

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

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Note from the Exhibit Review Editor . . .

I am delighted to help launch a new feature of *Southern Jewish History*. With this volume we begin a section on exhibit reviews. Our knowledge of southern history and heritage comes in many forms and is accessed by the public in many ways. One important means for learning about the past is through visits to museums and historic sites. When we can, we offer this regularly through our annual conference, and we take participants to area sites that help the past come alive. This new section on exhibits will provide analysis of what is currently on display in an area nearby or one you may be visiting. Some of these exhibits will travel and could be seen at a later date in another city. With these reviews, you will be able to learn more about the subjects that are of interest in the museum world, and the ways those subjects are addressed. It is our hope that these reviews will encourage our readers to access public history sites and to critically evaluate the history that is told and is yet untold. We begin this section with three reviews. From Maryland's neighborhoods to Texas's immigration policies through Galveston Island to the world of black colleges and Jewish refugees in the Deep South, these reviews illustrate the diversity and richness of Jewish experiences in the South.

We cannot review everything, but if you know of a major exhibit that warrants a review, please contact me. Or, if you would like to be a potential reviewer, I also would like to hear from you.

Phyllis Leffler

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Exhibit Review

Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges. Curator: Bonnie Gurewitsch. Museum of Jewish Heritage, 36 Battery Place, New York, New York. May 1, 2009 to January 4, 2010. This exhibit is seeking future venues. Contact through website: <http://www.mjhnyc.org/college/index.html>

It is well known that American intellectual life was profoundly transformed by the wave of refugee scholars, most of them Jewish, who fled fascism in the 1930s. Less well known is the role that America's historically black colleges played in providing a desperately needed haven for some of these scholars. At least sixty refugee scholars taught at historically black schools between the 1930s and the 1960s. Most stayed only a few years, but a handful spent the balance of their careers there, mentoring generations of students, some of whom would go on to play leadership roles in the civil rights movement.

This fascinating story is compellingly told in the *Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow* exhibit. Mixing video recollections with letters, photographs, broadsheets, and a few emblematic items, such as a Ku Klux Klan robe, the exhibit emphasizes the similarities between the Nazi racial policies that drove the refugees to the U.S. and the Jim Crow system they found on arrival. At the same time, it presents the moving personal stories of the scholars, often through the recollections of their former students.

Few of the refugee scholars had had any real contact with or knowledge of black Americans prior to taking up their new posts, and many of their students, particularly at the smaller schools in the Deep South, had not had much contact with Jews. However much political sympathy the Jewish refugees and their African American students and colleagues may have felt for each other, the cultural gaps were huge. One can almost feel the discomfort in the old black and white photographs of these formal, middle European scholars in their woolen three piece suits, standing

*The Negro's Burden, oil painting by Professor Viktor Lowenfeld,
Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia, 1943-1945.
Collection of Judith Weyburne and Dr. John Lowenfeld.
(Courtesy of the Museum of Jewish Heritage, New York City.)*

stiffly among their colleagues in the stifling southern heat. Often traumatized by what they had experienced in Europe many refugees were initially reluctant to draw attention to themselves by identifying too conspicuously with the black cause.

Over time, however, those who stayed at the black colleges formed deep personal bonds with their students. These colleges placed a strong emphasis on teaching and mentoring which suited many of the refugee scholars perfectly. Further, while the black colleges were creations of segregation, they were never themselves segregated. Indeed as the late John Hope Franklin notes in the book that inspired this exhibit, they were "about the

only places in Jim Crow America where white Americans and African Americans could communicate on the basis of equality and mutual respect.”¹

In this setting, black and Jewish intellectuals soon began to have a profound influence on each other. This is seen in their work, perhaps most clearly in the paintings of Viktor Lowenfeld, who taught art at Virginia’s Hampton Institute from 1939 to 1946. We also see it in recollections of the students and colleagues of memorable teachers such as Ernst Manasse, who taught German, Latin, and philosophy at North Carolina University in Durham from 1939 to 1973, and Ernst Borinski, who taught sociology, German, and Russian at Tougaloo College in Mississippi from 1947 to 1983. Over time this identification with African Americans inevitably turned political. Thus we learn that years before the sit-ins, Manasse quietly stopped patronizing theaters, restaurants, and other public facilities that did not allow blacks and that Borinski was targeted by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Committee. We also see the court records of Lore May Rasmussen of Talladega College who was arrested for dining with a black friend in a black owned café and fined twenty-eight dollars for the crime of “Casual Indifference” to Alabama segregation law. (The café’s proprietor was fined fifty dollars after offering the defense that she had not realized Rasmussen was white).

*Receipt for fine, Birmingham, Alabama, 1942.
Collection of Drs. Lore and Donald Rasmussen.
(Courtesy of the Museum of Jewish Heritage, New York City.)*

¹ John Hope Franklin, “Unsung Heroes” in Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb, *From Swastika to Jim Crow: Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges* (Malabar, FL, 1993), x.

