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# THE RAMBLER

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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## Memphis Memories

### Annual Meeting Features 'Cues, Blues, and Jews



Joan Nathan

From Southern-Jewish cooking to the African-American Jews of the Mississippi Delta, the 28<sup>th</sup> annual SJHS Conference, Oct. 31-Nov.2, 2003, in Memphis offers a program to challenge the senses as well as the mind. "A People's Memory is History" is the theme. Host Committee Chairs Sumner Levine and Jack Rosensweig, and Program Chair Mark I. Greenberg promise a convention that will be, as its title suggests, memorable.

This year's meeting will have a special Memphis flavor. One lunch will be catered by the famous Jewish-owned Corky's Bar-B-Q and another will feature recipes by Jewish food gurus Joan Nathan and Marcie Cohen Ferris. Conventioneers will also visit the Marilyn and Jack Belz Museum of Judaica, the Center for Southern Folklore, and the National Civil Rights Museum. Saturday night features a concert of klezmer music and three cantors.

Among the program highlights will be Stephen Whitfield's Gumenick Lecture on "Cues, Blues,

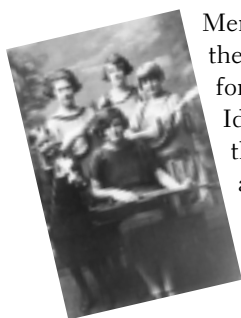
and Jews: Southern Music and Southern Jews." Whitfield, professor of American Studies at Brandeis University, has been one of the SJHS's most popular and insightful speakers. At the Saturday-night banquet author and historian William Ferris, former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, will offer "Personal Reflections on the Southern Jewish Experience." Joan Nathan, who hosted a PBS series on Jewish Cooking in America, will join folklorist Marcie Ferris for a "Culinary Tour of the Jewish South."

Local history is especially resonant in Memphis and the Delta. Memphis has been, "An Orthodox Oasis in the South." City rabbis will discuss this legacy, and historian David Patterson, chairman of the Bornblum Judaic Studies Program of the University of Memphis, will place the subject in context. The Jewish role in medicine is also significant in a region infamous for its epidemics. Historian Cornelia Wilhelm of the University of

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## Ramblin' 'round Memphis

### Local Jewish History



Stark family

Memphis was founded in 1819, when the Indian population was "removed" for white expansion and settlement.

Ideally situated in the middle of the continent and set on bluffs above a broad sweep of the Mississippi River, Memphis came to dominate the regional riverboat cotton trade and today continues as a major distribution center by air, rail, truck, and even barge.

If you were to arrive by riverboat yourself (still possible) and debark at the cobblestone levee below Riverside Drive, you might walk up a block to Front Street. Leading Jewish cotton brokers on this "Cotton Row" have had successful companies, following the trade of Joseph Andrews, who arrived



Schwab's

in 1840. Andrews, patriarch of the second known Jewish family to reside here and husband of a granddaughter of Haym Solomon, is considered the founder of the Jewish community. He donated land for a cemetery when his brother died in 1847, which prompted

the formation of the first Jewish communal institution, the Hebrew Benevolent Society. A Ladies' Benevolent Society soon followed.

If you were to proceed another block east to Main Street, you might imagine yourself passing the many shops of early immigrants: D. Block's men's furnishings, Zellner's shoes, Jacob Block's hats and the dry goods stores of Sam and David Schloss and

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# Yellow Fever: Yesteryear's West Nile



West Nile virus, the current mosquito-borne scourge, has killed crows, horses, and people, stymieing public health officials who helplessly spray, trap and drain to slow its spread.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one of the most dreaded diseases was yellow fever, a tropical contagion that erupted in port cities along the Gulf Coast and up the Mississippi. To prevent its spread, baffled public health officials urged sanitation and quarantine. For treatment, they tried laxatives and bloodletting.

The enigmatic ailment, apparently imported to the Western Hemisphere on slave-trading ships, is carried by an urban mosquito that lays eggs not in swamps but in artificial containers such as cisterns, jugs, and casks of drinking water on board seafaring vessels. Only the female mosquito spreads the fever, biting one infected person then carrying to others the "saffron scourge" that attacks the liver, turning victims yellow with jaundice.

