

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

MarkKBauman@aol.com

Bryan Edward Stone, *Managing Editor*

bstone@delmar.edu

Scott M. Langston, *Primary Sources Section Editor*

s.langston@tcu.edu

Stephen J. Whitfield, *Book Review Editor*

swhitfie@brandeis.edu

Jeremy Katz, *Exhibit and Film Review Editor*

jrkatz@thebreman.org

Adam Mendelsohn, *Website Review Editor*

adam.mendelsohn@uct.ac.za

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Founding Managing Editor*

rheimovics@cfl.rr.com

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# Southern Jewish History

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## Book Reviews

**Memories of Two Generations: A Yiddish Life in Russia and Texas.** By Alexander Z. Gurwitz, translated by Amram Prero, and edited by Bryan Edward Stone. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016. 416 pages.

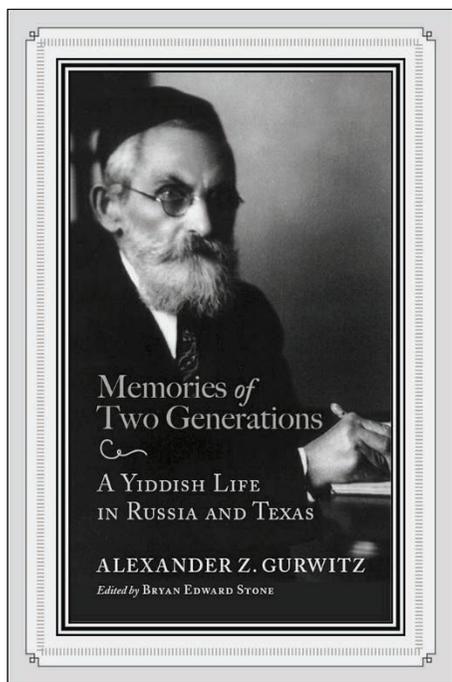
“It is almost two thousand years that the Jew, staff in hand, has been wandering over the face of the world” (314), writes Alexander Z. Gurwitz, an eastern European Jewish teacher and ritual slaughterer who left tsarist Russia for San Antonio, Texas, in 1910. Gurwitz was fifty-one years old, and, after a life of moderate economic success, two marriages, family, and fervent Torah study, he decided to abandon the increasingly troubled Pale of Settlement for the land, it was said, where a Jew could be free and gold rolled in the streets. Like so many among the two million Jews who left the shtetl in the three decades leading up to World War I, Gurwitz believed that the Old World was a time and place forever lost. War, revolution, and antisemitism reduced it to memory, and it fell upon “simple, ordinary” (xii) people such as himself to present “a collective portrait” (x) of this Yiddish-speaking world, so different from what his immigrant eyes later encountered in America’s southern borderlands.

The result of Gurwitz’s literary endeavor is *Memories of Two Generations*, an evocative and informative memoir, written in Yiddish between 1932 and 1935, translated into English by San Antonio rabbi Amram Prero in the 1970s, and now edited by Bryan Edward Stone. Given the literary productivity of Gurwitz’s generation coupled with the hunger of later generations to discover the vanished world of their ancestors, Gurwitz’s memoir finds itself in a fairly crowded cultural landscape. Those wishing to explore beyond *Fiddler on the Roof* and the stories of Sholem

Aleichem and Abraham Cahan have access to a wealth of autobiographies, novels, and other material in multiple languages—English, Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, and Polish—that ostensibly recreate the prelude and aftermath of the largest mass resettlement in Jewish history. Yet *Memories of Two Generations* has much to offer and, contrary to Gurwitz's own claim that "all the Jews of nineteenth-century eastern Europe comported themselves the same way," his experience augments our increasingly complex picture of Russian Jews and their American descendants. His memoir reveals how a self-professed ordinary Jew coped with precipitous change and social dislocation by embracing an uncertain present, confident in the power and relevance of his heritage.

