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Commerce and Community: A Business History of Jacksonville Jewry

by

Stephen J. Whitfield*

The span of Jewish history in Jacksonville embraces roughly one and a half centuries, and its beginnings could not have inspired confidence in its vitality. In 1857, when a yellow fever epidemic left six Jews dead, half of the community was wiped out; and the first communal institution to be founded was not a synagogue, or even a B'nai B'rith lodge, but a cemetery.¹ Throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, any rationale for boosterism would have been hard to sustain. When impoverished eastern European Jews began arriving roughly a century ago, they encountered conditions that were austere and even desperate. The community was no different from the you're-on-your-own circumstances of the rest of the New World, about which the Revolutionary War financier Haym Salomon had written as early as 1783. He warned his relatives in Poland: "Your *yichus* is worth very little here." Jews usually faced bleak and abject conditions upon moving to towns and cities like Jacksonville. *Mosaic*, the indispensable illustrated history of Florida Jewry, reproduces a photo showing "William Schemer, who came from Pusalotes, Lithuania, selling fish on a Jacksonville street in 1906." Portrayed is a single unadorned cart (not even a painted name on the cart), and a single horse; and Schemer is holding up a single fish. The cart

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*William Schemer selling fish on a Jacksonville street in 1906.
(From the Collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo Zerivitz, Founding Executive Director.)*

itself seems empty.² The prosperity that would eventually characterize Jacksonville Jewry could scarcely have been anticipated.

The scope of this essay is not the community itself, but instead some of the businessmen associated with Jacksonville. Although all were Jews, "Commerce and Community" does not pretend to encompass religious life, even though further light may be shed on membership in this minority. This essay profiles individual businessmen who are attached to a particular city, the trajectories of their careers, and the impact they exerted. Even as a chronicle of business developments, however, this account makes no claim whatsoever to comprehensiveness. The focus is limited to those whose business success made them the easiest to trace.

The careers and companies of the less spectacular businesspeople are less likely to produce a paper trail that might correct or contradict memories and oral histories. The unsuccessful tend to leave behind even fewer traces of their lack of accomplishment.

The thwarted dreams of the *luftmenschen* and the luckless tend to vanish, though they do occasionally show up in the credit reports of R. G. Dun. In 1870, for example, one M. Rosenberg came to Jacksonville from Little Rock, Arkansas, where under another name he is supposed to have failed in a business. A "transient Jew," Rosenberg "was said to be selling goods below recommended prices" in his newly adopted city.³ Many other businessmen could not have eluded the nemesis of failure. But generally not even the moderately prosperous, or the solidly middle-class, ordinarily bequeathed a record for the historian to examine and excavate.

Moreover, until well into the second half of the twentieth century, a southern Jewish businesswoman was anomalous. To the rule of an all-male club, a tiny number of exceptions in Jacksonville are noted in the following pages; occasionally a widow would take over the operation of a company. But the exact contributions of mothers and wives and daughters to entrepreneurial achievement are elusive. Also in need of exploration is how the commitments of *homo economicus* affected his wife. Documentation is scarce. But clues can be found, for example, in the diary of Helen Jacobus Apte whose husband's grandmother, Helena D. Williams, was the sister of Morris Dzialynski, whose career is discussed below. Day Apte's quest for business opportunities took him and his wife from Atlanta, where they had been married in 1909, to Miami; she cherished both cities. But the couple also lived long in Tallahassee, where Helen Apte found the society to be "narrow and prejudiced and uninteresting." Their last home was in Tampa, "a deadly dull town . . . narrow and provincial," she complained.⁴ The poignancy of such private sentiments could hardly have been unique, but the haunting echoes of a little night music are, alas, mostly inaccessible to the historian. The psychic price that such cultivated women paid must have been high, and perhaps even exorbitant, but cannot be measured with any precision.

This essay is weighted heavily toward the first generation to become prosperous, with several exceptions. That first generation no longer felt itself bound by the ethics of the fathers, even as it

was often encouraged by the ambitions of the mothers. Because of the emphasis in the following pages on the creation of wealth, rather than its perpetuation and diffusion, a caveat is necessary. Over a century later, the business history of Jacksonville's Jews is hardly over, and it is not running on empty. But generational change, and differentiations of wealth and status that upward mobility facilitated, have meant that a full-scale historical study of the community would have to be attentive to its divisions—of class, gender, and denomination. The duration of the residence in the United States or in Jacksonville mattered in calibrating status. So did family origins in western or eastern Europe or in the Levant, especially as the population grew. Such divisions, however subtle, rippled through the community, although it also must be acknowledged that Jews rarely need to live in huge municipalities in order to generate friction. To slice and dice one another is almost an independent variable in the equation of Jewish interaction. In the 1960s Irving Howe found himself unable to detect any “back-scratching” among his fellow New York intellectuals and critics. “Change the word ‘back’ to ‘eye,’” he suggested, “and maybe you’ve got something.” As of early 2005, for example, the last two Jews believed to be living in Afghanistan were feuding so fiercely with one another that they lived in quarters at opposite ends of the only synagogue in Kabul.⁵

In Jacksonville an ex-kosher butcher, the proprietor of Kosher Kuts, happened to go well beyond incivility. No merchant did more to expose the cleavage within the community. Harry Shapiro had attended the local Bolles School, later dropped out of Yeshiva University in New York, and twice failed at *aliya*. He became a right-wing extremist, who serves as perhaps the most striking proof that Jewry does not constitute a cohesive social unit. In 1997 the thirty-one-year-old Shapiro planted a bomb in the Conservative synagogue, the Jacksonville Jewish Center. The bomb was discovered before it could be detonated. He was given a ten-year prison sentence near Jacksonville for thus trying to disrupt a dovish speech by Shimon Peres, the Nobel laureate who was then Israel's prime minister.⁶

*Jacksonville Hebrew Cemetery, founded in 1857.
It is the oldest recorded Jewish communal institution in Florida.
(From the Collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo Zerivitz, Founding Executive Director.)*

So potentially lethal an episode was unique. Otherwise the saga of Jewish business in this city largely confirms what has long been evident in considering the mercantile pattern that has been prominent elsewhere in the region (and indeed in much of the rest of the nation). "Commerce and Community" is designed to consolidate what is broadly known of the record of such economic and social activity elsewhere and to encourage further research in communities that have not hitherto been considered central to the southern Jewish experience. The pattern described in this essay is unlikely to surprise students of southern Jewish enterprise, even though that subject has yet to stimulate a synthetic volume. The

annals of southern department stores and other mercantile establishments Jews often owned consisted of innumerable transactions across the counter and the good will Jews thereby hoped to generate.

Yet their way of life—call it their counter-life—has yet to be distilled and analyzed in a single book. Probably the most broadly conceived study remains Elliott Ashkenazi's 1988 monograph. But *The Business of Jews in Louisiana* is confined to merely a third of the nineteenth century and to only one state. Studies of particular families and companies exist, as do memoirs and novels and sections of books devoted to particular communities. In exploring the southern Jewish past, we really mean business. Yet strangely no serious volumes devoted to this theme are extant. "Few economic works have appeared in print for the era spanning Reconstruction into the twentieth century," Mark K. Bauman has lamented in his synoptic study of southern Jewish historiography. No scholar has acted upon the claim of the University of Kentucky historian Thomas D. Clark, who found it "impossible to consider Southern economic and social history with any degree of thoroughness without also considering" this particular minority. The southern Jew as *homo economicus* remains to be fully portrayed.⁷

The topic of Jacksonville Jewry has so far inspired only one scholarly article, which James B. Crooks published in *Northeast Florida History* in 1992. His piece runs slightly over seven pages of text and covers only two decades. Also deserving mention is a second article, in which Canter Brown, Jr., profiles a pair of brothers, Morris and Philip Dzialynski (pronounced Duh-LIN-skee), the former of whom was pivotal to the history of the city as well as to its Jewish minority. Bauman anthologized this 1992 article in 2006. Florida's first United States Senator, David Levy Yulee, never lived in Jacksonville, although a town in Nassau County, immediately north of Jacksonville's Duval County, is named for him. But even if Yulee studies are mentioned, that is a stretch. Thus the conclusion is unmistakable: the extremely limited historical scholarship devoted to Jacksonville Jewry is mostly biographical and is confined only to the nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries. By now the arc from past to present is

surely long enough, however, to have elicited scholarly curiosity. And yet what happens in Jacksonville somehow stays in Jacksonville.

To be sure, many southern Jewish communities can claim to have been neglected, or understudied, and can vie for the honor of historical retrieval. But the case for Jacksonville is especially strong when considered from at least one angle: size matters. In 1967 the city and county voted for consolidation, to go into effect the following year. The new political system not only streamlined services but made previously fractious problems soluble, such as closing down the twenty-four lines that had poured sewage directly into the St. Johns River. "I have seen the Rhine of song and story," Bertha Zadek Dzialynski, the daughter-in-law of Philip Dzialynski, wrote in 1944, "but except for the history associated with it and its ruined castles and interesting terraced banks, it does not compare in beauty with the St. Johns." In 1968, when the city and county governments were incorporated to make the municipality and the county virtually synonymous, the population of Jacksonville suddenly encompassed 840 square miles.⁸ The boundaries enabled it to forge ahead of Atlanta and Miami. Consolidation made Jacksonville even bigger than Boston or San Francisco. Those four other cities, for example, loom much larger in Jewish history, and have inevitably attracted greater scholarly interest. But because the suburbs of other American metropolises have not been incorporated within city limits, Jacksonville currently ranks as high as twelfth in general population. The closest demographic competitor is Indianapolis, which has already been the subject of an entire book devoted to its Jewish past written by Judith Endelman and published in 1984.

Jacksonville Jewry itself has remained relatively tiny. The first communal census, taken in 1880, pegged the proportion of the city's Jews at 1.6 percent. A century later the percentage had slipped to 1.2. The current estimate of barely above seven thousand souls happens to be smaller, for instance, than Wasilla, Alaska. The total number of Jacksonville's Jews would be enough to fit comfortably in the pews of a handful of synagogues on Long Island. Or compare the total number of Jacksonville Jews to, say,

the Saddleback Church of Lake Forest, California. The membership of this mega-church recently topped twenty thousand.⁹ A more plausible explanation for academic indifference, however, is that Jacksonville can invoke no claim for uniqueness. Located in the northeastern part of the state, twenty miles upstream on the St. Johns River from the Atlantic Ocean, Jacksonville has marketed itself as the First Coast, the gateway to Florida. But the city has lacked what is so recognizable and alluring elsewhere—the bustling dynamism of Atlanta, the radiant glamour of Miami, the easygoing Old South charm of Richmond, or the decadent hedonism of New Orleans. Unlike sociologists, historians look for the particular factors that shape events and institutions and are drawn to what is distinctive, what is unrepeatable, what is peculiar. History is about what does not quite fit the laws and generalizations that social scientists are prone to formulate. In terms of the Jewish experience, Jacksonville forms an anagram of many a southern (and indeed American) community, which undoubtedly contributes to scholarly neglect.

Let an effort at rectification now begin.

In the Beginning: The Mayor

A mayor, who simultaneously served, starting in 1882, as the first president of the first synagogue, Congregation Ahavath Chesed, personified the genesis of the community. The synagogue began as Orthodox but soon turned Reform. To make Judaism less divergent from the religious norms of the region, organ music was introduced in 1885; and within a decade, men no longer wore hats at “the Temple.” Born in Posen, Prussia, in 1841, Morris A. Dzialynski came to Jacksonville in 1853 and was educated in the city’s public schools. He fought for the Confederate States of America at Perryville and Murphreesboro but was too wounded to continue, and returned to Jacksonville. In the postbellum era, Dzialynski prospered in a number of businesses that earned the respect of R. G. Dun & Co., which considered this “sharp, active man” an honest businessman of “good reputation.” Not even bankruptcy had sunk him for long. His businesses included auctioneering, dealing in dry goods, and selling carriages, buggies, and wagons.

Especially in the sale of such vehicles, Dzialynski achieved local renown. Those wheels of fortune enabled him to forge a political career as a Democrat. First elected mayor in 1881, soon after the census had listed 7,650 residents, Dzialynski served two terms in the era immediately prior to the disenfranchisement of black voters. The city established a white primary for the Democratic Party in 1899, and two years later the party created a white primary for all county and state offices as well.¹⁰

Morris Dzialynski.

*(From the Collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo Zerivitz, Founding Executive Director.)*

In 1895 Dzialynski was elected municipal judge and served in that position until his death. He helped organize Jacksonville's first baseball club and served as its first president. He also served as one of the four governors running the Jacksonville Board of Trade, which was renamed the Chamber of Commerce in 1915. No wonder then that, upon Dzialynski's death, in 1907, his body lay in state at city hall and all municipal offices were closed, with flags lowered to half-mast. He lies buried in the synagogue's cemetery.¹¹ Perhaps the only noteworthy hostility that Dzialynski attracted came from some of his fellow Jews, whose businesses were harmed because of the rigorous enforcement of the Sunday "blue" laws. Sabbatarians thanked the mayor with gifts of flowers. But one local Jew was inspired to write a poem, which was published in the *New York Sun*: "Morris, thy path is strewn in roses/Since thou hast turned thy back on Moses,/And offered incense at the shrine/And bowed the knee to Philistine."¹² A foreign-born Jewish businessman who flourished in a region that was heavily rural, overwhelmingly Protestant, and xenophobic as well as notorious for its difficulties with diversity, Dzialynski enjoyed the sort of dramatic political success that underscored how much greater southern religious tolerance was than racial tolerance. He embodied what was most pliant about Jacksonville. When the polls closed on that election day in 1881, and the city's voters demonstrated their preference for mayor, the results marked, in effect, the night they drove old Dixie down.

The Retailers: Cohen Brothers

Jacksonville typified the cities and towns of the region (and indeed of the nation) because Jewish retailers played so conspicuous a role in the economy. Their general stores, dry goods stores, and clothing shops not infrequently dominated the historic downtowns of many a southern hamlet, where a boondocks Bon Marché might achieve a certain mercantile primacy. Cohen Brothers occupied that niche in Jacksonville. A dry goods store that became a major department store, Cohen Brothers was the counterpart to Godchaux in New Orleans, Thalheimer's in Richmond, Goldsmith's in Memphis, the Gus Blass Company in Little Rock,

Rich's in Atlanta, Levy's in Savannah, Pizitz's in Birmingham, Neiman Marcus in Dallas, Sakowitz's in Houston, the May Company in St. Louis, Hecht's in Baltimore, and Garfinckel's in Washington, D.C. In 1867, when two German-born brothers, Samuel and Morris Cohen, arrived in Jacksonville, fresh from working in their father's firm in New York, the town was still under military occupation. The foolish Confederate gamble to secede from the Union had left the southern economy in utter ruin, and therefore the postbellum era seemed to constitute the least promising circumstances for merchants to start a business, create capital or find customers in a town of about four thousand residents. Already prostrate, they lacked the resources to shop till they dropped.

