

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Dana M. Greene, *Book Review Editor*

2007

Volume 10



Southern Jewish History

Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Dana M. Greene, *Book Review Editor*

Editorial Board

Elliott Ashkenazi	Dana M. Greene
Ronald Bayor	Martin Perlmutter
Marcie Cohen Ferris	Marc Lee Raphael
Eric L. Goldstein	Bryan Edward Stone
Karla Goldman	Lee Shai Weissbach

Southern Jewish History is a publication of the Southern Jewish Historical Society available by subscription and a benefit of membership in the Society. The opinions and statements expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the journal or of the Southern Jewish Historical Society.

Southern Jewish Historical Society OFFICERS: Scott M. Langston, *President*; Leonard Rogoff, *President Elect*; Marcie Cohen Ferris, *Secretary*; Bernard Wax, *Treasurer*; Sumner I. Levine, *Immediate Past President*. BOARD OF TRUSTEES: Les Bergen, Eric L. Goldstein, Phyllis Leffler, Jacqueline G. Metzel, Stuart Rockoff, Jean Roseman, Dale Rosengarten, Phil N. Steel, Jr., Ellen Umansky, Stephen J. Whitfield. EX-OFFICIO: Jay Tanenbaum.

For authors' guidelines, contributions, and all editorial matters, write to the Editor, *Southern Jewish History*, 2517 Hartford Dr., Ellenwood, GA 30294; email: Markkbauman@aol.com. The journal is interested in unpublished articles pertaining to the Jewish experience in the American South. Publishers who wish to submit books for review should email Dana M. Greene at greenedm@gmail.com. For journal subscriptions and advertising, write Rachel Heimovics Braun, managing editor, 954 Stonewood Lane, Maitland, FL 32751; or email: journal@jewishsouth.org; or visit www.jewishsouth.org.

Articles appearing in *Southern Jewish History* are abstracted and/or indexed in *Historical Abstracts*, *America: History and Life*, *Index to Jewish Periodicals*, *Journal of American History*, and *Journal of Southern History*.

Southern Jewish History acknowledges with deep appreciation grants from the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation of New York and the Gale Foundation of Beaumont, Texas.

Copyright © 2007 by the Southern Jewish Historical Society.

ISSN 1521-4206

PERMISSION STATEMENT

Consent by the Southern Jewish Historical Society is given for private use of articles and images that have appeared in *Southern Jewish History*. Copying or distributing any journal, article, image, or portion thereof, for any use other than private, is forbidden without the written permission of *Southern Jewish History*. To obtain that permission, contact the editor, Mark K. Bauman, at MarkKBauman@aol.com or the managing editor, Bryan Edward Stone, at bstone@delmar.edu.

The Distance Traveled: Reminiscences of Twenty-five Years in SJHS

by

Janice Rothschild Blumberg

Antediluvian is the word that comes to mind when I think of the Southern Jewish Historical Society in the 1980s. The flood of regional Jewish historical societies had not yet begun—the Southern was the first—and very few, if any, universities offered courses in the subject. Interest was evidenced almost solely by the venerable American Jewish Historical Society, some of whose leaders, notably Saul Viener of Richmond, Rabbi Malcolm Stern, formerly of Norfolk, and Rabbi Jacob Rader Marcus, godfather of American Jewish history, realized that Jews had been an integral part of southern life from colonial times onward. Their impact far outweighed their numbers.

By the 1980s a new generation had begun to research its roots. In the South the study followed the trend of scholarship elsewhere in the country. No longer the near-exclusive domain of senior citizens whose grandfathers fought for the Confederacy, the subject was now addressed by students of local and regional history with their broadened focus on community experience and societal development. Numbers of Jewish easterners who relocated to Dixie after World War II discovered that preconceptions of the area as *judenrein* had been gravely mistaken, and they became curious about the actual experience of their predecessors in the region. The time was right. Academicians who themselves were Jewish, serious amateur historians, a few rabbis, and leaders of the AJHS came to the rescue. Whereas an earlier attempt to

establish the Southern Jewish Historical Society had failed, this time it succeeded.

