

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

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# Southern Jewish History

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## Book Reviews

**The Jewish World of Elvis Presley.** By Roselle Kline Chartock. McKinsty Place Publishers, 2020. 276 pages.

As someone who closely followed Elvis Presley's career from his seminal recordings for Sun Records through his climb to RCA Victor, and then to superstardom and beyond, I never realized how predominantly his career and personal life were impacted by friends and business associates who were Jews. In her illuminating study of Presley's life among Jews, Roselle Kline Chartock lays out an astonishing array of connections that led me to realize that his religious preferences were not, as I had long believed, fully couched in Christianity. "Elvis showed his love for all people," according to Memphis disc jockey and later blues icon B. B. King, whose early 1950s rise to blues fame mirrored the teenage Presley's absorption with post-World War II rhythm and blues that was so prominent in the South.

Indeed, *The Jewish World of Elvis Presley* cites evidence that Elvis's maternal great-great-grandmother was a Lithuanian Jewish immigrant who converted to Christianity upon arriving in the United States. Perhaps that accounts for the stunning fact that, for most of his life, he wore a medallion around his neck that bore a Star of David, a cross, and a *chai* as a symbol of life. Still, his manager, Colonel Tom Parker, tried to keep his association with Jews and Judaism a secret. "People don't like Jews," Parker told him. Presley's ancestry was decidedly mixed: French, Norman, Scotch-Irish, and Native American. But perhaps the Jewish part connected to what happened when his parents moved from Tupelo, Mississippi, to

the top floor of a two-story duplex in Memphis, where he was particularly drawn to Judaism. The ground floor tenants and landlords were Orthodox Jews: Rabbi Alfred Fruchter and his wife Jeanette. Presley helped them with various household chores, which included being their “Shabbos goy” when needed. The Fruchters invited the Presleys to Passover Seders and other holiday meals, and Elvis learned to love Jewish cooking. He even ate his favorite peanut butter and banana sandwiches on challah. Moreover, the rabbi’s cantorial music, which came in through the duplex’s open windows, enchanted and inspired Elvis. Rabbi Fruchter also owned a record player that Presley borrowed to play the early rhythm and blues sounds of Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup and Wynonie Harris, from which he learned and which he craved to perform.

Elvis’s father Vernon was outspokenly antisemitic and had come from an area in Mississippi where it was commonly thought that Jews had horns. Yet the family attended a fundamentalist Assembly of God Church, which believed the Jews to be the chosen people. As a youth, Jeanette Fruchter recalled, Elvis was known as “the nicest boy you could ever hope to meet,” one who, according to friends, “loved the Jewish religion.” As such, and because he came from so poor a family, Elvis received a free membership to the Memphis Jewish Community Center. There he cultivated what became a lifelong obsession with racquetball and a hearty appreciation of the center’s generosity. Years later he donated \$150,000 to one of its fundraising campaigns.

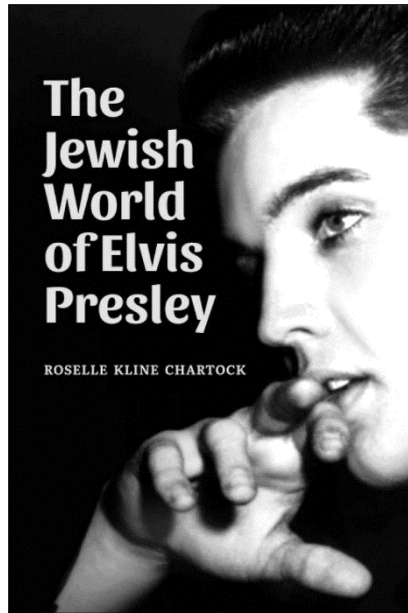
In Chartock’s telling, the Jewish merchants on Beale Street served a primarily Black clientele that heavily influenced the young Presley’s style and performances. The Lansky Brothers clothing store, whose owners descended from eastern Europe, intrigued an Elvis who sought an original look that became known as “cat clothes.” That style went far beyond the teenage norm of the day: tee shirts and jeans. His lifelong friendship with Hal Lansky, the son of store founder Bernard, ensured that Elvis maintained a distinctive fashion look throughout his life. He frequently shopped at other Jewish-owned stores on Beale Street, including Schwab’s Department Store, Lowenstein and Brothers, and Goldsmith’s. A huge movie fan, Elvis patronized Jewish-owned Malco Theatres. A jeweler named Harry Levitch was another longtime friend. Elvis hung out at and bought records from the Home of the Blues Record Store on Beale Street and befriended its owner, Ruben Cherry, whose store was the first in town

to sell Elvis's initial hit, "That's All Right, Mama." Years earlier Cherry had encouraged Elvis's musical aspirations and had even lent him money so that he could attend concerts and thus broaden his experience of music in performance.