This English edition of Gurwitz's memoirs, the majority of which recounts his life in Russia, is approximately three hundred pages long and divided into sixteen chapters. In the first half of the book, which provides remarkable details about his childhood and youth, he takes the reader on a journey through the small shtetlach and large cities of the Pale, where he lived and received his education. This included several years at the prestigious Volozhin Yeshiva, "the center, the very heart of the Jewish world's spirit," as Gurwitz puts it (164), where numerous eminent rabbis received their training. But the need to secure a living and to support his future family led him to abandon his quest to become a rabbi, opting instead to settle down as a certified *shochet* and *melamed*. Gurwitz thus provided a comfortable life for his family and, unlike so many of the destitute masses who left Russia for economic mobility, his decision to sail to the United States in 1910 was a product of mounting antisemitism: "How long would it be before a pogrom would overtake the next town? And the next? The same story might well be repeated and where would we be then?" (271). Determined to ensure his family's safety and their right to be Jewish without obstacle and fear, Gurwitz brought his family to America.

Perhaps the limited space devoted to his emigration and subsequent two decades in Texas is due to Gurwitz's discomfort in his new land. He did not learn English well and, as Stone notes in his introduction, "he describes San Antonio as if it were just another shtetl, where Jews were central to the community while a few Christians floated around the periphery" (8). This peculiar perspective does not, however, detract from the value of his reminiscences. Unlike the majority of



Russian Jews who settled in New York, the Gurwitzes went south via the Galveston Movement, a philanthropic program to divert Jewish immigrants from the poverty and dirt of the Lower East Side's sprawling tenements. Although only a few thousand Jews settled in Texas through this program, it is a fascinating story that complicates our New York-centered narrative of the era and, as Stone writes, Gurwitz's "may be the only complete account of the Galveston Movement from an immigrant's point of view" (5). Gurwitz's section on his transcontinental voyage

may be brief, but it is an invaluable resource for the historian who seeks to understand the hardships involved in choosing to abandon one's home yet having limited control over one's destination. His life upended and bifurcated in time and space, Gurwitz titled his work *Memories of Two Generations*, "because," he writes, "mirrored here are the life and times of two distinct eras" (xii).

For Gurwitz, it is his Jewishness—his religious beliefs and practices, his heritage, his outlook—that bridges these two eras. This sense of peoplehood framed his childhood and shaped the course of his life, even when economic need, cholera outbreaks, and political turmoil rudely intruded. His boyhood proceeded to the rhythm of the Jewish calendar. Daily prayer, Torah study, and the Sabbath defined his weeks, which were connected by the anticipation and commemoration of the numerous holidays: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Hanukkah, Passover, Shavuot. Then the cycle repeated itself. Much like Sholem Aleichem's Tevye, albeit with far greater accuracy, Gurwitz frequently quotes from the Bible and Talmud, and he likens his various

predicaments and opportunities to those of his putative Israelite ancestors. He believes that the Jew “does not live like other nations. He does not really live in the present. He lives in the past, with his wistful memories, or in the future, with the hope that it will be better” (88). And although much about the United States remained alien and distasteful to him, and although he reproaches Jews who gave in to the lures of assimilation, he understood that “American Jews should consider themselves among the most fortunate in the world,” because they enjoy “the rights and privileges of citizenship like all other people” (314). Gurwitz wrote these words in his concluding chapter, penned in 1935 when state-sponsored antisemitism had become the norm in Germany and Poland, when the Bolshevik Revolution had rendered his former homeland unrecognizable, and when a Jewish state was still a distant possibility. The deep ideological and theological ruptures that divided America’s Jewish community did not particularly trouble Gurwitz, because “no matter our individual and separate doorways, we all enter the same room. . . . Whatever we are, we are. But Jews we are” (331–32).

Most of Gurwitz’s narrative is infused with this spirit of optimism, and it unfolds through such lyrical prose. That it comes out elegantly in English is an enormous credit not only to Prero’s translation skills, but to Stone’s painstaking effort to ensure that this edition is as reliable, lucid, and well documented as possible. Stone’s succinct yet comprehensive introduction provides the necessary historical context for the memoir and explains why he, as a historian, decided to publish it. Over sixty pages of meticulous endnotes elucidate Gurwitz’s references to people, places, and events, as well as his numerous quotations from scripture and adages from Jewish lore. *Memories of Two Generations* will appeal to scholars, students, and anyone curious to learn about the rich heritage bequeathed by ordinary Russian Jews to their American progeny, including Texans.

Jarrod Tanny, University of North Carolina Wilmington  
The reviewer may be contacted at [tannyj@uncw.edu](mailto:tannyj@uncw.edu).



**To Stand Aside or Stand Alone: Southern Reform Rabbis and the Civil Rights Movement.** By P. Allen Krause, edited by Mark K. Bauman with Stephen Krause. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016. 424 pages.