Jewish immigrants were particularly hard hit. They were newcomers afflicted by the mosquito bite for the first time, whereas many a Southern native had suffered a mild case of yellow fever in childhood and built up immunity to the disease. Among the newcomers was a Bohemian-born rabbi called to Houston just prior to Passover in April 1867. As the weather turned sultry, "the pestilence stalked . . . that fair city, striking down the old and young," according to the *American*

*Israelite*. Four months after his Texas arrival, and just four days before Rosh Hashanah, the 30-year-old rabbi perished.

Whenever my research into American Jewish history leads me to the early records of Hebrew benevolent organizations, I read about donations to "yellow fever sufferers." In 1847, money and condolences flowed to Mobile; in 1873 to Memphis; in 1878 to Vicksburg, and again and again to New Orleans.

My colleague, Cornelia Wilhelm, a University of Munich professor participating in a special medical panel during our upcoming SJHS conference, found these same recurring references to yellow fever. During her research at The American Jewish Archives, she uncovered something more poignant—a diary handwritten by a B'nai B'rith president during the 1873 Memphis yellow fever epidemic. The 286-page account, set down in clear penmanship and heart-wrenching detail, describes how yellow fever spread death as well as solidarity among denominations.

Please don't miss our conference in Memphis, Oct. 31—Nov. 2 and the Saturday morning panel during which Cornelia Wilhelm will give us an inside look at the yellow fever epidemic—the West Nile virus of the 19th century that so greatly affected Southern Jewish history.

*Hollace Ava Weiner*

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Munich is crossing the Atlantic to present her research on a "Yellow Fever Diary." Patricia LaPointe will speak on "Memphis Jewish Medical Community and Early Jewish Settlers."

Two panels will address race and gender. Historian Stuart Rockoff will host a panel with Clifton Taulbert and Gene Dattel on "Parallel Lives: Growing up Jewish and Black in Mississippi." Phyllis Leffler of the University of Virginia will try to coax an answer to the question "What Drives Miss Daisy?" from historians Mark Greenberg and

Jennifer Ann Stollman.

For "Meet the Authors" moderator Mark Bauman has assembled an exceptional range of authors, including Emily Bingham (*Mordecai*, see p. 5); Harriet Keyserling (*Against the Tide: One Woman's Political Struggle*); and Bernard Rapoport (*Being Rapoport: Capitalist with a Conscience*). Dr. Eric Goldstein will present the SJHS's much-anticipated Book Prize, awarded every four years.

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## Elvis, The King and Memphis Jews



Memphis visitors can even play Jewish geography with Elvis Presley. At one time, Elvis and his mother shared a Jewish-owned duplex with Rabbi and Jeannette Fruchter in the Pinch. Called Elvis'II by his mother, this kid served as the Fruchter's Shabbos goy. In return, they let him use their telephone and phonograph. "The King" felt close to the Jewish community. He bought jewelry at Levitch's and purchased clothes at Lansky's, one of many Jewish stores and pawnshops on Beale Street

servicing the African-American community and the entertainment scene. (Of these, only Schwab's not-to-be-missed establishment remains.)

Some claim Elvis had a Jewish grandmother. He often wore a "chai" and had a Star of David engraved on his mother's gravestone. He even gave funds for two rooms, now replaced in a later renovation, at the Jewish Community Center.

For more, hear Daniel Mariaschin, author of *Elvis and the Jews* of Memphis, who will be a panelist on Saturday's discussion of "Cues, Blues, and Jews: Southern Music and Southern Jews."

Ramblin'—continued from page 1

Lehman and Co., as well four owned by various Levys. Going north to Court Square, you would find the first three-story house in the city, that of our Joseph Andrews, who also served as an alderman.

Heading north, the Pyramid sports arena marks the area where the German Jews arriving in the 1850s and 1860s first made their homes and founded synagogues. B'nai Israel at Exchange and Main was established as "moderate" Reform in 1853. Five years later, 40 members who wanted an Orthodox congregation, formed Beth El Emeth. A B'nai B'rith chapter organized the same year.

### **Civil War**

The Civil War interrupted the city's growing prosperity. Some Jews were slaveholders, and a few were slave traders. Reform Rabbi Simon Tuska and leading Jewish merchants were outspoken advocates of the Confederacy. Memphis Jews fought on both sides of the conflict, but predominantly for the Confederacy. Loyalty to the South, more than the defense of slavery, motivated them. After the Union captured and occupied Memphis in 1862, some changed sides. (The Yankees insisted that the Jewish social club change its name from the "Southern Club" to the "Memphis Club.")