In the eighth grade, Elvis became friends with George Klein. Both were likely attracted to each other for being different. Elvis was the rural outsider, Klein the lone Jew in the class. Neither was particularly welcomed by their classmates. Klein remained a close friend and perhaps the first member of what became known as the "Memphis Mafia," a

tightknit group of Elvis's pals, at least six of whom were Jewish. Elvis liked having people around him and offered his friends jobs that primarily hinged on keeping him company. They handled various tasks such as driving, travel arrangements, logistics, show production, and technical help. Chartock was fortunate to have interviewed many of these Memphis Mafiosi, and their tales of life with Elvis offer a plethora of compelling and intimate stories from the high school and army years through his death at Graceland in 1977.

Jewish songwriters, record label personnel, movie producers and directors touched almost every aspect of Presley's creative output. His earliest signature song, "Hound Dog," was written by Rock and Roll Hall of Fame songwriting partners Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, originally for female blues shouter Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton. Her version was filled with sexual innuendo and the anguish of being exploited by a selfish man. Elvis's take was toned down and quite different—something about catching a rabbit. Leiber and Stoller actually hated Elvis's version but kept their opinions to themselves when the royalties started rolling in. "To this day I have no idea what that rabbit business is all about," Leiber said in the duo's autobiography, aptly named *Hound Dog*. The pair easily bonded with Elvis and were pleasantly surprised to discover his vast knowledge



of the rhythm and blues music that they cherished. They also wrote "Jailhouse Rock" "Don't," "Loving You," and numerous other hits for him. Another potent Jewish songwriting team, Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, brought him hits like "Little Sister," "His Latest Flame," and "Surrender." Aaron Schroeder and his wife Abby came up with "I Was the One," "I Got Stung," and "A Big Hunk of Love," and turned the words from an Italian classic, "O Solo Mio," into Elvis's single biggest hit, "It's Now or Never."

In July 1956 Presley made his television debut on the Texaco Star Theater of Milton Berle (*né* Berlinger). Berle's contribution to the phenomenon that became Elvis is sometimes forgotten in the wake of later appearances that Ed Sullivan and Steve Allen hosted. Presley's highly rated 1968 comeback TV special was produced by Steve Binder, Bones Howe, Bob Finkel and Billy Goldenberg—all Jews. Colonel Parker was never enamored of Hollywood's numerous Jewish agents and producers, but he allowed for exceptions, particularly with the success of the comeback show.

The years that Elvis spent starring in Hollywood featured Jews at all levels of production and marketing. He aspired to be a legitimate, dramatic screen actor, like his idol James Dean. Elvis gave perhaps his most inspired and heartfelt performance in his fourth movie, *King Creole*, thanks to the direction of Michael Curtiz, who was born in Hungary as Mihalyt Kertesz. The director had escaped the Nazis but lost most of his family to the Holocaust. (Curtiz had earlier directed the most celebrated of Hollywood movies about refugees during World War II, *Casablanca*.) Most of Presley's films after *King Creole* were produced by Hal Wallis, aka Aaron Blum Wolowicz. But they had less bite, more songs, and no room for advancement in the craft of acting. So long as these movies made money, no one wanted to take chances on Elvis's acting aspirations.

The pages of *The Jewish World of Elvis Presley* are lined with memorable anecdotes, many of which cannot be found in the biographies that his singular career inspired. Chartock's book is a must-read for Elvis fans of all faiths and also for music historians seeking a closer look into the life of the entertainer known as "The King." The familiar phrase is applicable: Some of his best friends were indeed Jewish.

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**A Passion to Serve: Memoirs of a Jewish Activist.** By Sherry Z. Frank. Alpharetta, GA: BookLogix, 2019. 408 pages plus appendix.

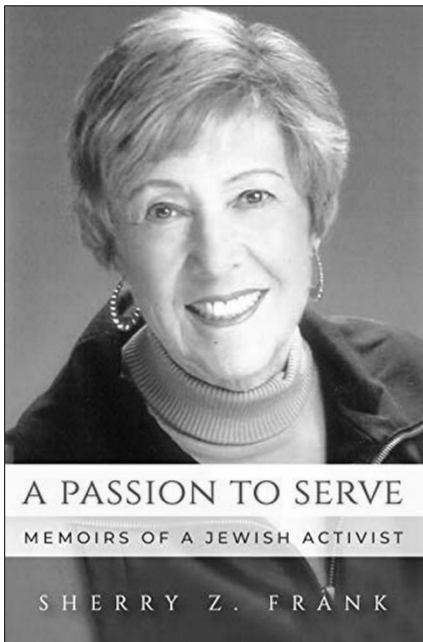
A community activist and bridge builder for over fifty years who was born and bred in Atlanta, Sherry Frank continues to make a difference in American Jewish life. She is perhaps best known for her work as president of the Atlanta Section of the National Council of Jewish Women, serving nonconsecutive terms beginning in the 1970s through today, and as the first woman to become southeast area director of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), a position she held from 1980 through September 2006. Frank's unwavering commitment to strengthening interreligious and interethnic relations, her tireless advocacy for Israel, ongoing fight against antisemitism and political extremism, and participation in the liberation movements of the 1980s and 1990s to help free Soviet Jewry and rescue the Jews of Ethiopia are only some of her many achievements. She also played a major role in creating the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival and, in the summer of 2003, helped establish and later served as president of Congregation Or Hadash in Sandy Springs, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. All of these are among the many subjects of her memoir's eighteen chapters.