In 1966 a young student named P. Allen Krause, working on his rabbinical thesis regarding the subject of southern rabbis and the civil rights movement, travelled to the convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in Toronto and interviewed thirteen attendees from southern Reform congregations. One of the questions he asked several of the interviewees was: "If in fifty years someone wanted to write a history of the civil rights movement in the South, what role do you think will be assigned to the rabbis?" That half century has passed, and one of the strongest pieces of evidence on which to base such an analysis remains Krause's own work, published in its entirety for the first time here.

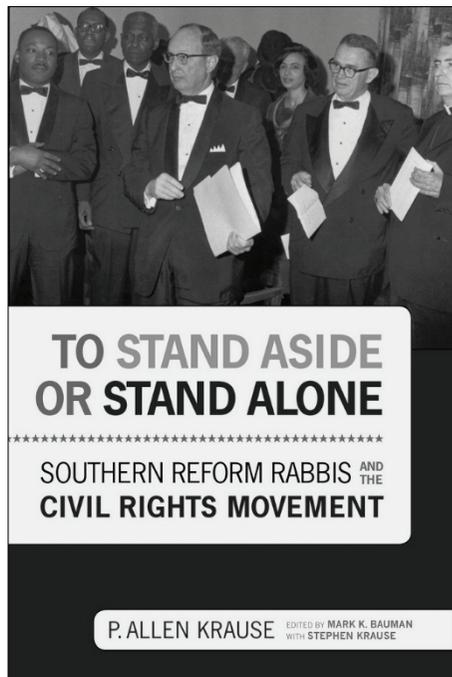
Krause published a summary of his findings in 1969 as "Rabbis and Negro Rights in the South, 1954-1967" in *American Jewish Archives*. When that essay was reprinted in the groundbreaking anthology *Jews in the South*, edited by Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Dale Palsson in 1973, Krause's research was quickly recognized as the foundational work on the topic. His article was pivotal for all subsequent discussions, including those in *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s-1960s* (1997), edited by Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin. In the introduction to the new volume, Bauman notes that Krause's research "provided the basis for the study of the topic for virtually every study thereafter" (xiii).

Krause went on to become a noted pulpit rabbi in California while continuing to work on producing a book-length version of his thesis—part of which had been "sealed" for twenty-five years because of a promise he had made to his interviewees that he would conceal their identities. Unfortunately, however, Krause died in 2012 before he was able to complete the project. Now the rabbi's son, Stephen, and Bauman have finished the work that Krause so ably undertook. The result is a volume that will no doubt be invaluable to researchers for many years to come.

The individual interviews are fascinating. Some are conducted with well-known figures of the era such as Jacob Rothschild of Atlanta, James Wax of Memphis, and Perry Nussbaum of Jackson, Mississippi. Other

interviews bring to light the work and views of lesser-known rabbis such as Martin Hinchin of Alexandria, Louisiana, and Moses Landau of Cleveland, Mississippi. All the rabbis give the impression of good will and noble intentions, although they were often constrained or stymied by the environments in which they found themselves. While some of the rabbis were more outspoken than others, they all describe the pressures that were placed on them and on their congregants by the members of their communities (and by national groups as well) who took strong stands on both sides of the desegregation and civil rights issues of the era. Taken together, they tell a story of tension and occasional triumph as the rabbis worked to put the message of prophetic Judaism into practice during troubled and heated times.

Having lived in Nashville for thirty years, I found the interview with William Silverman to be of particular interest. Silverman became known as “the pistol-packing rabbi” when, following the bombing of the Nashville Jewish Community Center in 1958, he publicly announced that he would be carrying his gun when he accompanied his two sons to school, lest anyone should attempt to harm them. I was also especially intrigued by the interview with Milton Grafman of Birmingham, Alabama. Grafman has often been condemned for having signed the letter that precipitated Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous response written from the Birmingham jail, but his interview shows that he was actually a strong proponent of desegregation who, like many of the other rabbis, was working behind the scenes to try to achieve change. In the spring of 1963, Grafman feared that dramatic demonstrations such as King’s actually made that process more difficult. Other readers



will no doubt find other chapters especially interesting for their own personal reasons.