It was a great shock when General Ulysses S. Grant issued his General Order No. 11, the only anti-Semitic order in American history. The December 1862 order singled out Jews for speculation and running contraband, and it ordered the immediate expulsion of Jews from Tennessee, Mississippi, and Kentucky. Jewish leaders appealed to "Father Abraham" Lincoln, who rescinded the order within days.

Once war ended, the Jewish business community flourished with new roles in banking, insurance and cotton. In 1873 and in 1878, yellow fever devastated the city. Many fled and many died. From a pre-war Jewish population of 2,100, only 300 remained.

In 1884, Baron Hirsch Synagogue, now the country's largest Orthodox congregation, was formed. In 1892, Jews and non-Jews alike bought \$50 bonds to purchase its first house of worship at Fourth and Washington. Anshei S'fard, with its own Sephardic ritual, was established in 1898. Beth Sholom, the Conservative synagogue, came into being in 1955.

By 1912, the Jewish population had grown to 6,000. Jewish Neighborhood House, established in 1901 to serve the influx of immigrants, helped not only Jews but the entire Pinch population. By the Depression, no Jews remained, but Neighborhood House continued to serve the educational and health needs of the African-Americans who moved into the community. The Hebrew Benevolent Society, having reorganized after the Civil War, became the Federation of Jewish Charities, a family social work agency, in 1906. These and other communal aid organizations evolved into today's Memphis Jewish Federation.

As you visit, you will observe Jewish names in many public places. Scratch a major cultural endeavor in music, art or theater, and you will find Jewish leadership, financial support and personal involvement.

### **Civil Rights Legacy**

Memphis had its own unique civil-rights history

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## The Pinch

By the 1880s, the earliest German Jewish population moved eastward in the city. Newer arrivals for the next 20 years came from Eastern Europe, fleeing pogroms, army service, and poverty. They moved into the vacated area north and near the river where they joined Italian and Irish immigrants. The area became known as "the Pinch" for the pinched stomachs of the Irish fleeing famine. Primarily poor and working class, the East European Jews brought their socialism and their Zionism to this 12-block area. The Pinch remains vivid in nostalgia for former residents and for local author, Steve Stern, who re-invents it in his novels and stories.

## HELEN SCHNEIDER SILVER

1922-2003



Helen Silver, the second editor of the *SJHS Newsletter* (now *The Rambler*), died in January 2003. She became editor in 1991 and retired from that position in 1998 only after a crippling disease prevented her from providing her usual high standard of performance. Those who saw her at our conferences may well remember her pleasant presence, always cooperative. She held the tape recorder, and her devoted husband Sidney served as her photographer.

Helen was a native of Knoxville, but lived in Charleston, SC, for the past 18 years. At one time she worked for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency in Washington and earlier was a civil servant with the TVA and NOAA.

A free-lance journalist, she wrote several travel articles for *Hadassah Magazine* and shared her talents freely with the publications of local organizations.

Helen was a member of Congregation Beth Elohim in Charleston, a life-time member of Hadassah, a member of Pioneer Women, K.K.B.E. Sisterhood, and a member of the Board of Directors of the South Carolina Jewish Historical Society, of which she was a founding member.

She is survived by her husband, a daughter, two sons, a brother, and five grandchildren.

*Sol Breitbart*

## Taking the SJHS for Granted

The SJHS supports research in the field of southern Jewish history through its grants to those involved in qualifying projects. Grants are intended to facilitate the completion of projects relevant to Jewish history in the South. Such projects might include the publication of books or exhibit catalogs or the preparation of exhibit modules. Grants may not be used to fund research or travel. The SJHS allocates \$4,500 among grant recipients each year. The application deadline is August 1, 2003. For more information regarding the grants program and guidelines for submitting proposals, visit the Society's website at [www.jewishsouth.org](http://www.jewishsouth.org), or contact the committee chairman:

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within its "Driving Miss Daisy" culture. Historian Selma S. Lewis, in *A Biblical People in the Bible Belt: The Jewish Community of Memphis, Tennessee, 1840-1960*, is convinced that the city's large black population bore the brunt of prejudice that would have fallen upon Jews and possibly Catholics.