Shortly thereafter, in 1981, I attended my first SJHS conference. Held in Mobile, Alabama, the conference was warm with southern hospitality and gulf breezes but otherwise hardly memorable. Its paucity of prospects may be indicated by the fact that I was instantly placed on the board. This undoubtedly benefited me more than it did the society; for it was there that I became friendly with Dr. Louis Schmier of Valdosta State College (now University) who mentored me through the completion and publication of the book that I was then hoping to write.¹

More significant was Schmier's dedicated guidance of SJHS in those formative years. Officially he served as secretary, no mean task in itself, but in addition he shouldered a multitude of other responsibilities including direction of the conference programs and coediting the society's first published book, *Jews of the South*, with Dr. Samuel Proctor and the help of Rabbi Malcolm Stern. He also compiled and edited *Reflections of Southern Jewry*,² a collection of letters from Charles Wessolowsky, a former Georgia legislator turned journalist for *The Jewish South*, the first newspaper published expressly for Jews in the southern states. The letters were reports by Wessolowsky about Jewish communities across the South in 1878 and 1879, addressed to his editor, Edward B. M. Browne, who was then rabbi of Atlanta's Hebrew Benevolent Congregation (The Temple) and many years later became my great-grandfather. Therein lies a personal vignette.

At the 1983 conference held in Savannah in conjunction with the celebration of Georgia's 250th Anniversary, which also commemorated 250 years of Jewish settlement in the state, I was scheduled to deliver a paper based on a chapter of the book that I was writing about the civil rights activities of my late husband, Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild. Thinking more of my own upcoming talk than of the current proceedings, I jumped to attention when I heard Susan White, a graduate student from Emory, begin reading her paper based on research she had done as an undergraduate assistant to Schmier for his book on Wessolowsky, which I had not yet seen. I did not know until then that the letters

were addressed to Browne. My family had never mentioned the Atlanta newspaper nor had I read anything about it in all of his memorabilia that had come into my possession. White's citations revealed that extant copies of the weekly were preserved at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati and available on microfilm. I later studied them there, bought a copy of the film for my own use temporarily, and then gave it to Atlanta's William Breman Jewish Museum. Thus did the 1983 SJHS Conference open new vistas for me, and led to easy access for others to the paper's origin.³

The society had not yet gone from a crawl to a walk by the time of the Savannah conference. One clear indication of this was my rapid ascendancy to the office of president-elect, which put me in the hot seat at the conclusion of the Richmond conference in 1984. I had absolutely no idea of how such an organization should function or what I was expected to do, my only experience having been to serve for several years as a very naïve, inactive member of the board of AJHS. As president of SJHS, I did begin to speak up at AJHS meetings, supported by fellow trustee and former SJHS president Jack Coleman, to try to affect a viable joint membership fee for the two organizations. Both societies sought to enlarge their constituencies but encountered widespread confusion on the part of prospective members who thought that the Southern was a subsidiary of the American. We never succeeded in solving the problem, but, as usual, time served to lessen it considerably. Now a similar confusion exists between SJHS and the Goldring Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, formerly the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, also a good friend, which many of us support individually but deplore the confusion surrounding our separate identities.

As president of SJHS I reached out in every direction I could see for ways to promote interest in southern Jewish history. I tried to get representatives for the society in each of the major southern cities; tried to persuade rabbis to explain the educational objectives of the society in their communities; tried through the good offices of community leaders like Jack Coleman and Saul Viener to obtain financial support from Jewish federations;

*Janice Rothschild Blumberg.
Greeting attendees at a past SJHS conference.
(Photo by Beryl H. Weiner.)*

collected congregational histories from the region; and with the assistance of Maryann K. Friedman tried to develop a speakers bureau on southern Jewish history as a resource for organizations seeking to develop programs.