By putting the various interviews together in one place, furthermore, this volume allows readers to make important comparisons between them. We can see the differences that faced rabbis in smaller communities like Hattiesburg, Mississippi, versus those in larger cities like Atlanta or Memphis, for example. We can see the differences between rabbis who were able to join in larger ministerial associations with Protestant and, especially, Catholic clergymen versus those who were pretty much compelled to go it alone. We can also see the different experiences of rabbis whose congregants were mostly merchants, and thus vulnerable to economic reprisals, versus those whose congregants were more concentrated in the professions. As a result, we quickly become aware that the notion of “the Solid South” was indeed a fiction, as each rabbi faced a special set of circumstances that influenced his actions and reactions.

The scholarly apparatus that Krause *files* and Bauman have provided for the interviews is also very adroit and quite helpful to the reader. Each chapter begins with a discussion of the particular community in which that rabbi held his position, both in general and in terms of the history of its Jewish residents; a biographical sketch of that rabbi; and a brief “Editor’s Introduction.” Very useful footnotes throughout the book explain certain historical events or personalities to which the rabbis allude. As a result, much can be learned from the book beyond the strict parameters of its focal subject.

I do have two minor complaints to register, however. The first problem is unavoidable: Krause asked all of the rabbis essentially the same questions, which was certainly the correct methodological approach, so the answers become somewhat repetitive. Rabbi Grafman even refers to this problem when he says, “I dare say there hasn’t been too much variation in what you have been getting in your various interviews” (249). One footnote—explaining a march in Mississippi that was taking place simultaneously with the interviews—is even repeated verbatim four times. I suspect, however, that many (if not most) readers will look to individual chapters focusing on a particular rabbi or locality rather than reading the book from cover to cover, as I did in preparing this review, so I don’t think this redundancy will prove to be significant.

The second problem has to do with the order in which the interviews have been presented. While the book is divided usefully into two main sections – “In the Land of the Almost Possible” and “In the Land of the Almost Impossible” – the sequencing, particularly in the first section, is not always as helpful as it could have been. Most notably, there is only one instance in which two rabbis from the same community are interviewed, Julian Feibelman and Nathaniel Share of New Orleans. Yet their interviews are not presented consecutively, which would have made it easier for readers to compare the differing views of two individuals whose local circumstances are similar. Having the interviews with the rabbis from Memphis and Nashville next to each other would also have provided for some interesting intrastate comparisons. An individual reader could certainly adjust the order in which the chapters are read to emphasize these connections, but it would have been nice if the editors had done that for us already, or at least done more to explain why they did not.

Even so, these caveats are very small given the overall excellence and importance of the volume. No one who is interested in this subject will henceforth be able to understand the full picture without consulting *To Stand Aside or Stand Alone*. Rabbi Krause is to be commended for conducting the interviews so thoughtfully and for laboring to bring them to light in their complete form, and Bauman and the younger Krause are to be applauded for seeing the work to its conclusion in such a professional and instructive manner. This is truly a volume that can be recommended to all students of southern Jewish history.

*Adam Meyer*, Vanderbilt University

The reviewer may be contacted at [adam.s.meyer@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:adam.s.meyer@vanderbilt.edu).

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**Gertrude Weil: Jewish Progressive in the New South.** By Leonard Rogoff. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 368 pages.

**G**ertrude Weil is not a well-known figure in American Jewish history, and that is a shame. Perhaps it is because she is from the South, and in particular from a small southern town—Goldsboro, North Carolina, population eleven thousand, with about 150 Jews for most of Weil’s life. Perhaps also it is because she was not a rabbi, professor, politician, or

business leader, but a lifelong activist and club member who never married or had children. That neglect does not do her justice.

In his interesting and informative biography, *Gertrude Weil: Jewish Progressive in the New South*, Leonard Rogoff paints a vivid portrait of an intelligent, charming woman, modern and traditional, radical and conservative. More than that, Rogoff ably chronicles Weil the difference-maker. She held leadership roles in many major political efforts of the Progressive Era, from the woman suffrage movement to anti-lynching campaigns to labor reform. She was also deeply engaged with issues facing the American Jewish community, actively involved in Reform Judaism, helping German family members escape the Nazis, and promoting Zionism. Born in 1879 in the same house where she would die ninety-two years later, Weil had a large impact on her local and state communities, advancing causes of national and global significance.