Although sympathetic to desegregation, fear of anti-Semitic economic consequences, even violence, meant that the community as a whole maintained a low profile. This did not deter Conservative Rabbi Arie Becker from marching with Dr. Martin Luther King in Birmingham, nor Reform Rabbi James Wax from preaching fiery sermons or playing a visible role in civil rights efforts. During the 1968 strike of sanitation workers, Wax worked intensely with other clergy for a settlement and ultimately led their dramatic march to confront the mayor. The strike was finally settled through the intervention of Jewish business leader and philanthropist Abe Plough, who anonymously gave the city funds to raise the pay of the workers after the murder of Dr. King at the Lorraine Motel. This was a defining event in the history of Memphis, as of the country.

In the 1960s, the city, with the leadership of Jewish businessmen, peacefully desegregated movie theaters and integrated personnel in department stores. Jews helped with the peaceful integration of schools. The city has made tremendous strides. Still, Memphis is one of the poorest cities in the country and its housing, education and social problems, particularly in the African-American community are far from solved.

## Thoroughly Modern

"Thoroughly modern" Jewish Memphis has a strong communal life—80-90 per cent affiliation among the 10,000 Jews—centered around a cluster of four modern synagogues (Sephardic, modern Orthodox, Reform and Conservative), two smaller Orthodox congregations, two Jewish day schools, two preschools, a Yeshiva, a Jewish newspaper in existence for 78 years, a new Jewish magazine, a residence for senior adults, a nursing home for the aged, a Jewish Family Service, a Jewish Community Center and both a Jewish Student Union and a Judaic Studies program at the University of Memphis plus many other social or service groups.

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The conference will close with a talk by Ellen Frankel, editor in chief of the Jewish Publication Society, on "The Contributions of Southern Jews to Jewish Publishing in America."

"This year's meeting offers an extremely strong program in a fascinating city," Program Chair Mark Greenberg observes. "Memphis is not to be missed."

## Son of the South Receives Accolade



The Jewish Theological Seminary honored Eli N. Evans with a Doctor of Humane Letters, *honoris causa* on May 22 at its commencement exercises. Evans needs no introduction to his fellow SJHS members as the leading voice of Southern Jewry and author of *The Provincials*, *The Lonely Days Were Sundays*, and *Judah P. Benjamin*.

Evans, President of the Charles H. Revson Foundation, was recognized for his “uncommon originality and leadership in the dual roles of historian and philanthropist.” A native of Durham, where his father served as six-term mayor and his mother rose to the vice presidency of Hadassah, Evans graduated from the University of North Carolina and Yale Law School. He served as a speechwriter for President Lyndon Johnson and was closely associated with former North Carolina governor and Duke University President Terry Sanford.

The citation said of Evans, “Through your life’s work, you have given voice to the twin impulses that motivate those who achieve greatness—to serve others and to find the larger meaning in one’s own experience.”

the tolerant rationalism of the enlightenment. When his wife Judy died, he composed a letter that became a Mordecai family “covenant.” It exhorted the family to cultivate their intellects, work usefully, and maintain family solidarity. The letter belongs to a Jewish genre known as the ethical will—several anthologies of them exist—but Bingham’s achievement is to illustrate how such a covenant shaped family values and behaviors experientially over generations.

At the book’s center is Jacob’s precocious daughter Rachel. She had become a heroine to American Jews when she reproached the English novelist Maria Edgeworth for her anti-semitism. Their correspondence blossomed into friendship, and the North Carolinian sought to emulate the English woman’s “enlightened domesticity.” Married to Aaron Lazarus, a Jewish merchant in Wilmington, NC, Rachel over time found spiritual sustenance in a growing Christian faith that brought her into religious conflict with her husband and her father, whose Judaism deepened as he aged. On her way to Richmond to visit the dying Jacob, Rachel fell ill and requested a deathbed baptism.

The Jewish-Christian line divided the family. Rachel’s sister Emma worked feverishly to “pilot” every Mordecai to Christ. Her sister Ellen founded a Hebrew Sunday School in Richmond. Even those Mordecais who remained Jews were highly acculturated. They baked matza but were untroubled by kosher laws. In Wilmington, the Lazaruses dutifully attended St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church but were also attached to the Charleston synagogue. To Jacob’s great pain, his children found spouses among Christians.