None of this made any immediately visible impact, but hopefully all of it together did help to create the more receptive environment in which subsequent growth ensued. Whenever I addressed audiences or wrote for publication I emphasized the importance of giving family memorabilia to archival repositories rather than the trash heap, trying to convince those who told me "Oh, my family wasn't important. No one would be interested," that the dusty contents of grandmother's attic were the raw materials used by historians to breathe life into otherwise deadly statistics. I recommended that they read Jacob Rader Marcus's

books on early American Jewry to understand that most of the fascinating characters about whom he wrote were “just ordinary people,” known to us only because somebody saved their letters, diaries, and account books.

One of my efforts to arouse interest in local Jewish history succeeded in a way that I had not anticipated. Knowing that Memphis had a strongly rooted Jewish community, I determined to take our conference there in 1985, hoping to stimulate activity and increase membership on behalf of SJHS. At the time the only Memphians who belonged were Rabbi James Wax, who was retired and in poor health, and Judy Peiser, executive director of the Center for Southern Folklore. Peiser took on the responsibility for local aspects of the conference program and Wax’s successor, Rabbi Harry Danziger, convinced Harriet Wise Stern to take charge of hospitality. A major factor in our success was that Philip Belz, owner of the fabulous Peabody Hotel and an old friend of my husband, David Blumberg, generously gave us the exceptionally reduced rates that enabled us to be headquartered in such luxurious surroundings. Thanks to all of them and entertainment by the inimitable Peabody ducks, we had a marvelous time in Memphis. For that we said, *Dayenu*, even before knowing of its byproduct. Our *lagniappe* was to learn that the conference had motivated Memphians to establish their own Jewish historical society. This has grown through the years and continues to stimulate interest in local and state Jewish history. Furthermore, it continues to provide SJHS with new vigor and leadership, including two subsequent presidents, Dr. Berkley Kalin and Sumner Levine.

That SJHS was gaining recognition became evident in 1986 when, rather than having to request hospitality from some community, we received an unsolicited invitation to hold our next conference in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. We heard a few snide remarks questioning whether South Florida was actually either southern or historically Jewish. These naysayers were soon given their comeuppance, however, when Dr. Henry Green with Dr. Abraham Gittleson presented a paper titled “Bagels, Blues and Black Beans: A Miami Mosaic,” and spent the rest of his time at

the conference lobbying for support of a projected statewide traveling exhibit on the Jewish heritage in Florida. From this modest beginning, with the help of others such as Laura Hochman of the Fort Lauderdale Jewish Community Center, and most notably Marcia Zerivitz, its founding executive director, the Jewish Museum of Florida came into being.

Attendees at the Fort Lauderdale conference also benefited from other advantages of the South Florida location. They visited the Cuban synagogue in Miami, heard a paper titled "Hotel Cuba" by Robert Levine, and were treated to a presentation on "Aspects of the 'Portuguese Jewish Nation' in the Caribbean" by Woodrow de Castro who came from Panama City, Panama.

Meanwhile, between attendances at conferences, some members of SJHS were busy working on their own projects, one of which was plotting and documenting Jewish grave sites in southern cemeteries. Tom Sokolsky-Wixon, who chaired the SJHS historic sites committee, undertook the process of compiling all Jewish cemetery records in Mississippi as well as recording abandoned Jewish burial sites throughout the state. B. H. Levy had already done this for Savannah, as Sol Breibart had done for Charleston, South Carolina. Gus and Marian Kaufman recorded Jewish graves in Macon and Brunswick, Georgia, and raised funds for restoring a neglected Jewish cemetery in Eufaula, Alabama. Dorothy and Samuel Werth, working in the 1816 Hebrew cemetery in Richmond, which encompasses what is believed to be the only Jewish soldiers' burial ground outside of Israel, found markers that appear to be from as early as 1791.

Strides were also made during these years to increase financial support for SJHS. At the suggestion of David Blumberg, the categories of Century Club (\$100) and Life Member (\$1000 paid over five years) were introduced, with Rabbi Alvin Sugarman of Atlanta becoming the first Life Member. An evening program in Atlanta served to heighten the visibility of SJHS and gain many new members. This was repeated in Atlanta more recently through the efforts of Jackie Metzel and the late, beloved Saul Viener, and hopefully will inspire others to do likewise in their communities in the future.