In chronicling Weil's early life, including her family's history as German Jewish immigrants to the United States and her formal education, Rogoff wisely opts for a loosely chronological but largely thematic approach. A thoroughly chronological narrative of Weil's life would have left readers lost in a flurry of disparate activities. The thematic approach, instead, shows the depths to which Weil was dedicated to her various causes, the leadership roles she played, and the thoughtful approach she took to complicated issues. The one consistent fact is that Weil looked to solve national problems at the local and state level. She mostly limited her activism to Goldsboro or North Carolina, remaining loyal to her roots throughout her life.

Weil grew up in privilege surrounded by loving parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, as well as servants black and white. Her family was among the town's first residents, German Jewish immigrants and former peddlers who owned a prosperous department store and held diverse stakes in local industries. Although there is no record of the Weils owning slaves, Weil's uncles and maternal grandfather served in the Confederate army, declaring loyalty to their state and regional identity as thousands of Jews did across the South. Gertrude Weil maintained this loyalty for her entire life, despite breaking with the majority of her peers by supporting the civil rights movement after World War II. The first chapter, titled "German, Jewish, and Southern," encapsulates the particular identity of the Weil family.

Smart, athletic, witty, and wealthy, Gertrude Weil had a happy childhood. She lived seamlessly among gentiles, befriending non-Jewish classmates in primary school, boarding school, and college. After graduating from Smith College in Massachusetts in 1901, Weil returned home, ironically describing herself as a “lady of leisure” (55). Her “leisure” pursuits included running a nursery school with her mother Mina, traveling across North America and Europe, reading voraciously, auditing summer classes at Cornell and Vassar, and attending lectures on Christian Science, Unitarianism, and Ethical Culture. The Goldsboro Jewish community recruited Weil to teach in the synagogue’s religious school, which she did for over fifty years. She became the school’s principal in 1918.

The Weil family helped found Goldsboro’s first Jewish congregation, Oheb Shalom, in 1883. Weil attended regularly. A town legend has it that she was once the sole congregant present but still insisted that “the rabbi conduct the entire service and deliver his sermon” (238). In describing Jewish life in Goldsboro, Rogoff’s book makes an excellent contribution to the recent scholarship on Jews in the South and Jews in small towns. Oheb Shalom formally affiliated with the Reform movement in 1890 and hired Rabbi Julius Mayerberg, a Lithuanian Jew raised Orthodox, educated in Germany, and trained as a lawyer. When Jewish immigrants began trickling in from eastern Europe, Mayerberg offered Goldsboro’s “Russian contingent” separate Orthodox holiday services after Reform worship had finished (28). In bigger cities, these traditional newcomers would have had more options, but in small towns they were forced into greater interaction with the Reform community. Weil showed no prejudice to their children when she taught them in the religious school.

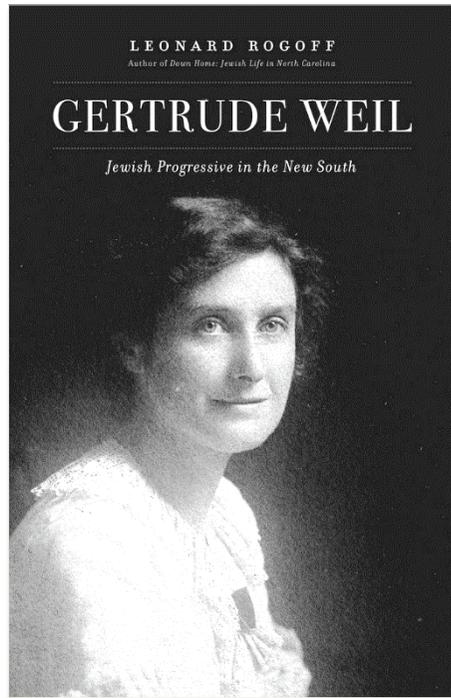
Weil’s father, Henry, opposed Zionism in the tradition of the Classical Reform movement that understood Judaism as religion and not as ethnicity or nationality. Weil, although emerging from that same tradition, embraced Zionism, largely because of her mother’s friendship with Henrietta Szold. In 1912, Mina and Gertrude both joined Hadassah, Szold’s Zionist organization for American women. Weil eventually became a regional officer. She was also a three-time president of her local chapter of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods and followed in her mother’s footsteps as president of the Goldsboro Woman’s Club in

1908, 1916, and 1932. The Woman's Club embraced progressive reform and social justice. Weil supported birth control and eugenics. The club pressed local and state politicians for labor reform, improvements to public health and education, and the creation of libraries.