Dividing *A Passion to Serve* into eighteen chapters was not accidental. As Frank writes in her introduction, "driven by a strong Jewish identity and pride in my community involvement," she "decided to make a link in this memoir between the Hebrew word, *chai*, which means both life and the number 18," by writing eighteen chapters about different aspects of her personal and professional life (viii). Having met Frank in Atlanta in the 1980s when I was teaching at Emory University, I was most interested in reading the chapter about her work for the AJC, as it was during her early years as executive director of the Atlanta chapter that our paths crossed. With readers invited in the book's introduction to either read the book straight through or choose chapters that "beckon" them, I decided to do the latter and, after reading the first chapter on "Women's Issues," turned to chapter four, which describes some of the early political issues in which Frank was engaged at AJC. These included efforts to help pass the Equal Rights Amendment, to renew the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and



to remove the Confederate battle emblem from the Georgia flag. Yet, as I quickly learned in reading this chapter, Frank's many passions—her feminism, love of Judaism and the Jewish community, long-standing commitment to social justice, etc.—are so deep and so intertwined that her chapters are not as different from one another as her introduction leads the reader to believe. The discussion of her advocacy work to renew the Voting Rights Act, for example, led to mention of the creation of the Atlanta Black/Jewish Coalition in Support of the Voting Rights Act, her involvement with this group, and the "close and life-long relationship" with Georgia Congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis that followed (67). More about the coalition, chapter four promised, would be covered in the chapter on "Jewish-Black Relations" (chapter nine). With great anticipation, I read that chapter next.

As with most of the chapters in this memoir, the chapter on Black-Jewish relations begins with a personal story. Here, Frank remembers her paternal uncle, Joe Zimmerman, who was one of the few white shop owners in downtown Atlanta who welcomed African Americans as customers. As a teenager in the late 1950s, she worked in his store on holidays and during the summers. At his funeral, held at Orthodox Congregation



Shearith Israel, Martin Luther King, Sr. ("Daddy King") gave the eulogy. To the young Sherry Zimmerman, this "spoke volumes" about her uncle "and his relation to the [Black] community." I am certain, she continued, that "it played an indelible role in shaping me and my commitment to civil rights and Black-Jewish relations" (171). This story is followed by the fascinating anecdote that the King National Historic Site in Atlanta allows visitors to see not only the Nobel Peace Prize but also the shirt that King wore on the day he received the prize, with the Zimmerman's label inside the collar. Frank's memoir is

filled with many such wonderful anecdotes. It also provides an insider's view of major American Jewish concerns and coalitions during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, while highlighting the professional and personal work of which Frank is proudest.

While I recognize that the focus of Frank's memoir, as evidenced by its title, is her life of service, I wish that the book had included more self-reflection. It includes mention of the many women and men who made a great impact on Frank, serving as role models and/or sources of inspiration. Yet the closest the reader comes to knowing Frank derives from the many wonderful photographs of her family, friends, colleagues, and fellow activists, often posing with her. In reading *A Passion to Serve*, I missed learning more about Frank's early years, including her memories of high school and college. When did she get married and what were the challenges and rewards of raising four children? How has being a grandmother of eleven enriched her life? During her years as AJC director, how was Frank able to handle the many personal and professional demands made upon her? These questions remain for me unanswered. Nonetheless, I highly recommend this engaging book to anyone interested in the Jewish community of Atlanta, the work of the American Jewish Committee, the National Council of Jewish Women, Black-Jewish relations in the United States, and the work of Sherry Frank. The lengthy appendix that further elucidates Frank's work in the Atlanta Black/Jewish Coalition, her programming and advocacy related to women's issues, and her long-standing efforts to build interethnic bridges, constitute a fine conclusion to a memoir that illuminates the many noteworthy achievements of a remarkable Jewish woman.

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**Sharing Common Ground: Promises Unfulfilled but Not Forgotten.** By Billy Keyserling with Mike Greenly. Self-published, 2020. 142 pages.

**B**illy Keyserling's book is what you need to read if you want a taste of local history, Black history, Jewish history, geography, business and

commerce, parks, and tourism. It is also a very readable memoir of an influential political leader in South Carolina and ultimately a look to the future and a call to activism. In this local history Keyserling includes all the people, not divided up into slices of the pie but integrated throughout. He asserts that people want “the truth of our history,” and that sharing that truth is our common ground.