The year 1867 also marks when a Massachusetts-born, New York City-based son of a preacher man published a novel titled *Ragged Dick*. This was the first in an oeuvre of close to a hundred works of fiction by Horatio Alger, Jr., who is credited with injecting into American popular culture the credibility of economic ascent. His upwardly mobile young heroes show their aptitude for success by acquiring at the outset of their careers a pocket watch, the symbol of punctuality and reliability. Agriculture is governed by the rotation of the planet and by the natural rhythm of the seasons; industry instead requires the manufactured time-piece that permits scheduled precision. A pocket watch is among the objects shown in the Mosaic exhibit and its accompanying catalog. But the hours on the face of the watch are not in Roman or Arabic numerals but rather in Hebrew letters. Its owner was George Dziyalynski, who in 1857 was the first Jewish child born in Jacksonville. He was the son of Morris Dziyalynski's elder brother, Philip Dziyalynski, who had come to the city in 1850 as a peddler.¹³ However apt this artifact is in suggesting the Jewish devotion to escaping from poverty, the typical Alger protagonist fails to strike it rich. He goes from "rags to respectability," in the phrase of the cultural historian John Cawelti, who pointed out that Alger's plots do not end in opulence. The hero instead succeeds by joining the rather unimposing ranks of middle management. Such heroes of fiction become neither entrepreneurs nor magnates,¹⁴ but often

rise no higher than a junior partnership in the sort of mercantile firm that the Cohen Brothers created and owned in Jacksonville. The Jews who are profiled in this essay differ from their moderately prosperous coreligionists, and therefore do not exemplify the fictional trajectory that Horatio Alger plotted. They easily surpass it.

The log cabin on muddy East Bay Street that the Cohen Brothers built for their store could scarcely have been more plebeian. A clerk served as their sole employee. Yet the firm managed to flourish. R. G. Dun & Co. noted that the store "had no transactions with anyone except selling their goods and mostly for cash. [The brothers] are Jews, have no property here but have made a good business and are well thought of." The "prudent" and "well-meaning" Cohen Brothers seemed to reinvest whatever profits earned back in the business. Samuel Cohen in particular was described as a "shrewd . . . [and] cautious businessman." The honesty of their "transactions has never been called in question" and they "give satisfaction to the community," according to these specialists in evaluating credit-worthiness. Cohen Brothers soon became sufficiently successful to move to a larger building on West Bay Street and send for two more brothers. Julius died not long after reaching Jacksonville. Jacob Elias Cohen joined the family firm in 1875, when only thirteen years old. But his skills were impressive enough to enable Samuel to return to New York City a decade or so later to conduct the buying for the Jacksonville store. Morris Cohen, free to leave as well, tried his hand at lace manufacturing in England. In 1912 he would return to Jacksonville and help run the department store until his death little more than a decade later.¹⁵

Jacob Cohen exhibited an undeniable flair for enterprise. He may have been the first merchant in the South to put price tags on merchandise. Even if the claim was inflated or apocryphal, Cohen Brothers helped scuttle the barter system that had been quite customary before the twentieth century. The company thus activated transactions of trust between the customers and the sales force and helped to reduce the effectiveness of the unscrupulous, there's-one-born-every-minute hucksters. Eventually, instead of

*Cohen Bros. Store, 43 W. Bay Street, 1880.
(From the Collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo Zerivitz, Founding Executive Director.)*

haggling and bargaining, came the assurance and the probity of "satisfaction guaranteed," based on fixed prices and the right of customers to return what they had purchased and receive their money back. According to a 1905 guidebook, no other firm in the city could claim to make such an offer. Cohen also relentlessly promoted civic improvement, especially in modernizing transportation. He wanted the name of Cohen Brothers to be integral to the buying habits of the populace. Exactly three decades after this department store opened, it moved elsewhere on Bay Street, to the site of what passed for the city's first skyscraper, the Gardner Building, six stories high. The civic growth that he promoted was becoming evident; the 1900 census revealed a population of 28,429. Jacksonville was the biggest city in Florida, well ahead of second-place Pensacola (17,747), although still

smaller than Savannah, Augusta, Charleston, Montgomery, and Mobile. But disaster struck Jacksonville, and Jacob Cohen showed true grit in the wake of the fire that devastated the city on May 3, 1901.¹⁶

The sparks that ignited a mattress factory and then spread to ravage 146 city blocks constituted the most momentous event in local history, an even more decisive episode than the ordeal of Union occupation during and after the Civil War. Every public building but one burned down, which meant that ninety percent of downtown Jacksonville lay in ashes. Among the two dozen houses of worship demolished was Congregation Ahavath Chesed, which the conflagration turned into a temple of doom. The congregation's records, like those of the city, also went up in flames. (Here it should be added that, though a new building emerged from the ashes, another fire broke out on January 28, 1940 and destroyed many, though not all, of the records of the synagogue from 1901 through 1939. No wonder then that scholars have not hitherto been tempted to reconstruct a history of Jacksonville Jewry.) The fifteen-member Jacksonville Relief Association formed after the 1901 fire included municipal court judge Morris Dzialynski, who was serving a second term as president of the Temple when the flames destroyed it. Congregation Ahavath Chesed was the first house of worship to be rebuilt.¹⁷

Handed a lemon, Jacob Cohen opted to make lemonade. He was not alone, of course, in his faith in the First Coast. At the end of 1901, forty families were optimistic enough to establish the Hebrew Orthodox Congregation B'nai Israel. Six years later a synagogue was erected in the La Villa neighborhood, where newcomers from eastern Europe tended to settle, and thus they enjoyed an alternative to Reform Judaism. Immediately after the catastrophe, however, Cohen had reason to suspect that his department store was surrounded by the remains of hotels that would never be rebuilt. Jacksonville might cease to be what the travel industry later called a "leisure destination," as tourists skipped the city and headed to hotels in Ormond Beach, Palm Beach, and even further south.

Cohen Brothers, the Big Store.

The new store opened in 1912 on the site of the old St. James Hotel.

(Courtesy Hazel Mack, Archivist, Congregation Ahavath Chesed.)

But he also saw in the empty lot of what had been the St. James Hotel an opportunity to construct an even more impressive edifice. Although the block bounded by Duval, Laura, Church, and Hogan streets was considered too far from the river for desirable municipal trade, Cohen bought the entire six acres in 1910. By then the population of the city had spurted to 57,699; and the idea of progress had become operational. His new St. James Building covered an entire block, even as a photograph from that era shows why Bay Street resembled so many southern (and American) communities in that era. The stores bore names like Jacobs Jewelers (founded by Lionel Jacobs in 1879, and then taken over by his son Victor), and Levy's (founded by Benjamin S. Levy in 1910). These firms, in their solidity and their gravitas, were above all *firm*. But Cohen Brothers was not content to display its wares and its amenities alongside such neighbors (and coreligionists). After a mere eighteen months of construction, a new and dazzling "Big Store" within the St. James Building,

with its entrance facing Hemming Park, opened on October 21, 1912.

If you build it, goes the mantra, they will come. On that opening day, they did. Out of an urban population of about 80,000, about 28,000 people visited Cohen Brothers, where two orchestras added to the allure. Onlookers peered through plate-glass windows, a novelty for Jacksonville. Through the huge seventy-five-foot octagonal skylight, the sunshine lit up the interior. A fountain gushed in the middle of the rotunda. Twenty-foot marble columns supported the mezzanine, which could be reached by a majestic stairway. The second-floor parapet consisted of a decorative frieze marked by six-pointed stars, which reflected the owners' pride in their religious heritage. The store covered the entire second floor and the center of the first floor of the four-story St. James Building. Cohen Brothers claimed to be the ninth largest department store in the nation and the largest in the South. In Jacksonville itself, only the railroad terminal and the warehouse for the Atlantic Coast Line and Florida East Coast railways occupied greater floor space. Cohen Brothers dramatically enlarged the notion of "dry goods" to include groceries, racks of sheet music, musical instruments, books, a pet shop, one-day service on personalized stationery, and a soda fountain (seating limited to whites only, of course). Jacob Cohen grasped the principle that the whole point of a department store was that it offered everything in one place. The first permanent electric streetlights to be installed in Jacksonville surrounded the St. James Building that harbored Cohen Brothers. The urban experience of Floridians could henceforth stimulate them to become more urbane.¹⁸

Competitors felt compelled to raise the level of their own game, to become more modern, more stylish, and more sophisticated. All became more attuned to fashion, and served as conduits of cosmopolitanism. Sensitivity to the fluctuations of taste that reverberated from outside was what partly constituted the novelty of the New South, the phrase that Henry W. Grady, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, made famous in 1886 in evangelizing for a region that would achieve postbellum prosperity

Cohen Brothers, Second Floor Dress Department, 1915.
(Courtesy Hazel Mack, Archivist, Congregation Ahavath Chesed.)

through capitalist enterprise. The downtown stores that Jacksonville's Jews and those in other cities established helped weaken the parochialism of the South without entirely ridding it of xenophobia. A leading downtown men's clothing store, Levy Brothers, proclaimed itself "a Fifth Avenue shop set down in the center of Jacksonville," and expressed pride in selling Hart, Schaffner, and Marx suits.¹⁹ Consider the balance sheets on which these merchant princes depended as the death warrants of the old order. Such tradesmen helped their neighbors cultivate a taste for the products of the modern world, and thus altered the atmosphere that the residents of cities like Jacksonville inhaled.

The year 1922 marked a special moment of civic pride when the estimated population within the city limits topped one hundred thousand. That statistic vindicated Jacob Cohen's faith in the viability of his adopted city, still the most populous in Florida.

With 171 churches, piety persisted even during the Jazz Age. During the 1920s Jacksonville remained the chief commercial and banking center of the state, and a rail and marine hub as well. In 1926 seven skyscrapers of ten stories or more were under construction. Over four hundred factories were also listed in the city, which was prosperous enough to attract a scion of one of the nation's wealthiest families. In 1925, when Alfred I. duPont moved down from Delaware, the solid-stone buildings of Jacksonville's banks impressed him, according to his biographer, in contrast to the vaguely Mediterranean-style pleasure domes that passed for financial institutions in Miami. If a city could be personified, the authors of a guidebook noted, Jacksonville would have been the "working son in the Florida family of playboys."²⁰ In 1927 Jacob Cohen died and his widow, Hattie Halle Cohen, took over as president of the company until her death in 1935. Her son Halle Cohen and her sons-in-law, Percy Zacharias (married to Rae Cohen) and Robert Seitner (married to Minna Cohen) continued to run Cohen Brothers as well as the St. James Corporation.

The fortunes of the Big Store can nevertheless partially confirm the historical generalization that Eli N. Evans famously propounded. At the heart of the southern Jewish experience, he wrote, are "the fathers who built their businesses for the sons who didn't want them."²¹ Evans has been the leading chronicler of southern Jewry, and no insight into its fate has been more resonant. But even apart from the gender-specificity of his generalization, it is problematic. The fathers often built businesses so that the sons could transcend them and escape from the confinements of small-town merchandising and life. The tragic element of generational difference that Evans noted has to be weighed against the wider horizons that the professions or maybe even the arts and sciences promised the sons (and later the daughters). Self-employment was very often the aspiration of Diaspora Jewry, because the precarious risks of such autonomy might seem less important than the option of avoiding an antisemitic boss as well as the radiant appeal of genuine security. In the South, where professional and academic and artistic alternatives were less apparent than in other regions, the building of family businesses

could be so intently pursued that "succession crises" could be deferred or finessed. The truly self-reliant do not easily foresee a future in which they have vanished. Amend Evans's statement concerning business inheritance to "grandsons," however, and that is what happened to Cohen Brothers. None of the grandsons (or granddaughters) of Jacob Cohen or Morris Cohen wanted to take charge of a department store.

That store, however, continued to be integral to the social life of the city at least through the 1950s. One piece of evidence of that status comes from a recent memoir. Born in Jacksonville in 1949 into a naval family that moved around to many postings, Mary Elizabeth Anania could record only a few fleeting memories of a hometown girlhood. But among them were Hemming Park and the store that faced it. The future Elizabeth Edwards, wife of former Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, does recall how much, when she was seven, the Christmas decorations in the Cohen Brothers windows "delighted me."²² The memoirist does not mention the evident effect of such baubles on the character of the holiday itself. But when Jacob Goldsmith originated the "Spirit of Christmas" parade in Memphis, and when over a hundred thousand Atlantans regularly attended the lighting of the great Christmas tree at Rich's,²³ something happened to the piety and the exclusivity of a holiday commemorating the birth of the Christian Savior. Cohen Brothers and its counterparts thus helped to desacralize the cultural climate of what was historically the most thoroughly Protestant section of the Western Hemisphere.

In any case the thrills to which the Edwards memoir attests were becoming rarer to stimulate, as customers increasingly preferred to patronize outlying shopping malls. They served pedestrians within an enclosed space, unlike shopping centers, and were generally anchored by a department store rather than, say, a grocery store. Shopping malls were the postwar invention of architect Victor Gruen, a Viennese Jew who had disguised himself as a Storm Trooper to escape from Austria in 1938 and who utterly transformed the habits of his adopted land. In 1959 ownership of Jacksonville's Big Store was transferred to the May Company, the chain that a Bavarian-born Jew, David May, had

founded in Colorado a little less than a century earlier. May had bought stock in Cohen Brothers after the fire to enable his friend Jacob Cohen to expand into the St. James Building, and sold the shares back once the Big Store enjoyed boom years again. The cachet remained high enough, the cultivation of lifelong allegiance and patronage had been effective enough, for David May's grandson to name the department store May-Cohen's. Invoking the legacy did no good, however, even when the St. James Building became a National Register Site. Downtown was dying. Even after Maison Blanche took over the Big Store, it shut down forever in the summer of 1987, a conspicuous victim of suburbanization. The era of Jacksonville's downtown shopping, of which Cohen Brothers was once the diadem, is no more.²⁴

The Retailers: Furchgott's

The great downtown mercantile rival to Cohen Brothers was Furchgott's, which opened in 1868 as a dry goods store on Bay Street.²⁵

The major figure in the history of this firm was born in Hungary in 1852. Leopold Furchgott was only sixteen years old when he reached Charleston, South Carolina, where two older brothers, Herman and Max, were already working in the dry goods business on the corner of King and Calhoun streets. However, almost immediately the siblings split up. One elder brother ventured west to Colorado; and Max's son, Arthur, eventually built a department store in Orangeburg, South Carolina. (Ultimately Arthur's son Robert Furchgott opted out of the family business and in 1998 traveled to Stockholm to accept a Nobel Prize in physiology.) Soon after the Civil War, Leopold moved south to Jacksonville, where his dry goods store, in partnership with Charles Benedict and Morris Kohn, opened on September 28, 1868. "They have a good stock of fancy dry goods—the best and largest in this town," R. G. Dun & Company reported. "Their business is entirely cash and they have no debts here." Despite his youthfulness, Leopold Furchgott declined to hover in the shadow of Jacob Cohen, and quickly emerged as a leading businessman in the city. Furchgott became a director of the Barnett National Bank

*Furchgott's, the city's fifth oldest business establishment, c. 1880.
Begun as Kohn-Furchgott Company, August 1868, on Bay Street.
(From the Collections of the Jacksonville Historical Society.)*

of Jacksonville, a charter member of the Jacksonville Board of Trade, and for several terms served as its first vice president.²⁶

By 1880 his firm flaunted a telephone when the Jacksonville Telephone Exchange directory listed only thirty-four names. Furchgott's sold corsets and carpets, damask and doilies. It also "sold" the city itself, most strikingly during the era of the Great War. During the winter season Jacksonville and its immediate vicinity attracted about a hundred film companies. Furchgott's may have been the first department store anywhere in the nation to open a movie department. Its aim was to enable producers and directors to learn about the attractions of Jacksonville, although soon after the war California drained any remaining interest in shooting films in northeast Florida. The nation's most successful

mail-order house, circulating its famous catalog, did not directly compete with stores like Furchgott's, which attracted urbanites rather than farmers. Not until the decade of the 1920s did Sears, Roebuck commit itself to developing retail stores. Until 1928, when the company opened a store on Main Street, Jacksonville customers who wanted Sears, Roebuck items had to order them by mail.