Although she pursued romantic relationships when she was a young adult, by her mid-thirties Weil had "committed to an unmarried life" (62) of political activism. Passionate about earning women's right to vote, Weil joined the National American Woman Suffrage Association

(NAWSA) in 1911, served as president of the Goldsboro Equal Suffrage League in 1914, and as president of the North Carolina Suffrage League in 1919. Along the way, she befriended NAWSA leader Carrie Chapman Catt. As Rogoff notes, while her class and educational background was "typical of suffragists," her religion was unusual (107). Although many Jewish suffragists existed, they did not organize as Jews but in secular progressive women's organizations. This was Weil's experience with the movement.

Weil's battle for woman suffrage came to a head in 1919 after Congress approved the Nineteenth Amendment, but passage by thirty-six states was needed for ratification. Although North Carolina failed to ratify the amendment in 1920, suffragists across the state celebrated Weil's tireless efforts. They rallied behind her as she came to lead the newly founded North Carolina League of Women Voters. She made national news in 1922 when she went to vote in Goldsboro but was given a ballot "marked for the Democratic machine" (152-53). Weil tore up the marked ballot and dozens more stacked on a nearby table. Nominally a Demo-



crat, Weil nonetheless eschewed partisan politics and hoped woman suffrage would lead to progressive reform regardless of which party won power.

After World War I, Weil directed more of her charity and volunteer work to helping African Americans, although she still trafficked in pernicious racialized stereotypes about the "idle, mischievous, and often vicious habits of the negro youth" (160). In 1930, she attended the Anti-Lynching Conference for Southern White Women in Atlanta. The next year, she joined the North Carolina Interracial Committee Woman's Section and gradually increased her activism. Her racial views evolved over time from progressive paternalism to an "appreciation of black agency" (161). Weil's relationship to her two black servants, Mittie Exum and Haywood Spearman, demonstrates this dualism. Rogoff notes that Weil paid them generously and considered them "family" (261). "When chauffeured by Spearman, Miss Gertrude, unlike Miss Daisy, sat beside him in the front seat rather than in the back" (262), but this seating arrangement hardly changed the power dynamic between the two.

Like her activism in behalf of African Americans, Weil saw her involvement in Jewish organizations as part of her broader commitment to progressivism. "Though her methods were founded on scientific principles," Rogoff writes, "she drew inspiration from the Hebrew prophets." Led by faith and intellect in all her activism, she "would not compartmentalize her life" (247), helping local millworkers or the nascent state of Israel under the same principles. In 1921, Weil began her "principal Jewish organizational commitment" (102) with the North Carolina Association of Jewish Women (NCAJW). The fifty-seven founding members who met at Oheb Shalom, including Weil's mother Mina and aunt Sarah, agreed to cooperate with national Jewish women's organizations like the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, or Hadassah, and some were members in all of these. The unifying principle was not denominational, ethnic, or political, but rather their identity as Jewish women from North Carolina. The NCAJW was one of the few state-based, independent Jewish women's organizations in America.

Weil did not regard antisemitism as a major part of her life. Rogoff cites a 1946 national survey and concludes that "antisemitism was weaker in the South than in the North and in small towns than in cities" (211).

A small-town southerner, Weil rarely spoke of antisemitism, preferring to emphasize “Jewish agency” (236). To Weil, antisemitism was something that occurred far away that prompted her to try to rescue her cousins caught in Nazi Germany and occupied France, or something the beleaguered state of Israel faced from its Arab enemies.

After Israeli statehood in 1948, Weil would visit Israel twice, but she directed her final activist push toward equality for African Americans in the South. She fought resistance to *Brown v. the Board of Education* in North Carolina, inviting Harry Golden, the editor of the *Carolina Israelite* and a Jewish civil rights activist, to speak at Oheb Shalom in 1955. When a Democratic gubernatorial candidate invited supporters to bring a “neighbor” to a campaign event at a segregated Goldsboro hotel, Weil “led a parade of African Americans into the lobby” (256). In 1963, when local progressives created a sixteen-man Bi-Racial Council, Weil joined their Women’s Goodwill Committee of 140 women and hosted the first meeting in her house.