This raises the one issue I would have liked to have seen explored further. While the exhibit deals with some tough history, it basically tells a “feel good” story, based largely on the affectionate recollections of former students. It says almost nothing about what contact, if any, the refugee scholars had with the American Jews in their communities. Of course, most southern Jews had made their accommodation, however uncomfortably, with Jim Crow. The analogy between Nazi and Jim Crow racism, so obvious and inescapable for the refugees and their African American colleagues was vehemently denied by many southern Jews into the 1960s and sometimes beyond. One is thus left wondering what they made of the refugees and what the refugees made of them. That quibble aside, however, *Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow* is a compelling exploration of a small but important chapter in intertwined histories of Jewish and African Americans.

Philip Kasinitz

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Forgotten Gateway: Coming to America through Galveston Island, 1846–1924. Curator: Suzanne Seriff. Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum, Austin, Texas. February 21 to October 11, 2009, then traveling to Galveston, to the Ellis Island Museum in New York, and other cities. Other Resources: Teacher’s Guide, available through the website. Website: <http://www.ForgottenGateway.com>

Between 1907 and 1914, about ten thousand eastern European Jewish immigrants arrived in the United States through Galveston, Texas, and were dispersed by rail to hundreds of communities throughout the Midwest and West. Managed from New York and supervised locally by Galveston’s Rabbi Henry Cohen, who met every boat at the dock and personally guided Jewish immigrants through the cumbersome arrival procedures, the Galveston Movement is a key event in Jewish immigration history. As this fine exhibit reveals, however, Jewish immigration was just one small piece of Galveston immigration history. For nearly a century, the island city served as a port of entry for thousands of

immigrants from throughout the world. While the Jewish portion of the exhibit figures prominently, it is about much more than Jews—and about much more than Galveston.

Forgotten Gateway is a large and well-funded presentation (support came from the National Endowment for the Humanities among other sources) that combines archival materials, photographs, physical objects, and interviews with immigrants' descendants, reflecting several years of effort by a multidisciplinary team of researchers. Visitors to the Bullock Museum include families, tourists, and school groups, and the curator has made a great effort to appeal to a broad general audience. Information cards are concise and informative, many displays encourage hands-on involvement, and video screens loop well-produced short films featuring scholars and descendants offering background information. Wall-sized photographs and recorded background noises (seagulls screeching, customs officials giving orders) subtly set a mood. Period props are used especially well: one display opens a footlocker to reveal the contents carried by a typical immigrant, and video monitors are perched atop piles of luggage, mitigating the sleek anachronism of flat-screen televisions.

The exhibit is particularly good at explaining why immigrants would choose remote Galveston: a wealth of original documents attests to the promotional campaigns conducted by railroad companies, shipping lines, and Texas boosters. Another strength is the depiction of the immigrants' perspective. One room devotes a kiosk to each of the questions they were required to answer upon arrival, revealing how fraught even the simplest queries could be: "What is your name?" (a label often in flux); "Are You Healthy?" (by whose standards?); "Are You Married?" (single women were suspect); "Are You an Anarchist?" (some were). The Galveston Movement gets special attention. Reproductions of dozens of letters Rabbi Cohen received from grateful immigrants fill a wall, and audio clips remind us that an Orthodox rabbi, Ya'akov Geller, was also at the docks to welcome immigrants seeking kosher meals and accommodations. And though no explanation is ventured, a fascinating set of original documents

reveals that Jewish immigrants were deemed unhealthy at the Galveston port at a much higher rate than were other groups.

While the Jewish immigrant experience is prominently featured, *Forgotten Gateway* emphasizes that Galveston's immigrants were of every ethnicity and nationality. It notes rightly that many of the first "immigrants" to arrive at the port came in cargo ships from Africa, and it also gives due attention to Chinese railroad workers, Comanches displaced by immigrant colonies, Mexican migrants crossing the border, and recent arrivals from Africa and Asia. The point is that Texas immigration is multifaceted and continuing—but here the exhibit suffers its greatest weakness. Billed as a historical survey of immigration through a single port (Galveston, 1846–1924), many elements range far afield from this narrow focus in an attempt to link the past with present issues. A video at the entrance plays interviews with recent immigrants and shots of arriving airliners, images that jar someone expecting Galveston circa 1846. Throughout the displays, contemporary accounts by immigrants with no connection to Galveston are interspersed among the documents. These are suggestive, but they also draw the viewer out of the moment and imply comparisons across time, place, and culture that may not be valid. There is a very good historical narrative about Galveston buried within *Forgotten Gateway*, but in fact the exhibit delivers much more than its subtitle promises: it is about immigration to Texas in general, and about the continuing tug-of-war between immigration and nativism. A broader title might better have conveyed the scope of materials included.