Leopold and Julie Furchgott had one daughter, Claire, who married a New Yorker, Paul Lowinger, in an era when women, perhaps especially southern women, could rarely be imagined as competent enough to own or manage such stores. Not even those formidable females known as steel magnolias were presumed to be canny enough to read a balance sheet. Leopold Furchgott, a member of the Reform synagogue, sought a successor in Fred A. Meyerheim. A former member of the sales force, Meyerheim had joined the firm in 1888, when deliveries were still made by horse and buggy. He assumed an increasingly important role after the 1901 fire. Despite the name, which means "fear of God" in German, Furchgott's burned down, and Leopold's wife did not want to remain in Jacksonville. The couple moved to New York, where he ran the buying office. Meyerheim remained to mind the store on Main and Bay streets. Even as the Furchgotts uprooted themselves from Jacksonville, Meyerheim tapped into the deepest roots of its Jewry. In 1894 he had married into a family that had founded Congregation Ahavath Chesed, the Slagers. The Slagers owned a jewelry store on the corner of Main and Bay streets, and for decades served as watch inspectors for the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. Julius Slager, who served as president of the Temple, had been a business partner of Philip Dzialynski, whose brother Morris had married Rosa Slager. She was the niece of Julius Slager, whose own daughter, Cordelia (Dedie) Slager Meyerheim, later became president of the synagogue's sisterhood.²⁷

In 1922, as president of the Kohn-Furchgott Company, Leopold Furchgott returned to the city for a lavish seventieth birthday party held at the Seminole Hotel. The store that he had co-founded had been in business for fifty-four years. Later that year, on Main and Forsyth streets, he opened an annex that

*Furchgott's on Bay Street, 1913, on the right.
To the left of Furchgott's is Jacobs Jewelry, with the clock in front.
To its left is the vacated site of Cohen Brothers. To the far left is Levy's.
(Courtesy Hazel Mack, Archivist, Congregation Ahavath Chesed.)*

dramatically enlarged the department store's floor space.²⁸ When Leopold Furchgott died at the end of the decade, Meyerheim became president. In 1941 he moved the store to its final downtown location, 130 West Adams Street. His son Harold, who had been confirmed at Congregation Ahavath Chesed in 1906, during an era when Reform Judaism ignored the bar mitzvah ceremony, succeeded him in 1945.

In 1968, Furchgott's reached another milestone by celebrating the centennial of its founding. In that year the consolidation of city and county government was achieved. The chairman of the board of Furchgott's, Harold Meyerheim, was one of an inner circle of twenty-three businessmen who had signed the manifesto that first called for such a civic transformation. Harold Meyerheim was seventy-four years old, but loyal older customers and employees

sometimes still called him “the young Mr. Meyerheim,” lest he be mistaken for his late father. By then Furchgott’s had expanded to stores in Regency Square and Roosevelt Mall.

The evolution of such an enterprise requires contextualization beyond the parameters of real estate. Furchgott’s exemplified the sorts of connections between sales personnel and customers that marked the emergence of consumerism as a way of life. The transformation from rural continuities to the uncertainties of urban and suburban encounters, as occupations and gender roles became more diversified and as strangers jostled with one another, required the calibration of infinitely nuanced interpersonal relations. (Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography is an early text that registers his own receptivity to such signals.) The anonymity of the metropolis became commonplace. Identity became fabricated and dramatized as the boundaries of the economy and society overlapped and became reconfigured. No scholar of these efforts to convert personality into performance was more astute, original, or influential than Erving Goffman, the Benjamin Franklin Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. He depicted the stabilization of a whole series of social conventions through the techniques of “impression management.” Such gestures, by which the participants of modern societies connect to one another, were especially crucial to effective salesmanship. Personnel had to sell themselves and not merely their products.²⁹

Goffman’s brother-in-law, the Canadian-born Charles Bay, was among the retailers obliged to be sensitive to such enactments of modern social space. Having earned an M.B.A. from Harvard, Bay had been an executive at Bonwit Teller in New York City and then at Filene’s in Boston before coming to Jacksonville in 1968, the year Furchgott’s celebrated its centenary. He became the first chief executive officer of the company who was kin neither to its founder nor to the Meyerheims. By then the difficulties of entwining commerce and consanguinity were becoming more apparent. As president and general manager, Bay played a decisive role in redefining Furchgott’s as a specialty store, emphasizing apparel and fashion accessories, rather than as a department store,

although the firm also sold linens, stereos, and televisions. The aim, Bay announced, was to appeal to customers in the middle- to upper- range of purchasing power: "Our future does not lie with the least affluent." Their destiny was presumably among the discounters. Other downtown stores were sinking, getting swallowed up, or struggling to find the right niche market. Bay's approach managed to keep the company alive even as downtown Jacksonville was becoming moribund.³⁰

Department stores like Cohen Brothers as well as specialty stores like Furchgott's encouraged a consumerist ethos that contributed to the eventual burial of the agrarian tradition that had so decisively shaped the mind of the South. Few cities were in greater need of cosmopolitanism. In 1920, when the U.S. census revealed that a majority of Americans for the first time lived in urban and suburban areas, 97 percent of the residents of Jacksonville had been born there. Politically its representatives aligned themselves not with a "magic city" like Miami but instead with the agrarian, backward Panhandle.³¹ Yet the natural setting that was once so prized did gradually, though not entirely, yield to the social forces that human beings set in motion. The indigenous gave way to the artificial, and traditionalism had to yield to capitalism, though not without a fight. In 1910 an editorial in the *Florida Times-Union* conceded that "as a financier the Jew is unexcelled . . . but he does not shine as builder, as inventor, as explorer, as civilizer, or as conqueror." Without any disparagement directed at a particular ethnic group, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist from nearby Alachua County lamented the loss of an intimate attachment to the land. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings believed that "something is shriveled in a man's heart when he turns away from . . . [the soil] and concerns himself only with the affairs of men."³² But those very affairs constituted the radical change in consciousness and experience that the Cohen brothers, Leopold Furchgott, and their compatriots helped to instigate. In effect they undermined the assumption that human plenitude had to be autochthonous.

They also accelerated the process of secularization, and, however unknowingly, facilitated what Max Weber, the greatest

social scientist of the last century, called the disenchantment of the world. Historians of Jewry have added another dimension to this process. For such mercantile enterprises also underscored the inexorable forces of assimilation, which corroded the authority of normative Judaism. This process was encouraged in towns and cities where a religious minority like the Jews proved to be too small to provide a niche market. To compete, Jewish merchants were not only obliged to remain open for business on Saturdays, but had to rely upon the patronage of non-Jews. Despite their paeans to the land and despite their ideology of agrarianism, few white southerners were morally opposed to making money. Even the moniker of "Dixie" may have stemmed from the bank notes worth ten dollars (*dix* in French) printed in antebellum Louisiana. The notes were nicknamed "dixes" or "dixies."³³ The region was not inhospitable to Jewish tradesmen, however much they seemed to exemplify a devotion to commercial aspiration. Though hardly enjoying the high status of, say, plantation owners or military officers, such businessmen were hardly disreputable. But they had to fathom the habits and preferences of their customers. Merchants had to adapt to survive, had to respond quickly to fluctuating tastes and styles, and therefore needed the sort of alertness, agility, and timing that might have won the professional envy of the acrobats of Cirque du Soleil.

The Clothiers

Retailing is a risky business. Just ask Ulysses S. Grant, who failed in running a general store, or the luckless haberdasher Harry S. Truman. Both of them had to pursue other lines of work (like running the country). Merchants had to cultivate the virtues of fortitude and perseverance, tenacity and pluck. Such qualities marked the operations of some of the clothing stores that Jews owned in Jacksonville.

Frank Rosenblum arrived in Jacksonville from Key West in 1896 and borrowed a horse, a buggy, and some sheets to become a peddler. He managed to save enough to buy a clothing store just before the terrible fire that broke out five years later. Three relocations later, in 1934, Rosenblum's was firmly established at Adams

and Hogan streets. Frank Rosenblum had built a high-end business that his three sons, John, Sheldon, and Herman, did indeed want to enter. Among their patrons was Fuller Warren, who served as governor from 1949 to 1953. Three other stores—at Regency Square, at Roosevelt Mall, and in Lakewood—followed the customers to the suburbs. By 1981 such was the loyalty to Rosenblum’s that some of its patronage could be tracked across four generations. But by then, Herman lamented, “the middle-aged, middle-income family today is so strapped paying off a home mortgage, taxes, and charge card bills, not to mention keeping the lights turned on, that there is little left over for high-quality clothes.” That year, after forty-seven years, the downtown store closed, leaving only the Lakewood location and the memories of the brothers’ combined adulthoods—111 years—of minding the store. That two of Sheldon’s three sons, Robert and Richard, were poised and ready to run Rosenblum’s Clothiers,³⁴ however, suggests that Eli Evans’s crisp generalization was never intended to have universal applicability. “This is in our blood,” Robert asserted. Richard did acknowledge, however, that an independent specialty store “is an anachronism, much less a family business.” However long the odds of survival the brothers dared to open a second store on Jacksonville Beach in 2003.³⁵

The experience of the first generation of another family in the clothing business belongs in a recent book by a Soviet-born anthropologist. According to Professor Yuri Slezkine of the University of California at Berkeley, the proclivity for trade is not distinctively Jewish. Such habits are shared with other “service nomads.” The overseas Chinese and the overseas Lebanese, the Parsis, the Jains, and the Armenians have also lived in diasporas on several continents, and have figured out “how to cultivate people and symbols, not fields or herds.” Slezkine has discerned in the adaptable, flexible, transactional status of such groups an overwhelming preference for family enterprises, and a capacity to provide financial and mercantile services for the surrounding rural population. One monograph on immigrants to Jacksonville early in the twentieth century illustrates Slezkine’s generalization. Both the 1910 U.S. census and the 1920 city directory showed that

Romanian Jewish immigrants were so concentrated in small businesses that none worked as laborers or domestics, and even salesmen and clerks were employed either by relatives or by other Jewish tradesmen.³⁶ Slezkine's "service nomadism," adept at negotiating exchanges among strangers, also collides rather directly with the rootedness in which white southerners have been invested. The Jews who inevitably came from elsewhere were more likely to pick up stakes than their gentile neighbors.

Nomadism does characterize the early life of Salim Mizrahi. He was born in 1874 under the Ottomans, in Tripoli, Lebanon, the son of a physician. His mother tongue was Arabic, and he entered the clothing business in Smyrna, Turkey, where he met his wife. In 1901, fearing a rise in antisemitism, the couple and their daughters, Rachel and Rebecca, reached New York, where Salim became a peddler of fine laces. Three more children were born there and in Atlantic City. In 1911 the Mizrahis moved to Jacksonville where their youngest child, Joseph, was born, and where the first French Novelty shop opened that year at 325 Laura Street. The store's ready-to-wear clothes, the fabrics, the handmade blouses, and the linens were all imported from francophone Europe: France, Belgium, and Switzerland. By the mid-1920s, when the French Novelty Shop was relocated to West Adams Street, the Mizrahis had earned a reputation for excellent children's wear and for fine linens. Rachel and Rebecca worked in the store. Salim retired in 1942. Ralph joined the firm four years later and became chairman of S. Mizrahi Sons. Joseph joined in 1952; and when an Ashkenazi outsider, Raymond Winterfield, came on board to run a ladies' sportswear store, it was named "Fields." A third generation arrived in the form of Ralph and Evelyn Mizrahi's son Charles.

To survive, the company had to move to the suburbs. Fields became Strawberry Fields in 1978. Its head was Jack Mizrahi, the son of Joseph and Dorothy, who became a buyer for French Novelty Country Shops. Many of the employees have been Arab-Americans, a hiring practice that amplifies the "service nomadism" of S. Mizrahi Sons, Inc. Its officers are Ralph S. Mizrahi, chairman; Charles Mizrahi, president; Jack Mizrahi, vice president; Joseph Mizrahi, secretary-treasurer. It is as though all hands

*Estrea and Salim Mizrahi,
c. 1911.*

*(From the Collection of the
Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo
Zerivitz, Founding
Executive Director.)*

were still needed on deck. Both Ralph and his son Charles have held the presidency of the Jacksonville Jewish Center, a Conservative synagogue. By 1981 the annual estimated sales had risen to over \$5 million in volume, from French Novelty Country Shops (twelve stores) and Strawberry Fields (eighteen stores).³⁷ Rooted in Jacksonville, the family was no longer nomadic. Its cohesiveness so integral to success was reflected in Ralph's insistence: "We didn't want to be 'and Sons.' We are the 'S. Mizrahi Sons.'" That raises the question: what about the daughters of S. Mizrahi and other entrepreneurs? Whether due to prejudice or to inclination, to unquestioned barriers, or to personal demeanor, women seemed to assert very little direct or formal impact upon commerce, though they loomed far larger in the community. Ralph Mizrahi's wife Evelyn, for instance, joined the board of the auxiliary of River

Garden Hebrew Home for the Aged when it opened in Riverside in 1946, and remained an active member half a century later.³⁸



Salim Mizrahi inside his store, 1919.

(Courtesy Hazel Mack, Archivist, Congregation Ahavath Chesed.)

