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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Dana M. Greene, *Book Review Editor*

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The Pioneer Period of the SJHS (1976-1983)

by

Saul J. Rubin

My association with the Southern Jewish Historical Society began in 1978 at the Raleigh conference. An earlier convocation in Richmond, in 1976, elicited several illuminating essays that were later published in *Turn to the South*.¹ Realizing that there was a hunger for a fuller exploration of our heritage and history, a follow-up convention was planned. That conference resulted in the election of officers and a plan for the future. Saul Viener was chosen the first president. Your humble servant was graced with the position of chairman of the board, the sole recipient of that title. Had I conducted myself with more aplomb, that office might have continued instead of being quickly jettisoned. I ended up the following year demoted to the position of a lowly board member.

I well remember conferences in Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, Jacksonville, and New Orleans. Savannah hosted twice. Camaraderie among the leaders resulted in growth and consensus. Prominent banquet speakers, including Eli Evans, Dr. Stephen Whitfield, Dr. Leonard Dinnerstein, and Dr. Malcolm Stern, enthralled large audiences of locals. Each conference featured gifted scholars. In time the level of research required to be a presenter was extraordinarily high.

I look back on that early period and consider how blessed we were to have talented officers and board members including Saul Viener, Jack Coleman, Solomon Breibart, Janice Rothschild Blumberg, Dr. Samuel Proctor, and Bernard Wax. Each

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one had a passion and expertise that resulted in an era of expansion.

My term as president was from 1980 to 1982. In my first address to the members I expressed a vision that I was determined to implement (with the help of many). First and foremost, the society was to dedicate itself to the amplification of knowledge about the southern Jewish experience. There were limited publications dealing with the Jews of the South. A few community histories existed, primarily volumes about Richmond,² Charleston,³ and Nashville.⁴ In addition, one could find articles in historical journals, a few diaries and family genealogies, as well as several generic books about southern Jews. With this situation in mind, I began researching my future book, *Third to None: The Saga of Savannah Jewry 1733-1983*.⁵ Thousands of copies were eventually purchased (now out of print), evidence of a latent yearning. Within a few years other major histories were written, including Myron Berman's *Shabbat at Shockoe* (about Richmond)⁶ and Steven Hertzberg's *Strangers within the Gate City* (exploring Atlanta's Jewish past).⁷ I believed the primary task of SJHS was to promote and encourage Jewish historical research and the publication of essays, books, papers, a journal, et al.

Furthermore, the membership was encouraged to establish archives and museums to ensure the preservation of artifacts, documents, photographs, and fragile records. Too much loss and deterioration had already taken place. I recommended the recruitment of a committee of experts who could assist individuals and organizations.

At the time I suspected that there was a contrarian faction that wanted the conferences to be more "appealing." My objection at the time was based on an awareness that we were in a pioneer phase and that we needed to focus on substantive research. In a letter addressed to board members, I stated, "We need to set high standards. Fluff is enjoyable for the moment but it is quickly gone, leaving little that endures." After the 1979 Charleston conference, I received correspondence from Sol Breibart, which included the following: "I agree with your assessment of the recent conference in Charleston, especially your criticism of the quality of the

*Rabbi Saul J. Rubin in the Temple study, in the 1970s.
Congregation Mickve Israel, Savannah.
(Courtesy of Saul J. Rubin.)*

papers." Sol, a history teacher, was instrumental in elevating future presentations. Jack Coleman, as president, responded, "The point taken in your letter about the quality of the papers is certainly in order. While we do have to appeal to the general public, quality should not be compromised." This remains a contemporary issue—the tension between popularists and scholars. The question is how to balance competing interests.

According to Treasurer Sol Breibart's 1979 financial report, the balance on hand was a mere \$114. By 1981, my handwritten notes of the board meeting indicate the society's treasury swelled substantially. A \$6,000 CD was purchased after funds were allocated to sustain the annual conference. Membership numbered

361 active participants. Fiscal stability required grant solicitations. A few generous contributors graciously responded.

My election as president in 1980 resulted in a vigorous attempt to establish a solid foundation structurally. That required a second board meeting annually. State membership chairpersons were appointed to help in an expansion effort. Top-notch individuals accepted the challenge, including Rabbi Murray Blackman (Louisiana), Rabbi Elijah Palnick (Arkansas), Audrey Kariel (Texas), Rabbi Leo Turitz (Mississippi), Marvin Cohn (Alabama), Hilda Wallerstein (North Carolina), Rabbi Howard Greenstein (Florida), and Saul Viener and Irwin Berent (Virginia). South Carolina and Georgia were served by the society's leaders. The roster burgeoned as a consequence.

In the early days, David Goldberg, an officer, sent out society news to the membership. But, in order to facilitate communication between the board and the members and otherwise serve the society, a regular publication was created, the *SJHS Newsletter*, edited by Sol Breibart. The newsletter contained reports of interest as well as brief historical essays.