Keyserling’s local history examines the role of Reconstruction in that shared story. A command of the American past requires knowledge of the course of Reconstruction, the most progressive period in southern history. Sometimes schools fail to study and teach Reconstruction. It comes after the first semester, so it may not be squeezed into an already full curriculum. And then, at the beginning of the second semester, teachers and professors alike think the students have already covered that period. One of the fine points about this book is the encouragement and support that Keyserling brings to the many teachers who are now teaching what they were never taught. They realize that Reconstruction is the period of history that set the stage for the present.

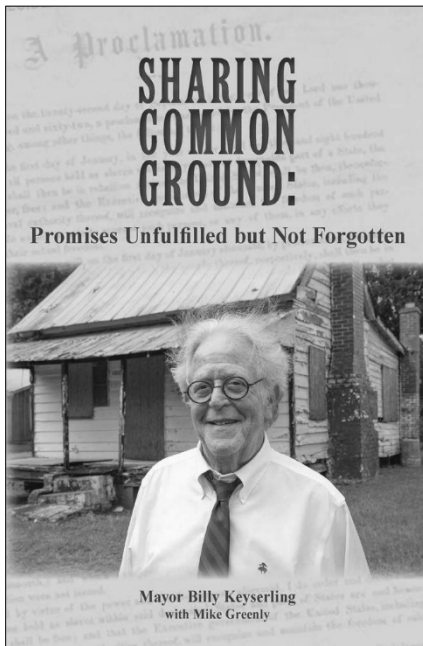
After the violent state-by-state overthrow of Reconstruction government came the national nadir of race relations. White supremacists wrote the history, distorting the problems and deleting the worthwhile accomplishments of interracial local governments and state assemblies. This went beyond the former Confederacy; it happened nationwide, as Asian, Italian, and other immigrants also suffered the consequences of the backlash. White historians, journalists, demographers, and intellectuals spouted racist thinking that became the standard of knowledge. Newly earned freedom for the formerly enslaved was subsumed by the white supremacy of the Lost Cause. How important it is, then, to hear the real story, such as what happened in Beaufort, South Carolina. How important it is, then, as white supremacy advances in our day, that we have books such as this.

The new Reconstruction Era National Historical Park (and in progress the network of associated sites) tells stories of Reconstruction. Keyserling shares his “sense of awe” when he relates the story of the formerly enslaved Robert Smalls, the Civil War hero and political leader in South Carolina and in the U.S. House of Representatives during Reconstruction. The author further notes how escaped slaves and newly freed slaves formed a regiment of the Union Army to free their brothers and

sisters. Keyserling also profiles Harriet Tubman, a conductor on the Underground Railroad and a Union spy during the Civil War. Few Americans may know that she was also an entrepreneur with a bakery and a laundry business to provide jobs for women in Reconstruction Beaufort. Keyserling also recounts the history of Penn Center on St. Helena Island, one of the first schools for African Americans. A century later Penn Center served as a meeting place for interracial groups working on civil rights and civic education and a peaceful retreat for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his fellow activists. Now it preserves Gullah culture and Black-owned land that families tilled since the 1860s.

*Sharing Common Ground* is also a memoir and a family history, and Keyserling portrays his ancestors and relatives as role models. He credits them with his "moral compass." His grandfather, William Keyserling (Caeserzki), fled pogroms in the Lithuanian sector of tsarist Russia; his escape from oppression, at the age of nineteen, was very dramatic. After finding refuge in New York City, he traveled in 1888 to Beaufort, where he found a job at Macdonald-Wilkins, a cotton and mercantile business. With his business partner, Keyserling also became one of the first local members of the Penn School Board. Historians usually date the end of Reconstruction in 1876, when—after a deadlocked presidential election—the two political parties agreed to withdraw federal troops from the region. The story is much more nuanced, however. Reconstruction was still going strong in Beaufort in 1888. But even as the prejudice and conformism associated with Jim Crow was permeating the South, Billy Keyserling's grandfather played a very active role in Beaufort's civic life. He inspired the character known as "The Great Jew" in Pat Conroy's novel *Beach Music* (1995), which presents the horrifying background of the Holocaust. By contrast *Sharing Common Ground* has little to say of the experience of anti-semitism in Beaufort.

In 1951, near the end of William Keyserling's life, he delivered a speech at a United Jewish Appeal event in New York in which he declared: "It's time for the young people to take over." He might have had his son and daughter-in-law in mind. Dr. Herbert Keyserling provided healthcare to neighbors who might otherwise have fallen through the cracks, and Billy Keyserling often accompanied his father on house calls and on the rounds he made at the local hospital. The filial admiration is evident. *Sharing Common Ground* also devotes a chapter to Harriet



Hirschfeld Keyserling, who published a memoir about her political endeavors, *Against the Tide: One Woman's Political Struggle* (1998), much as her husband did of his life, *Doctor K: A Personal Memoir* (1999). This "liberal Jewish woman from New York," her son writes, won election to the Beaufort County Council and then to the South Carolina legislature. He credits her, and others such as longtime U.S. Senator Fritz Hollings (D-SC), with teaching him to listen to others, to study issues carefully, and to respect differing points of view. Billy Keyserling's exploration of family values in-

cludes his parents' African American housekeeper, Maybelle Gardner Mack. She instructed him in "what is and is not important in life." She was his mentor in delineating "the human condition."