The career of Ben Friedman could exemplify a dictum in one of the very few books explicitly devoted to the business acumen of this model minority. "It was the Jewish acceptance of risk," Gerald Krefetz has written, "that enabled them not only to succeed but to thrive." Born in Chicago in 1914, Friedman began his retailing career at Lerner Shops and then Mangel's, a women's ready-to-wear chain that in 1949 sent him to open a store in Jacksonville. His assignment hardly made the newcomer freakish. According to a community survey conducted in the immediate postwar era, retail trade employed half of Jacksonville's Jews. (Another 13 percent could be found in wholesale trade, 10 percent in the professions, and 3 percent in finance.) Only a year after Friedman had arrived in Jacksonville, he and his wife Lillian decided to strike out on

their own, thereby applying Krefetz's generalization. The Friedmans poured \$2,800 of their savings into a Vogue Shop on Edgewood Avenue. Exactly four decades later it was fair to conclude that the gamble had paid off. Vogue Shops had become the largest privately owned apparel company in the state of Florida, with over a hundred stores in the Southeast. In the 1970s the Friedmans also inaugurated a chain of stores aimed at younger women: the Body Shops of America (not to be confused with The Body Shop International). Friedman might be considered a kind of successor to Dzialynski, who had served as a governor of what became the Chamber of Commerce. Friedman served on the board of governors of the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce. Dzialynski had served as founding president of Congregation Ahavath Chesed. Friedman served as founding president of the city's second Conservative synagogue, Beth Shalom Congregation, in the Mandarin section. He died in 2002.³⁹

A final example of such success also has its origins elsewhere. Sam Stein, who arrived at Ellis Island in 1905 with forty-three dollars, began his business career in America as a peddler. That sum does not seem like much. But it made him, if one government report can be believed, about five times wealthier than the average newcomer from the Old World *shtetlach* of a century ago.⁴⁰ By comparison to that average, Stein could almost be ranked as a venture capitalist. Starting out in Greenville, Mississippi, Stein wandered through the Delta selling jewelry and, once, getting robbed and shot. (The risks were not only financial.) But he made his base in Greenville, reputed to be the most tolerant of the towns of the Delta, dubbed "the most Southern place on earth." He married another Jewish immigrant. But he died suddenly in 1933, as the Great Depression wrought havoc with the prospect of financial security that had propelled Sam Stein a third of a century earlier from Lithuania.

His son Jake nevertheless converted the store, named Sam Stein's and then Stein's Self Service Store, and finally Stein Mart, into the biggest emporium in the Delta. Covering an entire city block, the store promised mouth-watering discounts on discards from chic Manhattan operations like Saks Fifth Avenue.⁴¹

Formerly a star tackle on the high school football team, Jake Stein became the very archetype of the booster, heading the Chamber of Commerce, serving as a city councilman, and presiding over the Hebrew Union Temple. Seven days a week he could usually be found in the store, a place that he evidently preferred to home in the company of his wife, the former Freda Grundfest, and one son, whose maturation was marked by considerable filial conflict.⁴² American men are apt to join just about everything but their own families, Will Rogers once remarked. For the Steins, the consequences might have been predictable, if the axiom that Eli Evans had famously formulated held true.

But this story had a twist. Born in 1945, Jay Stein not only exhibited a flair for retailing but also an ambition far vaster than the boundaries of the Greenville where he was born and raised. He devoted himself to expanding the mercantile enterprise that his grandfather began. Defying Eli Evans's generalization about the conflict of generations, Jay Stein made Stein Mart into a powerhouse of upscale clothing and other items that were generally found in department stores but were offered at prices common to discount houses. The growth of Stein Mart was spectacular, especially after Stein moved corporate headquarters to Jacksonville in 1984. He had graduated from Bolles, then a Jacksonville military school, in 1963; but the corporate decision to switch from Greenville to Jacksonville was hardly swathed in sentimentality. Air transportation, economic promise, and educational facilities were superior to Mississippi, even if Jacksonville was located far to the east of the Stein Mart stores that were clustered in the Delta and immediate vicinity. But Stein was also determined to expand the company that his grandfather and father had built. Sometimes a new store opened in some community (usually but not always in the South) every three weeks. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, Stein Mart was racking up \$1.2 billion in net sales, overwhelmingly in clothing and accessories, earned in 260 stores. Its historian concluded that "the company had positioned itself as a distinctive off-price retailer," offering high-quality merchandise. "But, when compared to department stores," Stein Mart "sold this merchandise at prices 20 to 60 percent lower." One of the

company advertising slogans was therefore especially enticing: "You could pay more. But you'll have to go somewhere else." By 2001 business was reassuring enough for Stein, while continuing to serve as chairman of the board, to transfer the CEO position to his closest associate, who became the first head of Stein Mart who was not a Stein.⁴³

The saga of this company is therefore in part a local story, as Stein and his company take their place in the line that started in Jacksonville a century earlier. Stein Mart is also a regional story, reflecting the considerable impact of Jewish merchandising in the South, and is in part proof of the economist Joseph Schumpeter's theory of the gales of destructive creativity that punctuate the capitalist system and keep it vibrant and renewed (and volatile). Such a system does not allow any city to be insulated for long from the rest of the state, region, or country. One other paradigm should be underscored as well. Central European Jews built Cohen Brothers and Furchgott's; Sephardim ran French Novelty; and descendants of eastern European Jews were responsible for the Vogue Shops and Stein Mart. The vocational pattern therefore helps confirm the generalization of the social historian Lee Shai Weissbach that, even when the influx of Russian and Polish and Romanian Jewish immigrants dwarfed the small communities that German Jews had established, "the basic Jewish occupational structure . . . did not change appreciably." From the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries "a certain constancy" in economic choices that Weissbach discerned in small-town Jewry was true of Jacksonville as well.⁴⁴

Mobility: Upward and Outward

That 1910 editorial in the *Florida Times-Union*, which acknowledged the Jew's adroitness in finance but insisted that "he does not shine as builder," had not envisioned Lonnie Wurn. Wurn was born in 1911 in Lvov, Poland, a city that had been called Lemberg when it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. (Lvov is now part of the western Ukraine.) In 1921 his parents brought him to Jacksonville, when the family name was Wurm. Adolph Wurm's wife, the former Clara Morgenstern, had

a brother, Isaac Morgenstern, who had already relocated to Jacksonville. Morgenstern bought a wooden shack for the Wurms in Riverside on St. Johns Avenue that they operated as a modest grocery store. The customers were mostly black. If the prototypical politician of the nineteenth century was born in a log cabin, the upwardly mobile Jewish businessman often started out above the store where the family lived. Working hours were harsh. The store stayed open for business from seven in the morning until eleven at night, seven days a week. For a decade Adolph and his wife Clara could neither take a vacation nor send their son to summer camp, but they saved enough to purchase a horse and wagon for deliveries.⁴⁵

Lonnie Wurn.

(Courtesy Hazel Mack, Archivist, Congregation Ahavath Chesed.)

Because they eventually managed to succeed in business while really trying, the family validated the theory of Max Weber that capitalist accumulation requires “worldly asceticism.” Duty trumped desire. The Wurms also verified the claim of Sol Nazerman, the Holocaust survivor and protagonist of *The Pawnbroker*, that the secret of Jewish wealth consisted of deferring gratification. “You obtain a small piece of cloth—wool, silk, cotton—it doesn’t matter,” Nazerman explains. “You take this cloth and you cut it in two and sell the two pieces for a penny or two more than you paid for the one. With this money then you buy a slightly larger piece of cloth,” he tells his young Puerto Rican assistant. But “you must never succumb” to luxury, never be distracted from the duty of self-abnegation, and never stray from the compulsion to buy more and more cloth, all for the sake of *parnossah*. And then, after many centuries, “you have a mercantile heritage” and a reputation for “secret resources” that happen to arouse envy and hostility.⁴⁶

In 1932 the Wurms’ son Lonnie became salutatorian of his graduating class at Lee High School, and then raced through his courses at the University of Florida in Gainesville to earn a law degree only four years later. In the mid-1930s, when the devastation of the Great Depression spared few families, less than 150 Jews could be found in the student body at the University of Florida. (Six decades later Gainesville had 5,500 Jewish undergraduates, a larger number than any other institution of higher learning in the nation.)⁴⁷ Marriage to Emily Bloom brought financial consequences. The groom’s new father-in-law, Herman Bloom, was the half-brother of Hannah Setzer, the wife of Ben Setzer. For half a century, Lonnie Wurn (who changed his surname in 1945 because of the taunts to which his elder daughter Jackie was subjected in school) served as the Setzers’ lawyer. He figured out, by setting up fifteen different trusts for members of the family, that Ben Setzer, who had built up a chain of grocery stores bearing the family name, could legally avoid paying millions of dollars in income and estate taxes. One reward for shielding Ben Setzer’s income was that his attorney had earned enough by the end of the 1940s to get into the home construction

business, joining his father and his brother-in-law, Harold Bloom. Building thousands of homes, they helped develop Jacksonville's Southside in particular, where Jewish newcomers and especially wealthier Jews tended to live in neighborhoods like Granada, South Granada, and Old Grove Manor. Wurn's autobiography claims that he was the first developer in northeast Florida to subdivide estates in a way that included such amenities as playgrounds, recreation buildings, and swimming pools.⁴⁸ Think of his legacy as an update of the biblical praise in Numbers 24:5: "How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel."

The suburbanization that eventually led to consolidation, the expansion that made Jacksonville bigger (at least in geography) than Atlanta or Boston, were due to the construction of single dwellings on previously empty land. In creating subdivisions, Wurn built as though there were no limits to the conquest of nature. But he was hardly alone, especially in the development of Arlington and Southside. The authoritative history of consolidation mentions two Jacksonville developers in particular. Martin Stein "began building a major regional enclosed shopping center at Regency Square," completed in 1967; and, also on the Southside, Ira Koger built Boulevard Center, which "became one of the first suburban office parks in the nation. As a result, suburban homeowners began to shift their working and shopping patterns to nearby malls and office parks at the expense of downtown."⁴⁹ Such growth is hardly without its downside, however, because the overdevelopment of the state of Florida has now become a cliché of social criticism, as the remorseless pressure of a growing population on resources harms the quality of life for residents, snowbirds, and tourists alike. Rarely have the higher living standards that suburbanization entailed produced such ambiguous consequences.

As Wurn himself grew wealthier, he built adjoining houses for his parents and immediate family. In 1987 he and his wife moved to Epping Forest, the former estate of the duPonts, the family that had been entrenched at what was undoubtedly the social and economic pinnacle of the city. An agnostic who

nevertheless funded the library (dedicated in 1981) of Congregation Ahavath Chesed,⁵⁰ he found his chief recreational pleasure in his later years in his yachts, the sixty-foot *Emilon* and the forty-three-foot *Mishigas*, on which he and Emily Wurn enjoyed taking guests sailing up and down the St. Johns River. As they did so, he might well have contemplated the fate that brought him as a ten-year-old to Jacksonville (or so the historian might be permitted to speculate). Wurn's autobiography does not formally contrast the Polish city, located on the Poltva River, which he left behind, with the Jacksonville that he helped to shape. Nor does he explicitly imagine how different his fate might have been. But to consider what would have happened to him is not difficult. The year that his family arrived at Ellis Island, the U.S. Congress first imposed immigration restrictions on eastern and southern Europeans. After that year the opportunities to emigrate from Lvov were far narrower. Two decades later, nine out of every ten Jews trapped in German-occupied Poland would be murdered.

In spurring the spectacular growth of the city, Wurn was a decisive figure. He therefore invites a comparison to Atlanta's master builder, Ben Massell. Like Wurn, Massell had been born abroad (although in Lithuania rather than Hapsburg Poland), and arrived in the United States as a child. Each family owned a grocery store that served a largely black clientele. Massell, however, built downtown, about a thousand buildings in all. There were so many, in fact, that in 1961 the booster Ivan Allen, Sr., a former president of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, proclaimed that General "Sherman burned Atlanta, and Ben Massell built it back."⁵¹ Suburbanization is integral to the enormous growth of Atlanta. Yet its dazzling downtown flourished. It became a regional capital and even an international mecca, while Jacksonville's sluggish center failed to keep pace.

Lonnie Wurn practiced law for fifty-two years and died in 2008. His most important client had been born in the *shtetl* of Pusalotes, before Lithuania had achieved its independence. (Over 90 percent of Lithuanian Jewry perished under the Nazis.) Because an older brother of Ben Setzer, Abraham Setzer, had earlier moved to Jacksonville, other members of the family settled in the

city during the era of the Great War. Ben Setzer arrived in 1914, and started out in the ice business on Eighth Street. He then opened his first grocery store on Fifth and Silver streets in 1925. Over a span of nearly four decades, he opened a chain of thirty-eight supermarkets from Jacksonville to central Florida; and Setzer had become a multimillionaire.⁵² In 1958 he sold the business to Food Fair. At the closing negotiations, at least according to apocrypha, Setzer asked all the lawyers present whether the entire contractual arrangements had been properly signed and finalized. Assured that the sale had been correctly completed, he then asked the representatives from Food Fair whether they happened also to be interested in buying the adjacent parking lots. The story may be a little too good to be true,⁵³ but it underscores a reputation for canniness.

Benjamin Setzer, c. 1930.

*(From the Collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo Zerivitz, Founding Executive Director.)*

With three partners, including his son Sidney, Setzer could concentrate on putting into practice the concept of the self-service discount store. "Stack It High and Sell It Cheap" was the motto of the business formed in 1955, Pic N' Save. Its appeal was not to the *feinshmeckers* (as the Lower East Siders would have referred to aesthetes with pretensions to refinement), but instead to satisfy the masses, without the cachet of glamour. Pic N' Save opened its first store in the Arlington section of Jacksonville in 1955. Within three decades Setzer and his partners built twenty-five discount stores, each of which generally occupied 40,000 to 55,000 square feet. So popular did they become and so accessible were their locations, that, according to a 1985 survey (the methodology of which cannot be verified), six out of ten of the city's residents claimed to have shopped at a Pic N' Save in the previous thirty days. At its peak it employed five thousand workers and executives. A "tough businessman," according to the son of one of the partners, Setzer became a multimillionaire all over again. Unwilling to leave well enough alone, he bought out two partners. He also replaced his older son Sidney with younger son Leonard, a Wharton School graduate who later became president of the city's Jewish Community Alliance. The Setzer family was fated to discover, however, the melancholy lesson that, in achieving business success, you only live twice.

