

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Dana M. Greene, *Book Review Editor*

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Ruminations about the SJHS

by

Bernard Wax

Shortly after being appointed director of the American Jewish Historical Society in 1966, I became aware of a Southern Jewish Historical Society that had been formed in the mid 1950s. Created in the aftermath of the 1954 Tercentenary celebrations of the arrival of the first group of Jews to what was to become the United States, the organization had essentially disappeared. However, with the publication of Eli Evans's *The Provincials*¹ and several other books and articles, and with the growing interest in Jewish genealogy and a spurt of attention by a number of academics in ethnic history in the South, it seemed the time was ripe for the society's reincarnation.

A confluence of individuals and circumstances ensured that this would take place. Saul Viener of Richmond, who had been instrumental in forming the original society, had become an influential member of the American Jewish Historical Society board. Along with me, he convinced its members to hold a trustees meeting in Richmond while simultaneously sponsoring a conference on southern Jewish History. Other organizations were approached for support, and the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Richmond Jewish Community Council, and, with the aid of Dr. Melvin I Urofsky, the Department of History of Virginia Commonwealth University generously participated.

Attending the 1976 meeting was a host of scholars, amateur historians, and interested lay persons. Among the latter was Rosemary Krensky of Chicago whose father, Rabbi Bernard C. Eh-

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renreich, had served as a rabbi in Montgomery, Alabama, during the early part of the twentieth century. She and her husband, Milton, were so pleased by the content of, and warm reception to, the meeting that they offered to underwrite the publication of its proceedings. As a result, *Turn to the South*² appeared, thereby giving further impetus to the resuscitation of SJHS.

Those of us involved with the planning were so amazed at the interest and enthusiasm of the participants in the Richmond sessions that a second conference was arranged to be held in Raleigh, North Carolina. Dr. Abram Kanof, a former president of the American Jewish Historical Society, offered to serve as our host and, along with Saul Viener, helped make arrangements. It was at this meeting that SJHS was formally organized, with a constitution and by-laws ultimately written, which resulted in SJHS being officially incorporated on August 21, 1978, in South Carolina. The society was recognized later by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) non-profit institution, giving it further legal status.

It was at this point that I was impressed by the truly informal operation that was created. Not only did people voluntarily solicit new members, promote attendance, and seek support for the annual meetings but several offered their time and talents in other areas as well. It was obvious that a newsletter had to be created to promote interest in our work and to bind the membership. Initially Sol Breibart, of Charleston, South Carolina, created and edited the *SJHS Newsletter* and was later succeeded by Helen Silver of the same city. More recently, the newsletter editorship was taken over by Dr. Leonard Rogoff of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, who modernized and renamed the publication, *The Rambler*. Also early on, Dr. Louis Schmier of Valdosta [GA] State College (now University) stepped in and served as what I term the administrator of this new organization. Not only did he manage and keep its records but he also continued to publish, stimulate interest in the field, and assist many attracted to the history of the southern Jewish community.

Over the years the major focus of the society has been the annual conference held in various communities throughout the South and which included local historical tours, visits to Jewish

Bernard Wax.

*Currently treasurer, Wax has been working
on behalf of SJHS since its inception.*

(Courtesy of Bernard Wax.)

landmarks, and academic papers. Although briefly discussed, the concepts of a permanent office with administrative personnel and the collection of books, manuscripts, and artifacts were to be left to other entities. One other possible institutional development, publication of a scholarly journal, remained. Propounded by a committee headed by Belinda Gergel and Patricia LaPointe at the 1996 meeting in Miami, the decision was made to publish an annual volume titled *Southern Jewish History* for a trial period. Dr. Mark K. Bauman and Rachel Heimovics were asked and agreed to

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serve as editor and managing editor, respectively. Under their dedicated efforts the publication is no longer “on trial” but is now in its tenth year and going strong. As SJHS became more comfortable in its growing academic niche made possible by the journal, it has taken on the task of instituting book and article awards, lectures, research, and publication grants, and even scholar and student travel subsidies. Much of this has been made possible by grants to the journal from the Lucius N. Littauer and Gale Foundations and individual contributions as well as the Bornblum Jewish Studies Program at the University of Memphis and Jerome M. Gumenick Family Foundation for conference speakers, and Lowenstein funds for research, some due to the efforts of past presidents Sumner Levine, Hollace A. Weiner, and Saul Viener, as well as other board members and the editors.

What I find amazing is that all of these accomplishments were made possible largely by volunteers who, for thirty years, have spent countless hours soliciting new members, raising funds, publicizing our activities, arranging meetings, proofreading, and writing articles, tasks all of which are normally associated with paid staff and organizations with substantial economic resources. As noted by Janice R. Blumberg elsewhere in this issue, the society has more than fulfilled its initial promise and, hopefully, will find new ways to illuminate the southern Jewish experience.

NOTES

¹ Eli Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of the Jews in the South* (New York, 1973).

² Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky, eds., *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry* (Charlottesville, VA, 1979).