Keyserling takes pride in his Jewish faith. Martin Perlmutter, then director of the Yaschik/Arnold Jewish Studies Center at the College of Charleston, told him that the Keyserlings belong in the ranks of "Prophetic Jews." They exhibit compassion; they seek to help people, whether local or elsewhere. For Keyserling, one of the pivotal ways of providing help is to educate Americans about their hidden history. Hence appendices to this book include the Emancipation Proclamation, the three Reconstruction Amendments to the Constitution, a map of the Reconstruction Era National Historical Park, and even the lyrics to "Common Ground," the song by Keyserling's coauthor Mike Greenly.

Uncovering that hidden history constituted the catalyst for this book. In championing the Reconstruction Era National Historical Park, Keyserling is engaged in more than boosterism and promoting Beaufort. He appears to be more driven by the urge to tell of history, a history that once vanished from our national consciousness. Keyserling is optimistic but not naïve. Adversaries of his sixteen-year struggle to uncover forgotten truths

about Reconstruction by building the park included the Sons of the Confederacy. But in inviting readers “to have you with me on this journey,” Keyserling connects the search for common ground in a democracy to the strengthening of diversity itself.

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**Changing Perspectives: Black-Jewish Relations in Houston during the Civil Rights Era.** By Allison E. Schottenstein. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2021. 415 pages.

The historic Black-Jewish alliance—rooted in the 1909 creation of the NAACP, strengthened during 1960s voter registration drives, then disparaged and scorned with the rise of Black militancy—never quite existed in Houston, a right-wing oil capital where affluent, insecure Jews feared antisemitism and the Black population lacked unity and leverage. The arc of Houston’s interracial history is far different from most American urban settings, as Allison E. Schottenstein contends in her richly researched book, *Changing Perspectives: Black-Jewish Relations in Houston during the Civil Rights Era*. Few historians have simultaneously probed Black and Jewish narratives. Schottenstein does, embedding the reader in Houston’s Black wards and in its Jewish universe as the two marginalized groups slowly inch toward collaboration. From within each camp, she presents a diversity of voices. Her sources range from radio broadcasts and news columns to memoirs, documentaries, recent oral histories, and archival material from the Communist Party of the United States to the Central Conference of American Rabbis. The Houston weekly *Jewish Herald-Voice* serves as a veritable diary.

For decades, Houston’s most prominent Jews—the wealthy leaders at Beth Israel Congregation (Reform)—had asserted in their Basic Principles that their race was Caucasian, their nationality American. Fearing accusations of dual loyalty, they distanced themselves from Zionism and allied with the white Christian elite who perpetuated and condoned Jim Crow. Despite Jewish illusions of acculturation and acceptance, wealthy

neighborhoods were restricted to white Christians; Jewish political candidates were assailed as “Commies”; the Lord’s Prayer persisted in public schools; and Arab oil embargos were blamed on Jews, who faced discrimination in the energy industry. Houston’s Black and Jewish spheres were far from monolithic. Schottenstein portrays a spectrum of rabbis, from Beth Israel’s Hyman Judah Schachtel, who initially embraced the Caucasian clause, to Brith Shalom’s Moshe Cahana, who rattled the Ku Klux Klan and even his congregants when he marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. Holocaust survivors, some of whom became successful shopkeepers, spoke up for African Americans. Nonetheless, when people of color moved into a Jewish neighborhood, white flight followed.

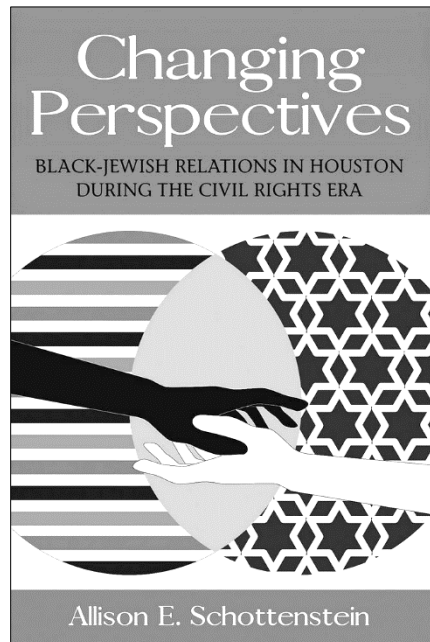
The book’s organization—sometimes chronological, sometimes topical—begins with a prologue outlining the early history of the Jewish and Black communities. In 1850, four years after Texas statehood, Houston had seventeen Jews and 2,300 slaves—22 percent of the populace. The Black population today remains 22 percent, but of 2.3 million people, Jews are less than 2 percent. In 1854 Houston became home to the state’s first and arguably most prestigious synagogue, Beth Israel. On a less illustrious note, Houston was the birthplace of the state’s first and largest Ku Klux Klan klavern, a sign of the reactionary tide beneath the surface of placidity and progress.