At first nothing seemed likely to decelerate the momentum with which Pic N' Save lured customers. Any serious rival would have to be merciless in the precision of its discount pricing, demanding in the cost-shaving that it expected of its suppliers, and eager to crush any signs of a unionization that might raise the wages of employees. Unfortunately for Setzer's ambitious legacy, such a company emerged from Bentonville, Arkansas, and would become the 800-pound gorilla of retailing of the entire planet. By 1991, when Wal-Mart generated \$32.6 billion in sales, some Pic N' Save stores had begun to lose money, and four years later the company declared bankruptcy. With professional liquidators hired to dismember the company, what Setzer had so cannily and so relentlessly built formally went under in 1996. But to crush it took the bring-it-on competitive drive and the disciplined power

of the biggest company in sales in the United States. In destroying Pic N' Save, Wal-Mart admittedly got an assist from the likes of Kmart, Target, Circuit City, and Toys R Us. But the victory really belonged to the company that became the largest grocer, the largest toy seller, the largest furniture retailer, and the largest private employer in the nation, and finally the largest retailer in the world. A pillar of the Jacksonville Jewish Center, Setzer is not buried in a pauper's grave; and his family, although ripped apart by dissension and lawsuits,⁵⁴ ended up, with a farsighted legal assist from Lonnie Wurn, far more comfortably than when the first grocery store opened.

Antisemitism did not evidently impede the Jewish retailers who made their fortunes in Jacksonville. Here, too, the city cannot be differentiated from the rest of the South, where judeophobia has historically been too mild to exert significant or damaging impact. Nevertheless attitudes have occasionally bubbled up that played into discomfiting, negative stereotypes. In 1977 the Reverend Jerry Falwell, for example, told his followers in Richmond that some folks don't like Jews because they "can make more money accidentally than you can on purpose." (Falwell later claimed to have merely uttered a "jest," though he was not noted for a robust sense of humor.) Tammy Faye Messner, the former wife of Jim Bakker, the televangelist who founded the PTL ministry and Heritage USA, a Christian theme park in South Carolina, has said of him: "As far back as I can remember . . . he's been really great with money. I think that's the Jewish part of Jim. . . . His grandmother was a German Jew," she explained of Bakker, who was imprisoned for fraud. What is impalpable, elusive, even mysterious about the Jewish accumulation of wealth can be a stimulus to wonder, fantasy, prejudice, and resentment. Shylock knows that "our sacred nation" is hated for the ascetic purposefulness that he himself lives by, for "my bargains, and my well-won thrift" (*The Merchant of Venice*, I.3). In the United States a little more than a century ago, the Populist animus against the financial manipulators operating in distant cities was tintured with a rhetorical, although not programmatic, antisemitism.⁵⁵

Christianity itself may well have reinforced such resentment against the wealthy. The poor are blessed, according to the Sermon on the Mount; and insofar as religion transmitted such attitudes to many of Jacksonville's residents, a certain moral obloquy may have been attached to those who enjoyed the fruits of competitive capitalism and an open society. Though some mixture of envy and animus must have been brewing in the collective unconscious of the city, very little evidence has surfaced that antisemitism was ever made explicit or took the form of discrimination in Jacksonville. For most of its history, the Jews rarely sought to breach the social chasms that subtly separated this minority from its neighbors, especially after working hours. The result was a *modus vivendi* that seemed both a matter of choice and a source of satisfaction.

The Value of Education

One Jewish businessman who recorded reflections on the subject of judeophobia was Alexander Brest, who was born in 1894 in Boston to poor immigrant parents who had fled from what became Poland. Brest put himself through the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on scholarships and part-time jobs, and graduated from MIT with a degree in civil engineering in 1916. Two years later during World War I, Brest was stationed in Jacksonville, an experience that left him "with sand in my shoes."⁵⁶ He remained there, and in 1924 formed the Duval Engineering and Contracting Company. The capitalization of \$5,000 came from Brest's savings, the result of having taught civil engineering at the University of Florida. But he doubted that, as "a damn Yankee in Florida, and a Jew to boot," he could be the face of the company in impression management, in glad-handing officials, and in securing contracts. So an affable native Floridian, a former student of Brest's in Gainesville named George Hodges, agreed to help Brest launch Duval Engineering. Hodges became its president in a fifty-fifty partnership. During an era of tremendous growth, the company flourished.

Jacksonville was definitely situated in cracker country. But there is no historical spoor to track bigotry against Jews; and, near

the end of his life, Brest insisted: "I have never experienced anti-semitism." He did admit, however, to reluctance to test too severely the forbearance of his neighbors. So he made a habit of avoiding the possibility of friction: "I have never sought memberships in organizations or groups that restricted entry. I simply stayed away from those people or clubs once I realized that they did not welcome Jews."⁵⁷ Halle Cohen of Cohen Brothers could not escape the dilemma, however, when the otherwise restricted Ponte Vedra Country Club invited him to become the token Jewish member. He refused.⁵⁸ The situation was at least ambiguous. The Jacksonville Social Register did include some of the Jewish families like the Cohens and Furchgotts who were the earliest to reach Jacksonville and who managed to become prosperous. The sources of wealth did not even have to be prestigious. Brothers Isador and Hugo Grunthal operated a wholesale grocery business, for example, and were not "very satisfactory in their payments." In 1876 R. G. Dun & Company "advise[d] some caution in extending credit in large amounts." But Isador had at least one redeeming virtue. A Johnny Reb, he had fought under Stonewall Jackson and P. G. T. Beauregard. In Jacksonville that Civil War service gave him the pedigree that Jews call *yichus*. Isador's granddaughter, Myra Grunthal Glickstein, recalled that "Jewish families were as prominent socially in Jacksonville as Gentiles," which is surely a bit of a stretch. One of her sons, attorney and judge Hugh S. Glickstein, left Jacksonville permanently and later claimed that the antisemitism, plus the racism, that pervaded the city helped push him away.⁵⁹

Not even the most snobbish of social clubs could impose any restrictions upon highway construction, however; and as Jacksonville expanded (and took its chances with the objections of old-timers to sprawl), Duval Engineering thrived. Before it was sold after four decades under Brest and Hodges, the company had built more than two thousand miles of roads and streets, including much of the city's expressway system, and paved Cecil Field. Brest also helped build the Jacksonville Naval Air Station, as did another construction firm under Jewish management, the S. S. Jacobs Company. Further south, Duval Engineering paved the first

road into Cape Canaveral (later Cape Kennedy), and constructed the first missile-launching platform there.

Civil engineering did not exhaust Brest's knack for seizing economic opportunities. Indeed he exhibited an intuitive gift, a nimble and instinctive flair for business. He invested heavily in real estate, for example. An ardent believer in growth, Brest had the sort of foresight that enabled him to snap up empty land east of Jacksonville toward the beach at forty dollars an acre, and then later sell the land for thousands of dollars an acre. He appears to have been equally shrewd in the stock market. A connection with Miami's Mitchell Wolfson also proved helpful. With his brother-in-law Sidney Meyer, Wolfson had founded Wometco, a chain of movie theaters, in 1925, and after World War II created the first television station in Florida, Miami's WTVJ (Channel 4). In 1957 Brest became a founder of the second television station in Jacksonville. When few such stations were in operation, they tended to dominate local markets, which meant that the acquisition of a television license was like a license to print money. But even as an owner of WTLV (Channel 12), Brest could appreciate the value of public television, and thus helped put WJCT (Channel 7) on the air by donating the funds for the tower space, equipment, and other facilities.⁶⁰

In 1939, at the age of forty-five, he had married a Viennese refugee, Mia Helen Deutsch. Her parents managed to get out of Austria as well and joined the couple at their home on River Road in San Marco. Rather than get sand in her shoes, however, Mia Brest wanted to live in a more cosmopolitan city than Jacksonville, and the couple divorced in 1957. Their two sons mostly grew up with their mother in New York City. Paul and Peter Brest often visited their father in Jacksonville and as teenagers traveled with him overseas during the summers. Each sought to carve out distinctive careers rather than becoming engineers. Paul graduated from Harvard Law School, clerked for U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan, and eventually became the dean of Stanford Law School. Peter elected social work and rose to become the associate commissioner of New York City's Department of Social Services.⁶¹

With no particular need to pass his business interests to his sons, and with a dedication to the importance of charity that Brest claimed to have learned from his pious mother,⁶² he redefined himself as a philanthropist who intended to exert a major impact on the city. For example, he gave three-quarters of a million dollars to establish the Museum of Science and History and a planetarium. He donated 1,200 acres of wetlands, near Fort George Island, to create the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve. Another \$2.8 million went toward expansion of the Metropolitan Park. Unacknowledged in the public tributes to him when he turned one hundred, or in the obituaries the following year, was the private help that Brest also provided. During the 1930s, for instance, Rabbi Israel Kaplan of Congregation Ahavath Chesed had asked Brest to sponsor a Jewish family desperate to flee the Third Reich. Brest agreed to accept financial responsibility for one family he did not know and eventually signed more than fifty such affidavits. Such gestures make even an exalted term like *mitzvot* seem inadequate. To deal with the mounting humanitarian crisis that the Third Reich fomented in the 1930s, he became president of the Jewish Community Council, forerunner of the Jacksonville Jewish Federation.⁶³

His favorite was Jacksonville University (JU), an institution lacking academic distinction but which Brest, who died in 1994, undoubtedly helped make less mediocre. The systemic challenge that JU faced was the caliber of public education in Duval County. In the early 1960s, for example, it ranked last among the sixty-seven counties in the state in per pupil spending. Duval County had become the fifteenth largest school system in the United States; but even when included among the twenty biggest, the ranking was still last in per pupil funding. Of Florida's ten largest counties, Duval also ranked lowest in teachers' salaries. Yet it was hardly poor. In the early 1960s, Duval ranked third in per capita and median family income in Florida. The state imposed no income tax, and yet the boom years in construction did not seem to generate the revenue from property taxes that could have boosted public education. In fairness to Duval County, it has not exactly been an aberration. By the twenty-first century, no state – not even

Mississippi or Arkansas—had worse high school graduation rates than Florida. In the early 1960s, so indifferent were Jacksonville's taxpayers to the value of public education that the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools discredited all fifteen public high schools in Duval County.⁶⁴

One privately-funded program offered a partial solution in encouraging promising high school students to attend college. A president of Congregation Ahavath Chesed, Philip N. Coleman came to the rescue of such pupils, though he himself had never graduated from high school. Born in Savannah in 1882, he had used sixty dollars that his mother had given him to take a bookkeeping course, which constituted the end of his formal education. After moving to Jacksonville, Coleman made a fortune in the lumber industry, primarily through the American Cross-Arm Company, which supplied telephone poles. However business success came at a certain price. Two years before his death in 1972, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) would be formed, and would discover that toxins from the Coleman-Evans wood preserving process had seeped into the soil at Whitehouse, ten miles west of Jacksonville. For three decades, beginning in 1954, the company had been contaminating the soil with pentachlorophenol (PCP) and dioxin, which the EPA had to clean up as a Superfund site during the twenty-first century. Coleman was associated with several major philanthropic enterprises, including the River Garden Hebrew Home, and served on the national board of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now called the Union for Reform Judaism). But his most imaginative project was the Dollars for Scholars program, which Coleman initiated in 1962 and chaired. He also provided most of its funding in its early stages. About four hundred graduating high school seniors eventually benefited from this program, which began just as the entire Duval County public school system was being discredited. Such graduates could thereby seize opportunities for higher education.⁶⁵

They did not have to attend JU (to which Coleman also significantly contributed). But those who did matriculate there stepped onto a campus that Brest did more than anyone else to

transform. He served as a trustee beginning in 1953 and eventually lavished an estimated \$6 million on the campus. It is dotted, for example, with the Alexander Brest Museum and Gallery, a dormitory, and athletic fields, plus unglamorous drainage projects made possible by his generosity. The ideal of *tzedakah* that he claimed to have picked up from his mother had not exactly been abandoned. With his almost feral drive and his boundless optimism, the 5' 4" Brest seemed to incarnate the expansionary energy of his adopted city. The combination of attributes that he exhibited—technical skill as an engineer, acumen as a businessman, and a desire to redistribute much of the wealth that he had acquired—inspired a full-page headline on the front page of the morning daily newspaper when he turned 100: “‘This city will never see another’ like Alexander Brest.”⁶⁶ That headline could have been his epitaph as well.

The chances of a sequel would have been considered very long. But strangely enough Jerry Zucker managed to beat those odds. Born in Tel Aviv in 1949, he came to Charleston with his parents and brother three years later. His father, Leon Zucker, was a rabbi who had survived the Holocaust. The family soon moved to Jacksonville, where the rabbi and his wife, Zipora Zucker, taught in the Hebrew school of the Conservative synagogue and instructed, among others, a multitude of Mizrahis. Growing up in Jacksonville, Jerry Zucker met Anita Goldberg, a native of the city. They became sweethearts at Terry Parker High School and married in 1970. She emulated her mother-in-law by becoming a teacher of young children. While still at Terry Parker High School, Zucker became an inventor, coming up with a push-button telephone at the age of seventeen. His high school science project was “A Revolutionary Phase Factor for Colinear Electromagnetic Waves.”⁶⁷ Zucker also developed a special interest in pacemakers and surgical tools. At the University of Florida he accomplished the feat of pursuing three majors (chemistry, physics, and mathematics), and then earned a master’s degree in electrical engineering from Florida State University in Tallahassee.

Eventually he obtained more than 350 patents for his inventions. A sister, Rochelle Marcus, recalled: “If Jerry dreamed it, he

could design it. If he could design it, he could produce it.”⁶⁸ Like Brest, Zucker showed a remarkable deftness in business as well. In 1983 he founded the InterTech Group, a conglomerate that makes plastics and fabrics that are operable in the minus-200-degree world of cryogenics. InterTech Group is one of the largest privately-held American businesses. Zucker capped his career by purchasing Canada’s largest retailer, the Hudson’s Bay Company. Founded in 1670, Hudson’s Bay Company was the oldest commercial corporation on the North American continent. Like a magnetic needle that could not be dislodged from an inevitable spot on the dial, a southern Jewish magnate had aptly found recourse in retailing. By 2008, when *Forbes* magazine estimated Zucker’s net worth at \$1.2 billion, he had become just about as wealthy as a brace of Bronfmans, or maybe even a pair of Pritzkers. As a philanthropist Zucker donated millions of dollars to assorted charities before he succumbed to cancer at the age of fifty-eight. Hudson’s Bay Company announced that his widow would succeed her husband as its chief executive (or “governor”), the first woman to hold that position. Anita Zucker also took over as chairperson and chief executive officer of the InterTech Group.⁶⁹

Zucker’s death in 2008 was “heart-breaking . . . for our community,” Mayor Joe Riley announced.⁷⁰ But Riley served Charleston, South Carolina; and the community to which he referred was not Jacksonville. After earning his master’s degree in Tallahassee, Zucker had gone to work for a pulp and paper company in Palatka, Florida. He never returned to live in Jacksonville, the city that had shaped him. The synagogue he later served as president was in Charleston. Therefore Zucker’s brilliant career in science, business, and philanthropy is only partly a Jacksonville story.

