years" (covering childhood, clubs, education, homes, playtime), "Entertainment" (consisting of music and dancing, theater and movies, nightclubs and restaurants, and the beaches), "Changes in Savannah" (including neighborhood expansion, culture and technology, transportation, people, tourism, and preservation), "Family Memories and Anecdotes" and "Love in Savannah" (focusing on falling in love, love for the city, and love for the Jewish community).

Readers familiar with major themes in American Jewish history will find much that is recognizable in these pages. The trials and tribulations associated with immigration, making a living, congregational schisms and acculturation receive ample expression by Savannah Jewry. Most American Jews clustered in the same occupations detailed in Savannah. Ethnicity and religiosity prompted the formation of new congregations, and tensions existed between assimilated and traditional Jews. Moreover, Jews in Savannah, like their coreligionists across the country, found time to enjoy and participate in life's many social and cultural opportunities. In fact, without scattered references to race relations and the importance of Tybee Island and other beach resorts, readers might forget that Savannah Jews lived in the South or along the Atlantic seaboard.

Whether or not readers find much distinctive in these oral history excerpts about Savannah or southern Jewry in general, they will surely enjoy the trip down "Memory Lane" offered by

Voices of Savannah. Valerie Frey, Kaye Kole, Luciana Spracher and their team of volunteers are to be commended for recording, transcribing, editing, compiling and publishing a work of enduring research value.

Mark I. Greenberg
University of South Florida

Off-White: A Memoir. By Laurie Gunst. New York: Soho Press, 2005. 314 pages.

Laurie Gunst, born in 1949 to Jewish parents in Richmond, Virginia, felt her greatest emotional connection to her African American nanny, Rhoda. "Part of me was white," Laurie explains, "part was Jewish, and the part no one could even see was black. I was about as divided as any one person could be" (60). Rhoda had begun working for the family when Laurie's grandmother was a young woman, and had developed deep and powerful ties with all three generations. Despite racial, class, religious, and age divides, and despite the fact that Rhoda was always a paid employee of the family, the relationship between Laurie and Rhoda shaped Laurie more profoundly than any other. In part this was due to the emotional distance her parents maintained, but it was due as well to Rhoda's loving commitment to her charge and the enduring intensity of their bond.

Off-White is Laurie Gunst's soul-searching exploration of that experience: of a white girl and a black woman, a Jewish girl and a Christian root-working woman, a wealthy girl and a working class woman, a charge and a nanny, who loved each other in the antisemitic, Jim Crow South. The book does not pretend to be a traditional historical text, but it is nonetheless permeated with the history of race, religious, and class relations that continue to shape southern experience. Given the impact of that history, the book is therefore also a reflection on Laurie's abiding sense of feeling an outsider where she grew up: "Being *different* has always been the affront the South has the least tolerance for, and those who are

will never truly belong" (47). And while Laurie's narrative succeeds beautifully in expressing the poignant singularity of her experience, it also raises provocative, even profound questions for the rest of us about the layers of meaning embedded in American notions of religion, race, and identity.

The Gunsts are Jews who do not want to "look Jewish," who celebrate Christmas, eat pork and shellfish, belong to a synagogue but know no Hebrew, send their children to Christian schools and encourage Laurie's participation in Rhoda's black church, but who never lose their understanding of themselves as Jews. Certainly, they have little choice. Active antisemitism is a reality, and while it proves far less physically dangerous than the racism it so obviously resembles, it is both frightening and upsetting. As Laurie observes in retrospect, "Is it any wonder that I felt... not quite white?" (49).

But to Laurie's mother, and later to Laurie, being Jewish also means something more positive. It entails a leftist and egalitarian political outlook and an abiding hatred for racism and segregation. "What's the point of being a Jew if you don't stand up for other oppressed people?" her mother challenges her more traditionally minded father (94). It is this understanding of what it means to be a Jew, coupled with her devotion to Rhoda, that leads Laurie to identify so deeply with black people and the cultures created by them.

At the same time, Laurie is sensitive and intelligent enough to recognize her own family's culpability in black oppression. Her awareness of the paternalism and racism that black people so often hear when whites speak of their beloved black mammy, her sensitivity to her white privilege, her discomfort with deeply ingrained southern racial hierarchies, are constant undercurrents in the book. She feels the pain of slavery viscerally, having identified so completely with Rhoda; this intensifies her sense of guilt when she discovers first the exploitive racism and Confederate service of one great-grandfather, and then, horrifyingly, the organizing of a racial massacre in Wilmington, North Carolina, by the other.

Off-White traces Laurie's life through its many twists, from dysfunctional family life to satisfying marriage; from drug

addiction to her embrace of Jamaican culture; from failed attempts at college to completion of a Ph.D.; from the discovery of her family's racial past to the uncovering of Rhoda's history. At each step, she challenges herself to explore her reactions and understand her motivations as honestly and openly as she can. In doing so she takes the reader with her on an intense journey through interracial friendships and romances, through black and Jewish perspectives on slavery and history, through the range of black views about Jews and the range of Jewish views about blacks: the ambivalent and contradictory feelings that surround race, religion, class, and love in the American South.

Who is she, she needs to know, and what is the meaning to her of these multiple identities? Toward the end of the book, Laurie discovers the Jewish section of a Savannah graveyard and ponders her powerful emotional reaction to these unknown dead. Given her lack of religious feeling or knowledge, what is her tie to Judaism rooted in? "*Maybe this is a tribal thing, after all,*" she concludes (280).