Chapter One explores the rationale and ramifications of Beth Israel’s Caucasian membership clause, codified in 1943 and rescinded in 1968. Schottenstein frames this as an “identity struggle” (40), a theme that runs throughout the book. The Cold War and the Communist witch hunts emerge in Chapter 2. Ironically, “at the height of the Red Scare in Houston . . . the city had no active Communist organizations” (76). Yet intimidation was so rife, and the right-wing Minute Women so menacing, that Jews kept their heads down. The *Informer*, the leading African American weekly, joined in the Red Scare by charging that Communists had even infiltrated the NAACP. Chapter 3 focuses on the school board’s resistance to the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision to integrate schools. Jews abstained from this struggle, comforted by local rabbi William Malev’s assurance that “segregation was an American fight, and not a Jewish fight” (104). Instead the Jews complained that Christianity permeated the curriculum and that a Bible Belt mentality animated the school board. The city’s Jews cringed in 1963 when, with news of the assassination of President John F.

Kennedy, many Houston students cheered and “kneeled to offer thanks” (215). In 1965, Jews finally began marching and working with African Americans to revamp the school board. They united under the slogan: “Space Age Houston—Stone Age Schools” (221). The calculus was changing as Jews realized that “to make change they could not stay quiet” (229).

Among the most riveting chapters in *Changing Perspectives* is “Exodus from Riverside to Meyerland,” a narrative detailing flight from a neighborhood that had been home to four synagogues and the city’s Jewish Community Center. In 1952, when a wealthy African American moved in, a white supremacist paid a Black handyman five hundred dollars to bomb the intruder’s house. The explosion had a ripple effect with a cross burning, bricks thrown at homes, and realtors frightening residents into making rapid sales. Over the next eighteen years, Jews and their institutions left Riverside Terrace for Meyerland, a neighborhood where they mostly remain today.

In succeeding chapters, the economic sphere comes to the fore as *Changing Perspectives* examines the “Desegregation of Downtown Houston.” At the forefront of the push for racial justice were students at Texas Southern University, a historically Black campus. In 1960, TSU students led six months of sit-ins, boycotts, and negotiations. By late summer the Retail Merchants Association, fearing negative headlines, agreed to quietly integrate seventy lunch counters—among them Jewish-owned Neiman Marcus, Sakowitz, and Battelstein’s. The quid pro quo was that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee consented to a weeklong news blackout during the transition. Newspapers and radio and television stations came on board. Desegregation arrived, the author concludes, “not because of . . . passion for civil rights but rather to protect the city’s business image” (89).





Halfway around the globe, Israel's victory in the 1967 Six Day War stirred ethnic pride among Houston Jewry, even as the Black Power movement spurred antisemitism and support for Palestinians. Jews, swept up in what Schottenstein terms "self-interest politics" (230), turned to international concerns, mainly freedom for Soviet Jews, also known as refuseniks. Only in the late-1970s, with the push from two powerhouse Black politicians did Houston's Jews collaborate wholeheartedly with African Americans. One was U.S. congressman Mickey Leland, a power broker and former Black Panther, who realized that Blacks and Jews had "greater opportunities . . . together than apart" (87). He became an advocate for Israel following a 1977 visit to the Holy Land and in 1980 established the Mickey Leland Kibbutzim Internship, a foundation that annually sends up to ten inner-city teens to Israel. The exchange focuses on leadership and team building. On multiple levels, it continues to foster Black-Jewish interactions in Houston. Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, a commanding orator, compared the plight of refuseniks with the struggle for freedom among her people. Jordan's speeches fostered a rapport between Blacks and Jews across the city.

Schottenstein, who completed her undergraduate work at Brandeis University and earned a Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin, has produced a compelling, well-written, finely layered study of a complex dynamic. *Changing Perspectives* invites further comparative research into ethnic groups that coalesce to gain clout in the public sphere.

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**Red Black White: The Alabama Communist Party, 1930-1950.** By Mary Stanton. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019. 199 pages.

**D**uring the Great Depression, the number of Communists in Alabama was miniscule. Yet incredibly, *Red Black White* constitutes the second scholarly monograph they have inspired, the first being Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe* (1990). The span of Mary Stanton's volume is ostensibly longer, covering two decades rather than one. But her subtitle

is misleading. This book is also set almost entirely during the Great Depression, the only decade of the twentieth century that the Communist Party nicked; and her final twenty pages read like an epilogue, or afterthought. Stanton covers a single branch of the Communist Party: District 17 in Birmingham. The writ of District 17 was not confined to "the Pittsburgh of the South" but ran to the rest of Alabama, and Georgia and Tennessee as well. Her vivid account of how the party's cadres engaged in political organizing during the Depression, the repression, and the Red Scare is inevitably punctuated with violence—"five lynchings, two riots, and two brutal labor strikes" (3). Radicals courted lethal risks in challenging the structures of race and class in Alabama, and nearly all of the brave white Communists whom Stanton depicts were Jews. Even though the author does not intend to make an explicit contribution to the historiography of southern Jewry, those portraits give *Red Black White* its pertinence.