The Advantages of Opportunity

Ben Stein, who was born in 1898, was no relation to the merchandising magnate Jay Stein. But to triumph in business in Jacksonville, such a surname evidently helps. Ben Stein’s career cannot be separated from the interplay of broad historical forces

of which he took shrewd advantage. During Prohibition, some Jews managed to make money legally. The most famous example was Samuel Bronfman, the immigrant distiller who, as a Canadian, did not have to obey the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. His Seagram distributors broke no Canadian export laws in carrying the liquor right to the U.S. line. What happened after that failed to arouse his curiosity. A deadpan Bronfman recalled: "I never went on the other side of the border to count the empty Seagrams bottles." Although Lonnie Wurn's parents did a brisk business selling feed to farmers, in the 1920s some of the most eager customers bought one-hundred pound bags of sugar. These bootleggers needed the sugar as an ingredient in moonshine. When Prohibition ended in 1933, Ben Stein got a liquor distributorship for northeast Florida. He figured that Duval County would not want to be the exception to all the gin joints in the country that were suddenly entitled to operate legally. Indeed, until passage of the ill-fated Eighteenth Amendment, Duval County had been one of only two counties in Florida to be wet.⁷¹

The popularity of alcoholic beverages might well be considered a constant that could guarantee a steady income, although several of the Protestant sects that condemned drinking as sinful might well impose a special limitation on the lucrative appeal of this business in the South (at least in theory). In the postwar era Stein seized a new and extraordinary investment opportunity resulting from an impending transformation in eating habits. "Would you like some fries with that?" would come to rank just below "How are you?" and its variations among the most frequently asked questions on the planet. Starting in the 1950s, the fast food industry became a phenomenon fueled by the bicoastal rivalry between McDonald's, which started in California, and Burger King, which started in Florida. The national passion for fast food had been demonstrated as early as the Jacksonian era when railroad personnel and passengers demanded snacks. Before the end of the nineteenth century, a European visitor commented that the national motto seemed to be: "Gobble, gulp, and go." But the true takeoff that tapped such habits began in the

immediate post-World War II era. Southern California, a notable site of the car culture, spawned not only McDonald's but also Jack in the Box, Taco Bell, and Carl's Jr. Eventually more earthlings would be able to recognize the golden arches than they could identify a symbol like the Christian cross.⁷²

*Ben Stein, 1955.
(From the Collection of the
Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo
Zerivitz, Founding Execu-
tive Director.)*

Incorporated in 1954, Burger King of Miami eliminated the carhops of the drive-ins. Self-service would reduce the overhead, and, for the sake of speed, the menu would be extremely limited. Hamburgers cost eighteen cents as did milk shakes. French fries cost ten cents as did a few soft drinks. Hungry Floridians who wanted a more varied cuisine had to dine elsewhere. A founder of Burger King attributes the brilliant idea of fast-food (eureka!) to a drive-in on Beach Boulevard in Jacksonville Beach in 1953. As part of his investment portfolio, Ben Stein provided loans to some Burger King restaurants. They did so poorly (bad locations, bad management) that he realized that the debts could not be repaid.

In an effort to protect his investment, he assumed control of the Duval County operations of Burger King, which placed him in contact with the headquarters in Miami. "We discovered that it was a pleasure to do business with Ben Stein," James McLamore, a company founder (along with David Edgerton), recalled. "He was a very astute businessman, and I always found him to be fair-minded and straightforward with us. Ben's problem was that he had taken over a restaurant business that he knew very little about." The South Florida franchises were booming while the Jacksonville operations performed poorly.⁷³

Whether Stein simply gave Burger King too low a priority among his businesses, which were the Southern Industrial Corporation and the Property Corporation, or whether the presidency of Congregation Ahavath Chesed, in the 1950s, which had grown to 450 families, distracted him, the historical record does not disclose. But whatever his indifference to the logistical complexities of grilling hamburgers for increasingly eager and impatient customers, he had paid sufficient attention to this segment of his investments to do something canny. The Jacksonville-based Burger King of Florida, Inc., appropriated and registered two trade names—Whopper and Home of the Whopper—in Washington. Stein did not bother to tell the Miami office, which was focusing on making the business grow in south Florida, and which by the end of the 1950s was turning a hefty profit. Stein continued to face difficulties in selling franchises because the restaurants in north Florida seemed so badly run.⁷⁴

But south Florida was hustling, so much so, in fact, that by 1958 Burger King of Miami, Inc., felt poised to challenge the biggest restaurant chain in the Southeast, Royal Castle, which William D. Singer had founded exactly two decades earlier in Miami, and which operated as far away as Louisiana.⁷⁵ (Singer had also parlayed the popularity of five-cent hamburgers into a political career, especially in an effort to expand the state's highway system. He served as president of Temple Israel of Miami as well. His son-in-law, Richard B. Stone, would become the second Jew, after David Levy Yulee, to represent Florida in the U.S. Senate.)⁷⁶ The corporate campaign to take on Singer's Royal Castle was

planned with the moxie and precision that military historians invoke in describing, say, Napoleon's battles against the German states in 1805 to 1806. In this particular food fight, Burger King triumphed. It was adept at figuring out how to benefit from the growth of suburbs, from the increasing dependence upon the automobile, and from the rising number of working mothers who could no longer provide home-cooked meals for their families every night.

Within the ranks of Burger King itself, however, Stein remained an impediment. Without an intimate knowledge of the business, or even an intense personal interest in it, he could not seem to promote or encourage franchises in his Florida territory. But because he still held the rights to names like Burger King, Whopper, and Home of the Whopper, McLamore and his partners in Miami had no choice except to buy out Stein. In 1961 he agreed to turn over to the Miami organization the rights to the trade names, the title, and the interest in using the names, plus total interest in trademarks and service marks. According to this contract, Burger King of Miami, Inc., could exercise worldwide rights to the trade name and the trademarks. In exchange the Miami office agreed to send Stein 15 percent of all the royalties of the national operation every month, although he insisted on retaining control of Duval Country, the management of which he gave to one of his sons. David A. Stein had worked weekends flipping burgers at fifty cents an hour on Beach Boulevard and, in 1959, dropped out of the University of Florida to devote himself fulltime to Burger King. He proved, McLamore acknowledged, "to be a very effective manager Within a few years David had these restaurants operating profitably," and they became "a credit to the system."⁷⁷

His father remained a free rider. Every month, as the company grew at a rapid pace, Ben Stein was certainly crafty enough to notice that his check kept getting bigger and bigger. He was doing nothing to augment the fast-food empire or even working up a sweat. Yet his bank account burgeoned. To avoid "paying Ben Stein a king's ransom every year," McLamore concluded that he had to purchase all of the remaining trademarks and national franchising rights that Stein still owned and end the 15 percent

monthly royalties arrangement. "We had to pay his price, whatever it was." The price turned out to be over \$2.5 million in a deal concluded in 1967, little more than a decade after Stein entered the business. His son remained for four decades thereafter a major franchisee and supplier of Burger King, which he made profitable enough to enable him to become a key founder of the Jewish Community Alliance and then to pledge the largest gift ever made to Florida Community College at Jacksonville.⁷⁸ Ben Stein died in 1984.

Piety and Pleasure

Urban historians might devise a spectrum of American communities in terms of their susceptibility to sin. One side could be marked with Mark Twain's depiction of hedonistic, hell-raising Virginia City, Nevada: "Vice flourished luxuriantly during the hey-day of our 'flush times.' The saloons were overburdened with custom; so were the police courts, the gambling dens, the brothels and the jails." To which Twain (or rather Hal Holbrook in his impersonation of the humorist in 1959) added: "It was no place for a Presbyterian, and I did not long remain one."⁷⁹

In welcoming voluptuaries, Jacksonville certainly could not compete with Virginia City, even though the wife of the novelist Stephen Crane, Cora Taylor Crane, ran the most prominent brothel in Jacksonville. Although located in a black neighborhood, "The Court" provided white women for white male customers. Or consider a handsome volume recently sponsored by the Jacksonville Historic Landmarks Commission. On one page are drawings of demolished or destroyed buildings. Indeed, even to mention such "cherished landmarks evokes a powerful sense of loss." The page depicts not only the building that housed Congregation Ahavath Chesed on 46 West Union Street but also three bordellos on the 800-block of Houston Street. The moral climate of Jacksonville did not escape the notice of H. L. Mencken, and it is doubtful whether American journalism ever produced a greater connoisseur of sinners and hypocrites. After the great fire in 1901, his Baltimore newspaper sent him to Jacksonville to cover the relief efforts. He could see the city for himself; and in his memoirs

published in 1941, Mencken was undoubtedly amused to write that "during the next decade the population more than doubled, and today it is a metropolis comparable to Nineveh or Gomorrah in their prime, with the hottest nightclubs between Norfolk and Miami."⁸⁰

Mencken overstated his case. Had Jacksonville really resembled the biblical cities of debauchery, an unflinchingly stern deity would have guaranteed that the First Coast is toast. In fact the city has generally preferred to project piety and attract the devout rather than the dissolute. In 1956 Elvis Presley appeared for the first time on an indoor stage in Florida. A reverend from the Trinity Baptist Church prayed for the rocker's soul and condemned him publicly for having "achieved a new low in spiritual degeneracy." A local judge, Marion Gooding, had even prepared warrants for Presley's arrest, to be served if "obscenity and vulgarity [were put] in front of our children." But Presley's pelvic gyrations turned out to be not suggestive enough for Judge Gooding to conclude that the morals of minors had been impaired and the warrants were not served. Other evidence of the municipal promotion of virtue can be cited. Biblical quotations are printed on the editorial page of the *Florida Times-Union*, which has been the city's leading newspaper for over a century. Early in 2005, when Super Bowl XXXIX hit town, David Garrett, who represented the Jacksonville Baptist Association, announced that he wanted fans "to see loving people who care about their city. I want them to see Jesus." Jacksonville made such spiritual experiences easier to absorb than elsewhere, according to David Burton, the director for evangelism for the Florida Baptist Convention: "We are very blessed here, whereas you go to some other cities in the nation where maybe the Super Bowl is being played, it seems like darkness, like the evidence of Satan is heavy there."⁸¹ The not-so-veiled allusion was surely to New Orleans where nine Super Bowl contests have been played, but where sympathy for the devil is reportedly common. Indeed Jacksonville has defined itself as so God-fearing a community that seventeen pages of small print in the latest edition of the Yellow Pages are required to list all the churches.

(Those pages also include ministerial and denominational advertisements.)

But at least on the calendar, Saturday night takes precedence over Sunday morning; and entertainment and leisure have also advanced their claims in a century that the mass arts have so indelibly marked. Presley's 1956 performance was held in the Florida Theatre, which had opened in 1927. Over a million bricks had been used in its construction. Lavishly superseding the nickelodeons where movies throughout the nation had once been exhibited, the Florida Theatre was fully air-conditioned, an unusual convenience for moviegoers in that decade. The building has since become a National Register Site. The architect who co-designed the Florida Theatre was Roy A. Benjamin,⁸² whose father, Simon Benjamin, had succeeded Morris Dzialynski as one of the early presidents of Congregation Ahavath Chesed. Indeed Roy Benjamin's young grandson, Mike Rothschild, attended Presley's show at the Florida Theatre. The minister of the Trinity Baptist Church was presumably absent.

Roy Benjamin was among Jacksonville's most prolific and able architects and he specialized in movie houses. During a professional career that began around 1907 and ended with his retirement after World War II, Benjamin designed over two hundred of these pleasure palaces throughout the Southeast. In Jacksonville his Arcade Theatre, which opened in 1915 and had a seating capacity of 1,250, may have been for its time the largest cinema in the South. Patrons could enter the Arcade from two parallel streets, Adams and Forsyth; and the long rows of shops that sandwiched the box office anticipated the conversion of Americans into citizens of what the Harvard historian Lizabeth Cohen has called "a consumers' republic." In 1938, when Benjamin's San Marco Theatre opened on the Southside, the double bill cost all of thirty cents as the price of admission. This movie house remains fetching particularly for its Art Deco façade.⁸³ Indeed an authoritative history of what the French critic Georges Duhamel in 1931 called the "temple of moving images" cites the San Marco Theatre as an important instance of "the new Art Moderne aesthetic." A 2001 article in *USA Today* included this "beautifully

*Florida Theatre, 128 E. Forsyth Street, Jacksonville,
co-designed by Roy Benjamin, opened in 1927.
Restored in 1983, Florida Theatre hosts around 200 cultural events a year.
(From the Collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo Zerivitz, Founding Executive Director.)*

maintained” theater on the short list of the ten best “places to see a classic cinema” in the United States. In 1939, when the population of Jacksonville was recorded as 129,459, they could attend sixteen movie houses, including three for Negroes. Benjamin also designed several apartment buildings, most importantly the sixteen-story Park Lane Apartments, which became in 1926 the first high-rise building in Riverside and was for many years the third-tallest building in Jacksonville.⁸⁴ He thus exercised the sort of influence on the city that is reminiscent of the inscription on the

commemoration stone of Sir Christopher Wren, who is entombed in his St. Paul's Cathedral in London. The injunction reads: "Si monumentum requiris, circumspice" [If you seek his monument, look around].