Toward the end of her life, Weil moved even further to the left. “I grow more radical every year,” she observed. “Who knows? I may live long enough to become a communist” (280). This trajectory is the opposite of several “New York Intellectuals,” who went from leftism to neoconservatism. Weil’s uniqueness here is suggestive of another way to evaluate her historically: as an intellectual.

In American history, there is a tendency to venerate righteous women without taking them seriously as thinkers. This was the case with Jane Addams before Christopher Lasch shone light on her intellectual heft as a philosophical pragmatist. In terms of American Jewish history, we see this with Henrietta Szold, friend to Weil’s mother. In *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust*, Melvin Urofsky wrote that “Judaism does not canonize, but if it did, nearly everyone would demand sainthood for Henrietta Szold.” Similarly, Rogoff calls Szold “a revered, even saintly figure” (99). Yet Szold was also an intellectual, contributing countless articles and delivering numerous speeches to Zionist publications and groups, designing educational curricula and programming for thousands of young Jews, and translating the work of Russian-born Jewish historian Simon Dubnow into English.

Rogoff primarily presents Gertrude Weil as an activist, but she was also a serious thinker. She wrote her senior thesis at Smith College on

Kant and decades later continued using terms like *noumena* in her writing. Although their four-year epistolary romance eventually dwindled, her love letters to suitor Victor Jelenko “were witty, intense, and literary” (60). Independently and in book clubs, she read voraciously from Tolstoy to Thoreau. She could cite the Hebrew Bible chapter and verse. One of her favorite books, mentioned multiple times by Rogoff, was William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Gertrude was not simply pious but “a well-read student of religion” (229). And her religiosity did not render her a prude. We can imagine the twinkle in her eye when at age ninety she quipped, “People think that I don’t know anything about sex just because I never got married” (279). Faith, reason, wit: these were all parts of Gertrude Weil’s intellect.

If we define an intellectual as someone who uses ideas to enact political change, Weil again fits the bill. Rogoff knows this but states it only implicitly, writing that Weil “expressed frustration with academic elitists who did not move beyond research and policy into direct action.” Weil’s dual nature as a religious intellectual enabled her activism. As Rogoff writes, “spirituality balanced Gertrude’s rationalism.” This flowed into her intellectual style: “Although a student of surveys and statistics, she was more likely to cite case studies and personal stories when making her arguments” (289). Without essentializing a feminine style of intellect, it is important here to note that Weil was making arguments. Gertrude Weil was not just a “Jewish Progressive in the New South,” she was a small-town female intellectual, a category too long erased from history. That, as much as anything, makes her worthy of a biography.

*David Weinfeld*, Virginia Commonwealth University  
The reviewer may be contacted at [daweinfeld@vcu.edu](mailto:daweinfeld@vcu.edu).

## Exhibit Review

**The First Jewish Americans: Freedom and Culture in the New World.** New-York Historical Society, October 28, 2016, through March 12, 2017. Curated by Dale Rosengarten and Adam Mendelsohn.

**D**uring winter 2016–2017, the New-York Historical Society (NYHS) turned over several of its lofty gallery rooms to showcase the experience of early American Jewry. Through the display of historic maps, original documents, paintings, and material objects, it presented the exhibit *The First Jewish Americans*, subtitled “Freedom and Culture in the New World,” which covered the period from the seventeenth century into the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century. It explored the ways in which Jews, mostly in what became the United States, went about the process of making homes for themselves as individuals and creating space for their Jewish communal institutions, primarily synagogues.

*The First Jewish Americans* evolved out of the original exhibition *By Dawn’s Early Light: Jewish Contributions to American Culture from the Nation’s Founding to the Civil War*, organized by the Princeton University Library; curated by Adam Mendelsohn, director of the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town, South Africa; and cocurated by Dale Rosengarten, archivist of the Jewish Heritage Collection at the College of Charleston Library in Charleston, South Carolina, and codirector of the college’s Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture. The original exhibition, on display at Princeton in Spring 2016 had not been intended to travel until the board chairperson of the NYHS read the accompanying catalogue and requested the show. The NYHS took some creative liberties and changed the exhibit to be more New York-focused.

The exhibit moved along both a temporal and a geographic arc. It began in Suriname and other parts of the Caribbean region where in the sixteenth century the first Jews settled and, for the most part, prospered through commerce. It then moved visitors on to the mainland of British North America telling, one by one, a well-known tale of New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, looking in that order at the eighteenth century, the age of the American Revolution, and then the early Republic period, respectively. A final two sections of the exhibit abandoned spatial specificity to explore first the rise, nationally, of a distinctively American form of Judaism and then highlight the contributions of Jews to the artistic and cultural life of the new nation.