*Janice Rothschild Blumberg (left) with Melissa Fay Greene.
Blumberg introducing the author of the award-winning book,
The Temple Bombing, at the 1996 SJHS conference, Miami Beach.
(Courtesy of Janice Rothschild Blumberg.)*

Perhaps the single most effective means of attracting new members has been the SJHS practice of holding its annual conferences in different cities, widely separated from each other whenever feasible. In the past two decades host cities have been Durham and Raleigh, North Carolina; Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama; Charleston, South Carolina (twice); Jackson, Mississippi; Richmond and Newport News, Virginia; Atlanta,

Georgia; New Orleans and Shreveport, Louisiana; Miami Beach, Florida; Hot Springs and Little Rock, Arkansas; Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee; and Baltimore, Maryland. The only exception made to the practice of being hosted by a traditionally southern community took place in 2000, when at the invitation of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, the society met on the campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati.

Reviewing my own experience at the helm of SJHS I realize that I was fortunate to be sandwiched between the administrations of two exceptionally knowledgeable teachers/scholars, Sol Breibart and the late Dr. Sam Proctor of the University of Florida. Both men gave me much needed advice and encouragement, and provided the society with wise guidance in its early steps toward maturity. Subsequent presidents—Rachel Heimovics Braun, Carol B. Hart, Sheldon Hanft, Beryl Weiner, Berkley Kalin, Bruce Beeber, Catherine C. Kahn, Hollace Ava Weiner, Minette Cooper, Sumner Levine, and currently Scott Langston—have also brought special strengths to the society, not least of which has been to broaden interest in southern Jewish history in the seven different states where they live.

Occasionally I encounter someone who expresses the erroneous belief that one must be either southern or Jewish to belong to SJHS. This fallacy has been disproved from the earliest years of the society's existence when several attendees regularly flew in from California for the conferences. Others have consistently come from Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, and among the society's most dedicated members there have always been non-Jewish scholars like Carolyn LeMaster, known for her expertise on the Jewish history of Arkansas, and the current president, Scott Langston. In recent years subjects relating to southern Jewry have drawn scholars to SJHS conferences from Europe and Israel as well as from all parts of the USA. Some attend as speakers and presenters themselves, others are there simply to be stimulated, learn, and network with those who share their interests. Keynote speakers have included the late Ambassador Morris B. Abram, best-selling author Eli N. Evans, prize-winning playwright Alfred

Uhry, and, most recently, Ambassador Stuart E. Eizenstat, all native southerners deeply concerned with their southern Jewish heritage.

Regardless of its success in other areas, the true measure of any organization is the service that it renders, and in this respect SJHS has matured decisively. From its earliest days it has produced a quarterly newsletter. At that time it also published two books and since then has provided partial subvention for others, a program now administered through a grants committee that also supports completion of historic work in diverse media. By means of a contest publicized through universities, it formerly encouraged students to research southern Jewish history, offering a modest cash prize and an opportunity to present the winning essay at the annual conference. The society's crowning achievement, however, has been the publication of *Southern Jewish History*. Now in its tenth year, this scholarly journal standing alongside its older distinguished counterparts in libraries everywhere, gives ample testimony to the growth of the society and confirms the premise of its founders that the southern Jewish experience is a unique and vital aspect of American Jewish history.

NOTES

¹ Janice Rothschild Blumberg, *One Voice: Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild and the Troubled South* (Macon, GA, 1985).

² Louis Schmier, ed., *Reflections of Southern Jewry: The Letters of Charles Wessolowsky, 1878-1879* (Macon, GA, 1982).

³ The author's ensuing research on her great-grandfather led to an article in *Southern Jewish History*. See Janice Rothschild Blumberg, "Rabbi Alphabet Browne: The Atlanta Years" *Southern Jewish History* 5 (2002): 1-42.