And there is more to it. She suddenly realizes that in this cemetery, Jews and blacks have been buried on the same side of the fence, separated from the graves of white Christians. She reflects on her childhood rabbi's stern reminder that Jews were not a race. "But look at where we lay buried: on the other side of that chain-link fence from the other whites. Next to the 'Colored.' What is the difference, I ask myself, between a race and a tribe? . . . Was it strictly a matter of DNA? Was it hair, was it skin, was it noses?" There is no easy answer to this, as Laurie understands, "but I knew that in that divided graveyard, a fresh awareness of my braided origins had been bestowed on me" (280-81).

Off-White is a provocative, often moving exploration of such questions through the eyes of one deeply sensitive southern Jewish woman, Rhoda's "part-time, off-white stepchild, misbegotten daughter of the black and Jewish South" (142).

Cheryl Greenberg

Trinity College

Moses Levy of Florida: Jewish Utopian and Antebellum Reformer. By C. S. Monaco. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. 240 pages.

The age of Jackson produced many colorful Jewish figures in American history: the New Orleans philanthropist Judah Touro; Uriah P. Levy, the first Jew to attain the rank of commodore in the U.S. Navy and, coincidentally, the officer responsible for the abolition of flogging in that navy; Rebecca Gratz, the dazzling beauty from Philadelphia credited with developing the concept of the Jewish Sunday school in America; and Mordecai Manuel Noah, ward-healing politician from New York, a sheriff who called for the assembly of all Jews at Ararat, the name he bestowed upon an island in the midst of the Niagara River.

And then there was David Yulee (born Levy) of Florida. The first person of Jewish ancestry to be elected to the U.S. Senate, Yulee married a Protestant woman. Estranged from his father, Moses Levy, he adopted the surname of his grandfather, Eliahu ibn Yuli, onetime minister to Sidi Muhammad of Morocco. Like Judah Benjamin of Louisiana, who also was born a Jew but did not practice the religion an adult, Yulee embraced the chattel slave system. In the process, abolitionist partisans wasted no opportunity attacking such leaders as "Israelites with Egyptian principles."

C. S. Monaco's biography of Moses Levy devotes less than two chapters to the relationship between Senator Yulee and his father. It is, however, a welcome addition to literature of the National period, offering insight into a complex figure and his plans to make Florida, not Buffalo, a new Zion in the age of road-building and canals. There is a "Zelig" quality to Moses Levy as Monaco tracks his many interests and travels in the first half of the nineteenth century. The family enjoyed some personal influence with the Sultan of Morocco, but, as Monaco correctly notes, Jews in North Africa generally suffered some of the most rigorous "ritualized humiliations" (physical segregation in housing, clothing codes, excessive taxation, massacres that led to confiscation and expulsion), which historians conveniently omit in citing the entente enjoyed by Arabs and Jews before the age of Herzl (13).

Moses Levy was one of those extraordinary men who lived through the many storms of idea and deed that transformed the world in the nineteenth century. His adventure began with a daring three mile walk to liberty from Moroccan territory to the British fortress/port of Gibraltar. A gifted linguist and merchant, he becomes a prominent planter in St. Thomas, Norfolk, Cuba and—after America acquired the territory from Spain in 1821—Florida. Monaco shares his enthusiasm for Florida, describing it as “an agricultural paradise that was ripe for immense rewards” (96). Levy became the greatest advocate of Florida and a recipient of one of the largest land grants in the territory. Even as he struggled to build plantations outside of St. Augustine, Levy had to deal with the many problems that existed in a “volatile, frontier environment”: arson and slander, malaria, yellow fever, and unhealthy “miasmas,” battles among runaway slaves, Seminole tribesmen, and American settlers from Georgia (86, 99).

A utopian socialist, not unlike Fourier or Saint Simon, Levy believed that the future of Florida lay in small agricultural cooperatives. No defender of slavery, he believed that the system should be phased out as quickly as possible. He favored manumission to those who were educated and championed miscegenation as a counterweight to historical racialism. He returned to Europe in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars to drum up support for his plan of development in the New World. Sometimes chided for boldly speaking out on behalf of his own people, he noted the level of antisemitism in London, where Jews constituted less than one per cent of the city’s population. He lamented how Jews within territories once liberated by Napoleon were subjected to the Pale of Settlement and pogroms.

As Jews from Bohemia to Charleston experienced stresses of modernization that would alter the practice of their faith, Levy—like Mordecai Manuel Noah and a contemporary gentile advocate of Jewish colonization, William Robinson—called upon them to create a center that would be the source of spiritual and economic rebirth. Levy’s contribution to the debate in Judaism was the concept of “triune love”—speaking the truth, abiding by the Levitical dictum to “love thy neighbor as thyself,” and making “the

will of GOD the *motive power* of action" (166-167). He called for the creation of a *chenuch*, a coeducational Hebrew school on a suitable piece of land in Pennsylvania that would train students in physical activity, arts and sciences, agriculture, and machine shop skills, and would lead to the creation of additional cells about the country.

Not surprisingly, in an age of royalist cynicism, bogus spiritualism, messianic expectation, patent medicines and temperance, Levy's many good proposals were lost. Monaco is to be congratulated for rediscovering this mercurial figure.

Saul S. Friedman

Youngstown State University