*Materials related to Charleston, SC, from The First Jewish Americans.  
(Photo by Glenn Castellano, courtesy of the New-York Historical Society.)*

For each place, the exhibit's organizers displayed artifacts and images as well as key documents that accomplished two purposes. The items on display told about the life of the Jewish community, be it in New York or Charleston, Philadelphia or Newport, stressing the growth of Jewish life in the form of congregations and cemeteries and, for the later period, voluntary Jewish associations outside of the synagogue orbit. For each of these places, the viewer could engage with the formal apparatus of public Jewish life. For Charleston, for example, visitors had a chance to see Penina Moïse's hymnal used for Sabbath services at Kahal Kodesh Beth Elohim, the first of its kind in American and indeed world Jewish history. But the exhibit also featured the more quotidian lives of individual early American Jews, exploring through a range of eye-catching objects how Jews lived. It showed how they made a living, mainly in commerce and artisanship, snippets about the interior furnishings of their homes, details about gender and family relationships, and importantly how they interacted as individuals with the non-Jews among whom they lived. *The First Jewish Americans* struck a fine balance between the formal life of the Jewish communities and the details about Jews as ordinary women and men, who, for the most part, took advantage of an expansive set of civic options.

As to the aesthetics of *The First Jewish Americans*, the organizers prepared a beautiful and rich show, assembling material never seen together, and all complementing each other. Silver objects crafted by Myer Meyers, the portraits of the Franks family, a circumcision log of slaves from a Jewish-owned plantation in Suriname, and paintings by Camille Pissaro and Solomon Nunes Carvalho offered much to see, enjoy, and think about in this exploration of the journeys undertaken by the small number of European Jews who joined the risky journey to what they understood to be the "new world."

For all the richness of the material and the care in the selection process, the exhibit stumbled for its conventionality and lack of probing of certain key concepts. It claimed to be dedicated to the theme of "freedom," as do so many other renditions of American Jewish history. But it never interrogated the term's meaning and how freedom for one group, particularly in that time and place, depended on the denial of freedom for others. We learned little about the Jews' involvement with slavery, their interactions with indigenous people, or the historic reality that the

*Oil painting of Kahal Kadosh Beth  
Elohim interior, 1838, by  
Solomon Nunes Carvalho  
(Courtesy of Special Collections,  
College of Charleston.)*

freedom Jews enjoyed made them different from Catholics who suffered grievously in these places. The exhibition texts consistently employed such self-congratulatory terms as “remarkable” and “resilience” without asking if the experience of these early American Jews stood out as particularly notable or different from that of other white people who cast their lot with the Americas.

Likewise, “resilience” as a positive word assumes that an individual or a group made a mighty effort in the face of extraordinary difficulty. But the term ignores the fact that the Jews of the Americas occupied a highly advantageous position given their ability to activate their own global trade networks and their family and communal ties that linked them commercially to Jews around the world. Jews benefitted the colonial authorities who founded these outposts purely for the purpose of making a profit, and, inasmuch as Jews helped in this effort, they needed less in the way of their own sterling qualities and more in the way of kin and community around the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds. Additionally, we know that Jews, like other free white people, moved around the colonies, and many went back to Europe for longer or

shorter periods of time, making the definition of them as “American” Jews less than convincing.

This exhibit failed finally to deal with the internal struggles and differences within the world of early American Jewry, for the most part paying no attention to the presence and then numerical superiority of Jews from northern and eastern Europe. It did not treat the rise of second congregations by the beginning of the nineteenth century as newly arriving Jews, Ashkenazim, rebelled against the domination of the old-timers. It did not highlight the general loosening of cultural and economic controls in the new nation with the rise of a culture of *laissez-faire*, nor did it treat the emergence of Jewish institutions outside the sphere of the congregations, which challenged the hegemony of the synagogues, as freedom came to mean freedom to be Jews as they wanted.

Despite these limitations, the decision of the New-York Historical Society to stage *The First Jewish Americans* provided New Yorkers and tourists to the city a chance to learn much and have a visually inspiring experience.

*Hasia Diner*, New York University