The feature that strays furthest from Galveston is also the most innovative and indispensable to the exhibit. In the final room, a wall-sized timeline depicts American immigration history. Visitors write the names and nations of origin of the immigrants in their own families on sticky notes and post them on the appropriate panels on the timeline. The effect, as notes accrue, is fascinating. Historical trends—waves arriving from various points in the world, periods of restrictiveness or laxity in enforcement—can be plainly read in the quantity and content of the notes on each panel. On the opposite wall, visitors post full-

length narratives of their own immigration experiences. This marvelous (and clearly popular) interactive element has little to do with Galveston per se but has everything to do with why anyone should care about this subject. Forgotten Gateway lacks the strict focus that may satisfy historians, but reveals to a diverse general audience the many contours and complexities of American immigration history, and it invites viewers to remember their own immigrant backgrounds and how newcomers continue to shape American life.

Bryan Edward Stone

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Voices of Lombard Street: A Century of Change in East Baltimore.

Curators: Anita Kassof and Deborah Weiner. Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore. Continuing. Catalogue: Deborah R. Weiner, Anita Kassof, Avi Y. Decter, eds. *Voices of Lombard Street: A Century of Change in East Baltimore*. Baltimore: Jewish Museum of Maryland, 2007 (170 pp.), available through <http://www.jewishmuseummd.org/index.html>

Voices of Lombard Street, the Jewish Museum of Maryland's marvelous historical exhibit on Baltimore's turn-of-the-century immigrant neighborhood, serves its subject in two important ways. It provides a snapshot of life in East Baltimore when it was the epicenter of the city's Jewish life. In addition, it chronicles the history of East Baltimore and the dramatic changes in its landscape over the course of a century. If it had done only one of these things and done it well, this exhibit would be deserving of great praise; that it achieves both is an especially impressive feat.

The curators focus on the twentieth century, while also briefly situating the neighborhood within Baltimore's longer history. Geographically situated on the dividing line between the North and the South, Baltimore developed features of both regions. It was an industrial and commercial center that had relied upon the southern plantation economy since the colonial period. The city

attracted thousands of free black laborers before the Civil War, even while enslaved blacks were widely employed by manufacturers, artisans, and families seeking domestic help. Baltimore was also one of the nation's most active immigrant ports during the nineteenth century. Although most of Baltimore's European newcomers were Catholics from Ireland and Germany, a small community of central European Jews had earlier put down stakes in the city. The exhibit gives them only a cursory mention; while German Jews did build several synagogues in the neighborhood—two of which, the Lloyd Street Synagogue (1845) and Chizuk Amuno (1876), have been renovated and currently bookend the Jewish Museum of Maryland complex—they never generated a dense residential enclave in the area.

Eastern European Jewish immigrants began to gravitate to East Baltimore at the end of the nineteenth century. They soon created such a visible presence that this immigrant and working class quarter previously known as "Oldtown" came to be called "Jewtown." Most of *Voices of Lombard Street* revolves around this era of the neighborhood's history, describing day-to-day life through photographs, maps, historic artifacts, and, occasionally, a cacophony of sound effects. Particular attention is paid to the quotidian: life-size recreations of an immigrant apartment's living room, a tailor's shop, storefronts along Lombard Street (the neighborhood's commercial thoroughfare), and even a backyard privy show what this environment might have looked and felt like a hundred years ago.

Although the East Baltimore represented here was predominantly Jewish, the curators acknowledge the multitude of experiences that the neighborhood spawned. The "voices" of *Voices of Lombard Street* are decidedly plural. African Americans and Italian immigrants also lived in the neighborhood, as well as in their own residential enclaves nearby. All shopped at Lombard Street's primarily Jewish-owned stores. Interviews with a diverse cross section of former denizens are quoted throughout the exhibit, and they suggest that ethnic and racial coexistence was not without its tensions. The exhibit also reveals occasional friction among the neighborhood's Jews, especially

regarding morality and leisure. A census register from the early twentieth century indicating that some area brothels were owned and staffed by Jewish women, for example, is presented next to a newspaper report of a local rabbi's campaign to shut these businesses down. (An essay in the exhibit's catalogue gives a scholarly account of Baltimore's Jewish Court of Arbitration and its efforts to settle legal differences between Jews outside of municipal channels.)

As was true for most other immigrant communities, the post-immigrant generation left in search of better housing and more space. Where most historical exhibits on urban Jewish life end at the mid-century exodus to the suburbs, *Voices of Lombard Street* stays with the neighborhood even after it had been designated a slum by the city and hundreds of its brick row houses were demolished and replaced by public housing. By 1970, more than 90 percent of area households were black, many of them poor. Although East Baltimore was increasingly marginalized and impoverished, Lombard Street's commercial district remained constant for a while longer—not only as a shopping thoroughfare, but also as an enclave of Jewish entrepreneurship. This section of the exhibit, along with co-curator Deborah Weiner's excellent catalogue essay on postwar Lombard Street, explains the neighborhood's decline within the context of both local and national developments in urban planning and black-Jewish relations.

Today, the neighborhood is undergoing another flurry of urban renewal, in part because of its official designation as a historic district. The Jewish Museum of Maryland has certainly been a beneficiary of East Baltimore's reinvigoration. With *Voices of Lombard Street*, the museum returns the favor in the best way it can—by documenting and exploring the neighborhood's history with intelligence, creativity, and sympathy for a multitude of perspectives.

Marni Davis

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