The Speculators

Roy Benjamin's wife Phyllis often recalled a family of boys passing through her neighborhood collecting scrap metal for their father, and what struck her was how "barefooted and grubby" they looked. Their surname was Wolfson. Louis E. Wolfson, who was born in 1912, and his brothers would acquire wealth of a magnitude that makes them loom larger than any of the other Jewish businesspeople who belong directly to the annals of Jacksonville. Controlling at his peak total assets of about a quarter of a billion dollars, Lou Wolfson was running more than a dozen corporations by 1955, and he dominated close to ten others.⁸⁵ He served formally as chairman of the board of seven companies, as president of three others, and as a director of three more. Wolfson had become, according to business historian Robert Sobel, "the most colorful businessman of his time." Two years later *Fortune*, the monthly business magazine, identified the nation's wealthiest Americans. (Unsurprisingly the group was heavily weighted toward beneficiaries of the oil depletion allowance as well as heirs and heiresses.) Wolfson ranked thirty-fifth. With one exception, no one ahead of him was younger (and even in that case by only one year).⁸⁶ The flamboyant credo that animated Wolfson ("it's easier to make a million than a hundred thousand") would dwarf the wildest ambitions of "Ragged Dick" and "Mark the Match-Boy" and all the other nineteenth-century go-getters Horatio Alger had invented.⁸⁷

From a historical perspective, the scrap metal business has been almost as strikingly Jewish as baking *hamentashen*, interpreting the Talmud, or becoming a violin virtuoso. The task of collecting and selling rusty iron pipes and discarded automobile parts is politely termed the salvage business and, in an era of ecological consciousness, may be called recycling. However it is named, the metaphor is nearly perfect for the struggles of a

marginal minority in the Diaspora, because unwanted industrial detritus seemed a fitting endeavor for a cast-off, shunned group whose meager lot was taken as evidence of a triumphant Christianity. The Yiddish poet I. J. Schwartz's epic *Kentucky* (1925), which traces three generations of a family living in Lexington, Kentucky, has the patriarch earn a small fortune in scrap metal. Mordecai Richler's first novel, *Son of a Smaller Hero* (1955), evokes this grueling business; and his own father was a Canadian scrap yard dealer. So was a young Louis B. Mayer, who worked in his father's junkyard, before working on his own scrap metal operations in Boston and Brooklyn. (He then got into the nickelodeon business.) In Kansas the immigrant father of future Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania owned a junkyard. In Chicago the immigrant Chess family had a scrap yard (the Wabash Junk Shop); sons Leonard and Phil would later achieve fame and fortune in the record business. The father of the artist Philip Guston (né Philip Goldstein) worked as a junkman in Los Angeles. In Amsterdam, New York, the immigrant father of Issur Danielovitch Demsky bought a horse and wagon to pick up pieces of metal, rags, and other junk. "Collecting the things that people had thrown away was an awful way to make a living," and "our yard was always full of junk." The son understandably opted for another vocation under the name Kirk Douglas. After becoming world famous, he put statues made of scrap metal in his garden. The eponymous founder of Atlanta's William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, which opened in 1996, entered his Uncle Max's junk business. When Max Breman died, William Breman took it over. During World War II, the company made bolts for aircraft and canteens for G.I.'s. The business grew into the highly successful Breman Steel Company. Or take Sam Tenenbaum, an heir to his own family's scrap metal business. He has funded the Tenenbaum Family annual lectureship in Jewish Studies at Emory University. A 2008 magazine article devoted to the current state of the business profiles Nathan Frankel, a 1995 graduate of Brandeis University who runs a family business, the Frankel Iron and Metal Company, in California. The sophisticated shredding machine that is now standard in the business was invented half a century

ago by the Proler brothers of Houston. Their given names, Hymie, Sammy, Jackie, and Izzy, raise doubt whether they believed in the Resurrection. Scrap metal was a business dominated by Jews who never stopped living in the Iron Age. Virtually no start-up capital was required, and an element of independence could be maintained. The peddlers often needed a place to keep all the scrap, which resulted in the creation of junkyards.⁸⁸

The origins of the greatest of all of Jacksonville's Jewish fortunes began in junk collecting on Davis Street with such items as glass, rags, and discarded newspapers and then continued with the inclusion of scrap iron, which Morris David Wolfson peddled from a horse-drawn cart. (Readers of *Mosaic* can recall that single horse and single cart from which another Lithuanian immigrant, William Schemer, sold fish in Jacksonville.) The scrap iron was collected and brought to M. Wolfson & Co. on Myrtle Avenue,⁸⁹ and handshakes alone certified transactions. The sons helped out in the afternoons after school and went to the junkyard on weekends too. "In those days," one of Lou's younger brothers, Saul, recalled, "you worked morning to night, Saturday, Sunday, until you got the job done."⁹⁰ The insecurity that the family faced in its early years in Jacksonville can be exaggerated. The Wolfsons lived modestly, and were certainly not desperately poor.⁹¹ Nevertheless they were familiar with the world from which the fabled Jewish reminiscence emerged: "We only ate chicken if we were sick, or the chicken was."

It is apt to insist that, for much of his life, toil was the destiny of Morris Wolfson. Wolfson was born in 1879 in a Lithuanian *shtetl* so obscure that even its spelling (Posville or Pasvalys) is uncertain. Because an older sister had already settled in America and was able to help him, an impoverished Morris Wolfson joined her in Baltimore in 1896, at the age of seventeen. He lived in a few other cities before marrying Baltimore-born Sarah Goldberg in 1905. Sarah gave birth to Irene Wolfson in 1907, to Sam two years later, and other children followed. Within a year of Lou's birth in 1912, the family moved from St. Louis to the La Villa neighborhood, where Jacksonville's impoverished eastern European Jews settled in the heart of the black section. The Orthodox synagogue,

Congregation B'nai Israel, was located in La Villa. Its rabbi, Benjamin Safer, had two sisters and four brothers, all of whom had come there from Lithuania in the early twentieth century. One of them, Max Safer, worked from dawn to dusk on a horse and wagon to collect used bottles and barrels and then wash them for resale. In such a neighborhood, the Wolfsons were hardly peculiar. Saul was born in 1916, Morris Wolfson became a naturalized citizen a year later, and Cecil was born in 1919. Three years later Percy was born, but he died of pneumonia only a year later in Lou's arms, a tragedy that strongly affected Morris Wolfson's later decision to fund a children's hospital in Jacksonville. Morris spent very little on himself. He never mastered English and, instead of flipping through the *Florida Times-Union*, read the world's most widely circulated Yiddish newspaper, the *Forverts*, the socialist daily published in New York. Morris and Sarah Wolfson and their eight children later relocated their home to Fifth Street in a middle-class neighborhood in Springfield.⁹²

One Wolfson child was good enough at sports to hope to get beyond public school. At Andrew Jackson High School, from which Lou graduated in 1930, he captained the basketball team, lettered in baseball and track, and as an end on the football squad was named to the All-Southern team. Athletic promise enabled him, with parental encouragement, to achieve the fairly rare feat of attending college—the University of Georgia—on a football scholarship. The stipend was generous enough for him to send twenty-five dollars a month to his family in Jacksonville. A severe gridiron injury to his shoulder during a game against Yale doomed any hope of continuing to play right end for the Bulldogs. Wolfson was no standout in the classroom; at least according to some later magazine profiles, the correct spelling of *laissez-faire* was beyond him. When the economy began to tank, Wolfson dropped out of the University of Georgia to return home in 1932. College friends later recalled his vow “to make some money,”⁹³ which is a little like Michelangelo looking up at the bare ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and indicating that it needed a few dabs of paint.

*The six oldest Wolfson children, c. 1920,
(from left to right) Irene, Sam, Louis, Edith, Saul, and Cecil.
(From the Collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo Zerivitz, Founding Executive Director.)*

The ordeal of hard work, especially in the scrap metal business, did not alone ensure emancipation from the poverty that pervaded the South. It represented the foremost economic problem in the United States, according to President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1938. No region was historically more destitute or more likely to assign its residents to a lifetime of sheer drudgery. Call it a variation on the labor theory of value. "Cotton on the roadside, cotton in the ditch," Nashville's Bob McDill sang. "We all picked the cotton, but we never got rich."⁹⁴ (Substitute "citrus," and the switch to Florida leaves the truthfulness of the lyric unaffected.) Becoming wealthy required shrewdness and luck. Both of these attributes became evident near Starke, about twenty-five miles southwest of Jacksonville, when Lou and Sam Wolfson noticed piles of plumbing supplies and fixtures that belonged to the son of J. C. Penney, the department store magnate. The elder Penney was so devout that he had intended to build a community home for retired clergymen. But by 1933 the Great Depression had torpedoed such plans, and the Wolfson brothers offered Roswell Penney \$275 for the unused brass fittings, lead pipes, and other supplies, which Sam and Lou then trucked to the scrap metal yard of M. Wolfson & Co. in Jacksonville.

From there the brothers delivered the supplies to plumbers, contractors, and industrial plants, and quickly formed their own company, Florida Pipe and Supply. Disposing of the cast-off supplies piecemeal earned about \$100,000, which provided Lou and Sam with a tidy profit of 36,263 percent. Because the retired clergymen whom Penney had wanted to help expected any heavenly reward to be the gift of the Savior, never was the wry adage more apt: "Jesus saves, but Moses invests." Penney eventually recovered and bought new supplies to finish the retirement home. But Lou Wolfson was on his way to becoming a millionaire, something he accomplished by the age of twenty-eight. (Some perspective on the cost of living during the Depression is needed to appreciate the alteration of his status. When Wolfson was twenty-eight, the bus fare in Jacksonville cost eight cents, and a taxi ride from downtown to the airport to catch a flight on the only options, Eastern Air Lines or National Airlines, was \$1.25.

Green fees were then in the one dollar to two dollar range at the city's ritziest country clubs, not that Jews were allowed or welcomed to play golf there.)⁹⁵

The football injury kept Wolfson out of World War II, although his brothers who were old enough, Sam, Saul, and Cecil, served in the military. With wartime government contracts soon enriching Florida Pipe and Supply, it earned as much as \$4.5 million a year.⁹⁶ Wolfson was able to purchase a shipyard in Jacksonville. To buy another shipyard, in Tampa, he borrowed half a million dollars from Alexander Brest and his partner. The business boomed. For the French, Wolfson built freighters; for the Dutch, he built dredging ships.⁹⁷ But the most relentless corporate engine of his wealth was Merritt-Chapman & Scott, of which he acquired a controlling interest in 1949. Two years later he became chairman of the board and president. This construction and marine salvage conglomerate built tunnels, roads, and ships throughout the world and was ranked at 210 on the *Fortune* 500. The dams built in North America included the Cougar, the Folsom, and the Gorge High. In the 1950s the Priest Rapids and the Glen Canyon dams constituted the largest construction projects that a single contractor had ever assumed up to that time. Merritt-Chapman & Scott also built part of the Throgs Neck Bridge. In 1949, when Wolfson took over the company, it was grossing about \$40 million. Within six years Merritt-Chapman & Scott earned about eight times that amount, largely as a result of mergers with companies that Wolfson also controlled.

He also owned the controlling interest in New York Shipbuilding Corporation, a Merritt-Chapman & Scott subsidiary that managed the third largest shipyard in the United States. A photograph from 1959, when the *Savannah* was finished, shows him standing next to Mamie Eisenhower. Here's to the ladies who launch: she is smashing a champagne bottle on the hull of what was the world's first nuclear-powered passenger and cargo ship. The following year Wolfson's company launched the USS *Kitty Hawk*, a supercarrier. New York Shipbuilding must have done good work, because by the end of the century the *Kitty Hawk* was enjoying the second longest active status in the U.S. Navy.

*Louis Wolfson and First Lady Mamie Eisenhower in Camden,
NJ, July 21, 1959, as she launches the NS Savannah.
(From the Collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo Zerivitz, Founding Executive Director.)*

(Ranking first, oddly enough, is the far more ancient USS *Constitution*, nestled in Boston Harbor.)⁹⁸

Of course Wolfson had not been born to make ships but to make money; and by the mid-1950s, the crackerjack journalist John Gunther described Wolfson as an “ambitious and fiercely energetic young promoter.” But almost no one was calling Wolfson the first “corporate raider.” The term had barely entered the vernacular. But, in effect, what he had done was to consolidate the first postwar conglomerate, that is, a corporation that was characterized by diverse, often unrelated, and even random interests. An unusually wide wingspan enabled him to soar. If this innovation was uncredited, however, the explanation is that he and his partners invested their own money rather than raising it from passive investors, institutions, or the general public. Nor did the companies that were acquired fit into any cohesive pattern other than the impression that their stock had previously been selling at a price below actual worth. Much later, in 1977, he boasted that “whoever stayed with me and went in when I went in and stayed with me . . . made money.” If he exercised “management control,” came the qualifier, “no one’s ever lost money in any publicly owned company if they started with me until I got out.”⁹⁹

His closest associates became known simply as “the Wolfsons.” They consisted of eight men linked closely but not formally with the speculator in the effort to identify companies that had underappreciated values or greater profit potential. The Wolfsons’ task was to gain control of these firms. Two of the eight men, Louis’s brothers Sam and Saul, remained in Jacksonville. The Wolfsons’ pioneering exercises in corporate raiding culminated in 1955, with the launching of what Harvard historian Richard S. Tedlow calls “one of the first unfriendly takeover efforts in modern American business history.” The spectacular proxy battle to take over Montgomery Ward, the second-largest mail-order house in the nation, from its crusty, arch-conservative, octogenarian chairman, Sewell L. Avery, became “the business story of the year.” Wolfson met with Montgomery Ward shareholders in cities throughout the United States but his first stop was Jacksonville. Reporters portrayed him as tall, dark, handsome, muscular, and

Four Wolfson siblings at a gala commemorating Jacksonville Wolfson Children's Hospital, 1992, (from left to right) Saul Wolfson, Sylvia Wolfson Degen, Cecil Wolfson, and Edith Wolfson Edwards. (Courtesy Hazel Mack, Archivist, Congregation Ahavath Chesed.)

*(From the Collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo Zerivitz, Founding Executive Director.)*

courtly. He spoke with a southern drawl and took the press by storm. Publicity presented the conflict in terms of a hustling outsider's dynamism pitted against an imperious, sluggish, and "decadent management" that was falling further and further behind Sears, Roebuck. But the story ended with Wolfson's defeat. He did become a director but got only three seats on Montgomery Ward's nine-person board. Quitting within a year, he netted a paper profit of \$857,000 and received dividends of another \$600,000. By then Avery had been brought down. A month after fending off what he called "raiding parties," Avery resigned; and soon the company he had led since 1931 would disappear as well.¹⁰⁰ Soon thereafter Wolfson became the largest single stockholder in American Motors, but failed to mount a challenge to the presidency of George Romney.¹⁰¹

By then, however, Wolfson's career had spun out of the radius of Jewish business in Jacksonville. In 1950 he moved to Washington, where he had succeeded a year earlier in making a hostile tender offer that secured a controlling interest in the Capital Transit Company. That inventive takeover mechanism made him responsible for the management of the bus and streetcar system of the District of Columbia. How to reconcile the interests of the riders, the employees, and the stockholders was a challenge that (to put it mildly) eluded him; and the purchase and operations of Capital Transit brought down on Wolfson the worst publicity of his career to date. Under the leadership of "the Wolfsons," executives at Capital Transit got whopping salary increases and stockholders received enormous dividend increases. Having bought into Capital Transit for \$2 million, he sold his shares in 1956 for over \$13 million. The Wolfsons thus made millions on their investment. But routes were reduced by a fifth, and fares increased four times.¹⁰² Under fire, Wolfson relocated to Miami Beach in 1952.