Nor is this book parochial. During the first half of the twentieth century, no instance of racial injustice was more internationally notorious than the plight of the Scottsboro Nine, charged and convicted of rape in northern Alabama. Three of Stanton's nineteen chapters recount aspects of the case. Although she can hardly be expected to revise Dan T. Carter's *Scottsboro* (1969) or James Goodman's *Stories of Scottsboro* (1994), local antisemitism did target the Communists' International Labor Defense (ILD) as well as the crackerjack criminal defense attorney Samuel Leibowitz. "Many white Christians despised the Reds for their atheism or simply for being Jewish. The term *communist* covered both bases," as Stanton nicely puts it (45), although Leibowitz was not a communist. In one trial in 1933, the Morgan County prosecutor pointed to him and to the ILD's chief counsel, Joseph Brodsky (who is unmentioned in *Hammer and Hoe*), and urged the all-white jury to "show them that Alabama justice cannot be bought and sold with Jew money from New York" (94). In that era, leftists measured courtroom victories by how long southern jurors might take before deciding to convict an innocent Black defendant, and the ILD was correct in calling such perversions of justice a "legal lynching" (4). Yet counsel for the defense in the Scottsboro trials altered constitutional law when the Supreme Court was persuaded to require adequate counsel in state courts and to prohibit the exclusion of African Americans from jury rolls. The last of the Nine was not freed from prison until 1950, just under two decades after these youths had been convicted for a crime that they did not

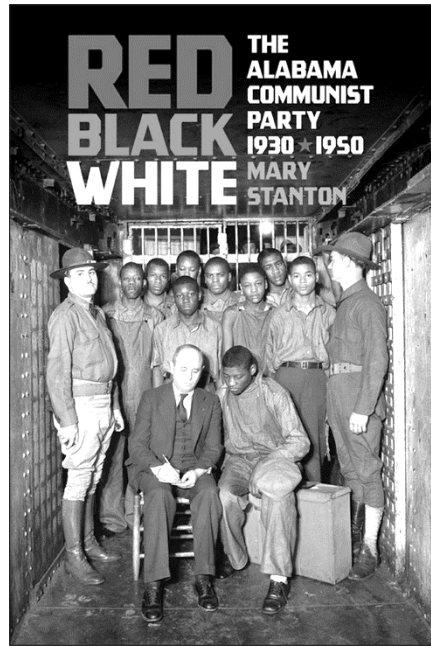
commit. Montgomery's Reform synagogue, Temple Beth Or, risked collateral damage, because congregants like Sadie Franks and Bea and Louis Kaufman helped raise money for the Scottsboro Nine. The Kaufmans opened their home to ILD attorneys and to Communist organizers. Because Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein actively joined the Scottsboro defense, the trustees forced him to resign from the pulpit in spring 1933.

The lone indigenous figure among Alabama Jewry whom Stanton portrays at length is Sadie Franks's brother, Joe Gelders, a physicist who taught at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. The murder of Black strikers helped radicalize him, and Gelders joined the Communist Party. In 1935 he paid a high penalty, however, when he was kidnapped and clubbed with blackjacks. Suffering from broken ribs, Gelders was left to die fifty miles from Birmingham. At least two of his assailants whom Gelders could identify belonged to the Alabama National Guard and worked for U.S. Steel. Nonetheless, no one was ever indicted. Gelders persevered, as did his wife Esther, who taught English at Tuscaloosa. Although she did not share his politics, she endured the consequences—death threats, a burning cross on their front lawn, shots fired into their living room. Gelders later chaired the Standing Committee on Human Rights of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, and in 1940 founded a tabloid, the *Southern News Almanac*, which was published under secret party sponsorship. Only fifty-two years old when he died, the brutal beating on his chest fifteen years earlier was the probable cause of so early a passing, Stanton believes. The couple's daughter, Marge Frantz, also became a Communist. Although she left the party after the 1956 revelations of Stalin's systematic crimes, she described her upbringing in a collection of reminiscences, *Red Diapers* (1998), coedited by Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro. "I would not trade the passion for social and racial justice that I inherited from my father," Frantz asserted, "for any other way of life."

The task of realizing such sentiments was Sisyphean, and the role of Jews in that effort decisive. Before *Southern News Almanac* was founded, the Communist Party used the *Southern Worker* to promote the interracial organizing of miners, sharecroppers, and factory workers. James Allen (*né* Solomon Auerbach) and his journalist wife Helen Marcy (*née* Ida Kleinman) served as early editors. Also from District 17, Blaine Owen (*né* Boris Israel) wrote for the Communists' national magazine, the *New Masses*.