The third generation explored all possibilities of identity. Siblings Ellen and Marx, Rachel’s children, became devotees of the socialist Fourier and embraced a panoply of utopian causes from free love to hydrotherapy, without renouncing their Judaism. Indeed, Ellen wed a Universalist minister, but insisted that he be circumcised, converted to Judaism and married in a synagogue before they relocated to an Indiana vineyard. She eventually joined a free-love colony, Modern Times, and left two children with the Shakers.

The Mordecais were Southerners, too. They held slaves and commonplace feelings about them. They were ardent Confederates and felt shame when Major Alfred Mordecai, the first Jewish graduate of West Point, refused a Confederate commission and sat out the war with his wife’s family in Philadelphia.

As Bingham’s subtitle suggests, she sees the Mordecai saga as an American tale that transcends region or ethnicity. Wherever they settled and whatever their beliefs, Mordecais aspired to a middle-class respectability—or rebelled against it. What makes the story so immediate is how much the Mordecais in all their contradictions anticipated the complex, multi-layered identities of our day.

*Leonard Rogoff, Chapel Hill, NC*

## An American Family

### Book Review

*Emily Bingham, Mordecai: An Early American Family. New York: Hill and Wang, 2003*



Jewish historiography wrestles with great abstract forces: emancipation and enlightenment, tradition and modernism, assimilation and acculturation. In her compelling study, *Mordecai: An Early American Family*, Emily Bingham reminds us that the choices that Jews confront focus less on grand ideas than on facts of personality, family, community, and economic situation. Her artfully conceived, multigenerational chronicle documents how America gave Jews the freedom to choose among identities even as the new Republic was inventing an identity for itself.

Mordecais were devoutly Jewish, piously Christian, religiously indifferent, and spiritually liberated.

Jacob Mordecai, a revolutionary war veteran, settled his family in the hamlet of Warrenton, NC, in 1792. Failing as a merchant in 1808, he opened the Warrenton Female Academy with his gifted children serving as teachers. The school pioneered the liberal education of women and drew the state’s elite. A scholar, Mordecai in his early years was imbued with

# Memphis

## CALENDAR

Date	Event
Oct. 31-Nov.2	SJHS Annual Meeting, TN Program and registration at <a href="http://www.jewishsouth.org">www.jewishsouth.org</a>
current	“With this Ring: History of the Jewish Wedding Ceremony”; “Treasures of the Collection” Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives, 1109 W. Franklin St., Richmond VA 23220 (804.353.2668)
current	“Of Passover and Pilgrimage: The Natchez Jewish Experience” Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience Exhibit, Temple B’nai Israel, Natchez MS (601.445.5407)
current	“Alsace to America: Discovering a Southern Jewish Heritage” Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, Utica, MS (601.362.6357/ <a href="http://msje.org">msje.org</a> )
permanent	“Creating Community: The Jews of Atlanta from 1845 to the Present” William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring St. NW, Atlanta GA 30309 (404.870.7684/ <a href="http://atlantajewishmuseum.org">atlantajewishmuseum.org</a> )
permanent June 10-Nov. 2	“MOSAIC: Jewish Life in Florida” Jews of Broward County: Their Lives, their Contributions, their Impact on Florida” Jewish Museum of Florida, 301 Washington Ave., Miami Beach, FL 33139-6965 (305.672.5044/ <a href="http://www.jewishmuseum.com">www.jewishmuseum.com</a> )
current	“We Call this Place Home: Jewish Life in Maryland’s Small Towns” The Jewish Museum of Maryland, 15 Lloyd St., Baltimore MD 21202 (410.732.6400/ <a href="http://www.jhsm.org">www.jhsm.org</a> )
Permanent	“The Blum House Project” Old City Park, 1717 Gano St., Dallas TX (214.421.5141/ <a href="http://oldcitypark.org">oldcitypark.org</a> )
thru July 20	“A Portion of the People: Three Hundred Years of Southern Jewish Life” Yeshiva University Museum, 15 W16th St., NY NY 10011 (212.294.8330/ <a href="http://yumuseum.org">yumuseum.org</a> )