I initiated the idea of a speakers (later, a speakers and resource) bureau. Bernard Wax, director of the American Jewish Historical Society, provided the expertise to ensure a solid operation. I served as the chair, recruiting such scholars as Dr. Malcolm Stern, one of the premier American Jewish historians, and Dr. Kenneth Stein of Emory University (later of the Carter Center). Professional archivists were invited to join the team and offer guidance to institutions interested in founding museums, archives, or exhibitions.

The publications committee announced in 1981 that it was ready to publish a second volume of southern Jewish historical essays, consisting of conference papers and other submissions. Drs. Sam Proctor, Malcolm Stern, and Louis Schmier were the editors.⁸

Board member (later president) Janice Rothschild Blumberg agreed to serve as chair of the New Orleans conference (1982). Dr. Arnold Shankman was responsible for the gathering of papers. Dr. Joseph Cohen of Tulane was asked to open the university's

Rededication of the first Jewish cemetery (1733–1770), Savannah.

Saul J. Rubin, left, officiating;

Malcolm Stern standing to the right.

Photograph taken at the 1983 SJHS conference.

(Courtesy of Saul J. Rubin.)

Jewish museum/archives for the attendees. The conference exceeded our expectations. At the Saturday eve banquet, I defined the mission of SJHS as I envisioned it: “to promote a broader understanding of southern Jewish history through conferences, papers and publications; to increase communication among scholars and lay persons interested in research; to disseminate information via lectures to the American Jewish community; and to assist in the development and display of archival and museum documents and artifacts.” One suspects that mission remains at the core of the society’s enterprise.

As a postscript I want to add this personal revelation. It ruffled me as a rabbi fascinated with American Jewish history and as a Jew with southern Jewish roots (my mother was a native Georgian) that short shrift was made of the Jewish experience in this region. A northern/eastern bias was dominant at the time. The paradigm used by scholars for constructing American Jewish history lacked a southern perspective. The emphasis on antisemitic incidents educed that perception. The South was inclined to philosemitism (Civil War abuses, the Leo Frank lynching, and temple bombings notwithstanding). That is why I consider three papers delivered during my period of service (1980-1982) as seminal. The first was by David Goldberg of New Orleans. It demonstrated the philosemitism in this region by noting that between 1880 and 1914 Jewish mayors served every major port city from the Mason-Dixon Line to the Gulf coast of Texas, the only exception being Charleston. Nothing parallel to this happened elsewhere in America.⁹ Keep in mind that this was the era of massive eastern European Jewish migration. The second and third papers were by Dr. David T. Morgan.¹⁰ They dealt with two remarkable southern Jews, husband and wife Philip Phillips and Eugenia Levy Phillips. Philip was elected to the United States House of Representatives as a congressman from Alabama. Philip Phillips's memorial service was conducted in the chambers of the U.S. Supreme Court. Wife Eugenia served with Rose Greenhow as a Confederate spy. Her sister, Phoebe Levy Pember, was the matron of the largest Confederate military hospital (Chimborazo) in Richmond. The Randolph family of Virginia counted her among their closest friends. In these instances Jews mingled freely with America's "aristocracy" and were accorded respect and honor.

As a consequence of these papers and the stream of southern Jewish materials published from 1980 on, a reevaluation of American Jewish history occurred. Contemporary volumes are more balanced. I believe that is a direct result of the work accomplished by the SJHS. It should be a source of pride and fulfillment to us all.

NOTES

¹ Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky, eds., *“Turn to the South”: Essays on Southern Jewry* (Charlottesville, VA, 1979).

² Herbert T. Ezekiel and Gaston Lichtenstein, *The History of the Jews of Richmond, from 1769 to 1917* (Richmond, VA, 1917).

³ Charles Reznikoff and Uriah Z. Engelman, *The Jews of Charleston: A History of an American Jewish Community* (Philadelphia, 1950).

⁴ Fedora Small Frank, *Five Families and Eight Young Men: Nashville and Her Jewry, 1850–1861* (Nashville, 1962); Frank, *Beginnings on Market Street: Nashville and Her Jewry, 1861–1901* (Nashville, 1976).

⁵ Saul Rubin, *Third to None: The Saga of Savannah Jewry 1733–1983* (Savannah, 1983.)

⁶ Myron Berman, *Richmond’s Jewry, 1769–1976: Shabbat in Shockoe* (Charlottesville, VA, 1979).

⁷ Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845–1915* (Philadelphia, 1978).

⁸ Samuel Proctor and Louis Schmier with Malcolm Stern, eds., *Jews of the South: Selected Essays from the Southern Jewish Historical Society* (Macon, GA, 1984).

⁹ David J. Goldberg, “The Administration of Herman Myers as Mayor of Savannah, Georgia, 1895–1897 and 1899–1907,” (master’s thesis, University of North Carolina, 1978).

¹⁰ David T. Morgan’s essays on Philip Phillips and Eugenia Levy Phillips appear in Proctor and Schmier with Stern, *Jews of the South*.