Jailed in Memphis for sedition, beaten in Selma, shot in Harlan County, Kentucky, Owen was taken for a ride in a black sedan after meeting with steelworkers in Birmingham. Badly beaten, he refused to reveal the names of his comrades and had his hair pulled out before getting flogged. He fled the South—not to abandon his political convictions, but instead to fight with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain, where Owen vanished—listed as “missing in action.” Another organizer, Harry Simms, whose family name had been Hersch, was unlucky too. In 1932 a deputized mine guard named Arlie Miller murdered him, claiming self-defense. Simms had been unarmed, but Miller was exonerated. Hy Gordon, Amy Licht, the ILD’s Allan Taub, and the London-born Amy Schechter, whose father was the celebrated scholar Rabbi Solomon Schechter of the Jewish Theological Seminary, are also cited in *Red Black White*. They struggled to release the region’s Black citizens from the reign of terror that operated beneath the placid equanimity of southern society.

Two of the Communists assigned to District 17 sought to recruit Black sharecroppers in particular. A graduate of Columbia College, Nat Ross (*né* Rosenberg), later became the Communist Party’s postwar southern director. Along with the Russian-born Sid Benson (*né* Solomon Bernstein), Ross confronted a beleaguered Black community in which its newspaper, the *Birmingham Reporter*, adopted the philosophy of Booker T. Washington of the Tuskegee Institute. “The rich white people of the South” were African America’s true friends, one editorial opined, rather than “a bunch of foreigners paid by Moscow and Jewish gold to stir up trouble among the Negroes” (15–16). The Alabama Sharecroppers’ Union was nevertheless formed in 1931. Theodore Rosengarten’s classic venture into oral history, *All God’s Dangers* (1974), portrays union member “Nate



Shaw" (Ned Cobb). Jailed during the organizing effort a year later, he secured the help of two white attorneys from the ILD. Who were they? *All God's Dangers* testifies to Shaw's prodigious memory, but exhibiting a lifetime's circumspection, Shaw said, "I disremember their names." Rosengarten calls the major defense attorney Stein. The local white men in authority "hated his guts," Shaw observed. That was fine with him. Given the misery and vulnerability of Black life in rural Alabama, he had few other white allies.

That white Communists in the 1930s were very likely to be Jews may be a truism that Stanton fails to explain. But the reasons should be suggested here. Some radicals become middle-aged and even elderly apparatchiks, but activism—especially dangerous activism—is usually a monopoly of the young. During the Depression decade, the Jews whose ages ranged from their twenties to their thirties would most commonly have been born to impoverished immigrants from eastern Europe. Their lives were insecure under capitalism, which after 1929 seemed to be on the skids, to be replaced by a system that promised to end not only misery but ancient hatreds as well. Moreover, the theoretical aura of Communism offered special appeal to intellectuals; textual analysis was central to Judaic tradition. The confidence that ideological fervor instills, the yearning for social justice emblematic of the Prophets, plus a certain recklessness that was oblivious to the peril of the Deep South, brought these young Communists to District 17. There they were easily crushed, and the question inevitably lingers whether their organizing efforts left any traces.

*Red Black White* answers in the affirmative. The ILD and District 17 served as "working models" for the next generation of liberal and radical activists who would galvanize the struggle for civil rights. The ILD saved the lives of the Scottsboro Nine and others, exposing the cruelty of Jim Crow. "Without the Reds' tenacity," Stanton concludes, "much injustice in the United States would have gone unreported" (160). Without the risks that the young Jewish Communists assumed to challenge the exploitation and discrimination that pervaded Alabama and other southern states, the generation that later fought against segregation would have been obliged to start from scratch. Stanton is, after all, also the author of *Hand of Esau* (2006), a study of the response of Montgomery's Jews to the 1955 bus boycott. Stanton's case is not utterly implausible; history is not replete with movements that begin ex nihilo.

But vestiges of the struggles of the 1930s were quite limited, and she apparently found few real links—either personal or institutional—to suggest that such a lineage was on anything other than life support. The most famous American Communist of the second half of the twentieth century, Angela Davis, was born in 1944 and raised in Birmingham, the daughter of activists. But she is unmentioned in *Red Black White*, and one takeaway from this disturbing book is the length of the odds in making Alabama's political economy more decent. The contest between the Communist Party and the state's power structure was utterly asymmetrical. The Reds could not open the sluice gates to let their crimson tide wash across Alabama so that both races might benefit. Common class interests were supposed to catalyze change; but three decades after the ILD arrived, the state's politics remained an irreducible either/or. As John Patterson, who served as governor from 1959 to 1963, explained to journalist Marshall Frady (*Wallace*, 1968): "You were either for the white folks or the nigras. If you didn't appeal to prejudice, you'd get beat."

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