There, in a house facing Biscayne Bay, he lived with his wife, the former Florence Monsky of Montgomery, whom he had married in 1935, and with her mother, Jenny Monsky. The entwining of these two families undoubtedly reinforces the folk wisdom that, before doing field work among, say, the Kwakiutl,

anthropologists seeking to appreciate the intricacy of kinship networks should begin with southern Jewry. Lou Wolfson's brother Saul married Florence Monsky's sister Hazel; and Sam Wolfson, after his first wife died, married the sisters' first cousin from Wetumpka, Alabama. In Montgomery the Monskys fit the paradigm of small-town Jewry as owners of the Classy Clothes Shop and the Guarantee Clothing Store. So smooth was the family's adjustment to regional values that a first cousin, LeRoy Monsky, played guard for three seasons at the University of Alabama, made All-America in 1937, and as team captain that year also led the Crimson Tide to the Rose Bowl. Another first cousin of the Monsky sisters, Doran Weinstein, joined Florida Pipe and Supply as early as 1940. Inserted into the inner circle of business associates, "the Wolfsons," Weinstein became president of Capital Transit before being placed in charge of the Devoe & Raynolds paint company. A niece of the Monsky sisters has evoked the world of Montgomery Jewry in *Midnight Suppers* (1983), a novel that refers to Temple Shemetz Torah, to the Classy Clothes Shoppe, and to the E-Light Café (where political deal-making in the state capital was famously conducted). Louis E. and Florence M. Wolfson had four children. In that era, when the rich were more democratic in their lifestyle and were still much less insulated from the rest of us than later in the century, Stephen, Marcia, Gary, and Marty attended public schools.¹⁰³

In 1959 Lou Wolfson began to show a serious interest in horse breeding and thoroughbred racing. In 1978 his colt, Affirmed, based at Harbor View Farm near Ocala, won the Triple Crown, the last horse to accomplish the feat.¹⁰⁴ In 1972, four years after Florence M. Wolfson's death, the widower married Patrice Jacobs, the daughter of the horse trainer Hirsch Jacobs. Although Wolfson lived over half a century on Miami Beach, and died there in 2007, Stephen Wolfson claimed that his father had always regarded Jacksonville as his home. Long after Lou Wolfson's permanent departure, the Jewish Community Council in Jacksonville continued to receive his donations, and the personal attorney he had loyally retained was Joseph Glickstein, Sr., a former president of the Temple. Glickstein had represented Morris Wolfson

and remained, until his own death in 1982, an attorney for Lou Wolfson as well. Wolfson's father had belonged to the Conservative synagogue while late in life also providing the major financial support for the Orthodox *shul*, Etz Chaim, founded after World War II. Yet Lou Wolfson had minimal religious allegiances. His funeral services were conducted in the city that had spawned him, at Congregation Ahavath Chesed, where he and his first wife had retained membership. He is buried at the Temple Cemetery in Jacksonville.¹⁰⁵

The absence of biographical attention is striking. Indeed a recent history of Wall Street notes that speculators like Wolfson, who flourished in the immediate postwar era, have now sunk into oblivion, leaving no "permanent imprint on the country's cultural conscience."¹⁰⁶ His impact is therefore yet to be adequately measured. Certainly the sheer diversity of the companies under his control defies summation here. He invested in oil wells and an amusement park and owned steel mills as well as companies making power shovels, truck-trailers, kitchen appliances, and television cabinets.¹⁰⁷ He was a financier whose companies actually made things in an economy still dominated by manufacturing. A buccaneering product of the Bible Belt counted on the productivity of the Rust Belt. Wolfson's abiding interest in movies, however, also deserves attention.

In the mid-1940s, he bought into a studio, Monogram Pictures, for \$400,000, and several years later sold his shares for over \$1.2 million.¹⁰⁸ Nothing further of consequence happened to link him to the film industry, however, until a former gag-writer for Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows* flew to Jacksonville. Mel Brooks was then a comic whose career, despite the hilarious energy of *The 2,000-Year-Old Man*, had not reached the show-biz stratosphere. Brooks met with Arvin K. Rothschild, a member of the board of directors as well as vice president of the Universal Marion Corporation. Wolfson was the chairman of its board. Rothschild was a vice president of U-M Productions, of Royalty Productions, and of U-M Telefilms, Inc., as well. The film project that Brooks came to Jacksonville to pitch was arguably in bad taste. But what he had in mind was definitely *about* bad taste; the working title of the film

*The Wolfsons with Triple Crown winner, Affirmed, on magazine cover.
(From the Collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo Zerivitz, Founding Executive Director.)*

was *Springtime for Hitler*. There are different versions of, or variations on, what happened next. In one recollection, as Brooks explained the plot to Rothschild at his Southside home, the host was not exactly stationary. Indeed his belly laughs propelled him onto his living room floor, and the spasms of uncontrollable mirth signaled to Brooks that his proposed film was likely to be green-lighted. According to the *Jacksonville Journal*, however, Rothschild was bursting out loud with laughter while reading the scenario in the barbershop of the Universal Marion Building. When Brooks came to Jacksonville, he had dinner with Rothschild and other members of Beauclerc, a Jewish country club located on the Southside. They, too, cracked up. Brooks's title admittedly had to be made blander; but with the Universal Marion Corporation cofinancing *The Producers* (1968), his first feature film won him an Oscar for the best original screenplay the following year.¹⁰⁹ Wolfson's indirect but decisive contribution to the career of Mel Brooks ensured that the laughter that his other films would provoke could become part of the national soundtrack. It also represents a curious sidelight to a Jacksonville business that had begun in scrap metal.

Scandal

Of all the figures portrayed in this essay, Louis Wolfson is unique in terms of the direct political consequences of his financial conduct. Within a decade of the Montgomery Ward defeat, he ran into problems with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). In 1966 U.S. Attorney Robert Morgenthau of the Southern District of New York charged Wolfson, along with a close associate from Jacksonville, Elkin B. "Buddy" Gerbert, of selling unregistered stock in a company called Continental Enterprises.¹¹⁰ Located in Jacksonville, Continental Enterprises was a spin-off of Capital Transit and specialized in movie exhibitions and real estate. The SEC required a controlling stockholder who sought to sell more than a tiny fraction of outstanding shares in the company during a half-year period to provide a registration statement. That a controlling stockholder is selling those shares in his or her own company, the SEC argued, might well be of keen

interest to others; hence the regulation. In 1967 Wolfson and Gerbert were convicted of conspiring to violate the securities laws by selling the unregistered stock.

The sources of this criminal prosecution remain mysterious. Not since 1933 had anyone who had been charged with selling unregistered stock ever faced imprisonment, rather than civil penalties. "I have asked Wall Street brokers about this matter and they say that this particular section is violated by scores of brokers," wrote a syndicated columnist who much admired the financier's character and generosity. "No one was prosecuted under it until Louis Wolfson showed up." William Casey, for example, was also guilty of selling unregistered stock and merely paid a fine. That did not stop him from becoming the chairman of the SEC (and later, under President Ronald Reagan, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency). Wolfson denied any criminal intent and insisted that he had not known that such transactions were illegal. He asked: "Why would I want to violate any rule or regulation when I could register stock and sell the stock?" Having sold the unregistered stock openly and in his own name, rather than through a foreign nominee account, Wolfson had even reported the sale to the SEC. He also reported the Continental Enterprises sale on his income tax returns, a gesture that might ordinarily suggest the absence of criminal intent. Wolfson hired the celebrated criminal defense attorney, Edward Bennett Williams, to challenge the conviction; and in 1969 an appeal reached the Supreme Court. The court announced on April 1, however, that it would not consider the appeal. Wolfson and Gerbert served nine months in a federal minimum-security prison near Pensacola, Florida.¹¹¹

What gave this case its unexpected historical importance is that as Wolfson was going down, he took a U.S. Supreme Court justice with him. The legal troubles that Wolfson experienced happened to coincide with suspect efforts to make contributions to a jurist (and even to a former jurist). Wolfson denied that he sought any quid pro quo and insisted that his proposed donations were merely intended to convey his appreciation to admirable

members of the highest bench. Money has been known to change hands to or from the Supreme Court. The wealthy Justice Louis D. Brandeis had, after all, secretly helped to fund the progressive advocacy of his friend, Professor Felix Frankfurter, who had to live within the confines of an academic salary. But when Wolfson offered to provide a salary supplement to former Justice Arthur Goldberg, who had become Ambassador to the United Nations, Goldberg decisively rebuffed the overture.

Goldberg's successor on the Supreme Court (and also an occupant of its "Jewish seat") was less prudent. Before taking that seat in October 1965, Abe Fortas had enriched himself in private practice, and his resentment at the modest judicial salary of \$39,500, which was raised to \$60,000 in 1969,¹¹² apparently intensified the sin of greed. (That attribute is the downside of the yearning to escape poverty reflected in the lives that are explored in this essay.) Fortas drove a Rolls-Royce, had no children to educate, and liked collecting checks the way many American boys relish the chance to collect baseball cards. The encounter with a financier willing to sign such checks proved fatal to the career of one of the most talented and liberal of modern Supreme Court justices. The deal had been struck within three weeks of Fortas's ascent to the bench, and common sense should have told him that the arrangement was bound to arouse suspicion. The Wolfson Family Foundation volunteered to pay him \$20,000 a year, which was then half of his Supreme Court salary, for as long as he lived. Fortas's wife, tax attorney Carolyn Agger, was to receive the same amount for as long as she lived were she to survive her husband. In 1966 the entire outlay of the Foundation for charitable purposes was \$77,680, so the check that Fortas deposited in January 1966 accounted for nearly a fourth of what was disbursed. In early June Wolfson was indicted. He should have been regarded as damaged goods, something Fortas was slow to recognize. Indeed, four days after the indictment was handed down, the justice flew to Jacksonville to attend the meeting of the trustees of the Wolfson Family Foundation. Although he resigned later that month, he did not bother reimbursing the Foundation for the \$20,000 honorarium—though no actual services seem to have been performed—

until the end of the year, so that the income from the Foundation did not have to be reported on the jurist's tax returns.¹¹³

In late June 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson nominated Associate Justice Fortas to replace Earl Warren as chief justice. The nomination was stalled, however, because, for the first time in the history of the Senate, Republicans launched a filibuster against a Supreme Court nominee. They wanted the next president, presumably a Republican, to pick Warren's successor; and in early October Johnson was obliged to withdraw the nomination. In spring 1969, when the Supreme Court rejected Wolfson's appeal, Fortas recused himself from the decision. Less than a month later, *Life* revealed the eyebrow-raising news of the annual retainer that Fortas had accepted from the Wolfson Family Foundation; and the GOP assault upon his personal probity became too vociferous to ignore. Fortas met with Wolfson in his brother's home in Jacksonville, where he momentarily switched to Yiddish, referring to "these *momzers*" who were "after me . . . and they want to get me." When the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) subpoenaed records of the Wolfson Family Foundation in Jacksonville and discovered in the contract that Fortas had signed how remarkably generous the trustees had been, resignation from the Supreme Court soon became the only option. The public controversy that he acknowledged arousing had to be quelled, even though he had broken no law. Fortas did believe that the SEC and the legal system had "mistreated" Lou Wolfson. The jurist had not in any way intervened in Wolfson's behalf, or even hinted that he would do so, according to the financier's testimony to the FBI. If the payment was intended to be a bribe, why would the Foundation have written a check?¹¹⁴

The new president, Richard M. Nixon, achieved a vacancy on the Court, and in 1969 named the conservative Warren E. Burger as chief justice. Three years later Nixon was able to appoint to the bench William H. Rehnquist, whom the attorney-general described as "to the right of the Sheriff of Nottingham."¹¹⁵ (That bizarre location on the political spectrum was uttered in praise.) The ignominy Fortas had inflicted upon himself was unmatched, and not since then has a Supreme Court justice been forced to quit

the bench.¹¹⁶ Any hope of rehabilitation was squelched in 1977, when arguably the greatest reporter of his generation, Bob Woodward, secured tapes of conversations between Fortas and Wolfson. That new evidence revealed a closer association—although no illegal actions—than acknowledged eight years earlier. How different might the course of American jurisprudence have been, had the largesse of Lou Wolfson not been such a temptation? Conjecture is bound to be inconclusive. Had Fortas gotten the chance to serve as chief justice, the direction Earl Warren had taken constitutional interpretation in enlarging civil rights and civil liberties might have been perpetuated. A group of eminent legal scholars did not need to speculate on what might have been. They ranked Fortas's judicial career in the "near great" category; and of all the justices who ranked as "great" and "near great," none had ever served so briefly on the Supreme Court.¹¹⁷

Perhaps the most redeeming feature of Wolfson's career—philanthropy—remains integral to his Jacksonville roots. As early as 1946, his father had wanted to establish a children's clinic in the city; and as M. Wolfson & Co. blended into Florida Pipe and Supply, he had become wealthy enough to donate half a million dollars for such a medical center. But the immigrant junk dealer died two years later, and not until 1951 would the Wolfson Family Foundation be formed. Its first and most important commitment was to the Baptist Memorial Hospital (now called the Baptist Medical Center), located on the Southside on the St. Johns River. A fifty-bed pediatric care unit opened in 1955, and sixteen years later was consolidated into the 180-bed Wolfson Children's Hospital. For thirty-five years, until 1986, Lou Wolfson chaired the foundation, which eventually bestowed millions of dollars on the Baptist Medical Center including funding of a wellness center. Other beneficiaries of multimillion-dollar donations included the Wolfson Student Center at Jacksonville University and the River Garden Hebrew Home/Wolfson Health and Aging Center. Cecil Wolfson succeeded his brother as chairman of the foundation's board. So lavish was its generosity that, shortly before Lou Wolfson's death, the Wolfson Family Foundation exhausted its endowment, having spent itself to the vanishing point.¹¹⁸

*Presentation in 1972 by Louis Wolfson to B. S. Reid
of Baptist Memorial Hospital of Jacksonville.*

*The \$200,000 check was first payment
toward a \$1 million pledge to the hospital.*

(Courtesy Hazel Mack, Archivist, Congregation Ahavath Chesed.)

The Challenge of Race Relations

In the four hundred mile swath of territory between Atlanta and Orlando, no better children's hospital existed at the end of the 1950s than the Wolfson Children's Hospital. Hope Haven Hospital was already in operation on Atlantic Boulevard, first for children with bone diseases, later mostly as a rehabilitation center for polio victims.¹¹⁹ Wolfson Children's Hospital was designed to be more comprehensive. Perhaps more importantly, it was supposed to be open to all. In a 1946 letter to his five sons, Morris D. Wolfson had urged "you boys" to "make sure that all persons affiliated with

this Clinic in any way have no prejudices as to race, creed, or color." Bigotry would undermine the duty of those staffing such an institution to "consecrate themselves to the task of giving relief to the young." Indeed the plaque testifying to that aim, to heal the sick "irrespective of race, color, or creed," deeply impressed attorney Abe Fortas when he came to Jacksonville in 1965 to attend a board meeting of Merritt-Chapman & Scott.¹²⁰

In the immediate postwar era, however, the doctrine of "separate but equal" still prevailed, and remained authoritative both in law and in custom. The cruelty of Jim Crow became all too apparent in 1955 when a ten-year-old girl from Lake City, stricken with a lethal meningitis virus, needed to be treated at Baptist. There was no hope for her survival otherwise since no black hospital provided adequate care. Joel Fleet, a pediatrician, came to the rescue. Fleet had grown up in Live Oak, Florida, where his father and later his brother had run a department store since 1905. Their family constituted half of all the Jewish families in town. Fleet graduated as valedictorian of his Suwannee High School class in 1932 and finished Tulane Medical School eight years later. In 1940 he came to Jacksonville's Conservative synagogue, the Center, to marry Margaret Fishler. She had grown up in a kosher home in Fernandina Beach, where her Romanian-born father had paradoxically gone into the shrimping business. Her parents were strict. They had even prohibited interfaith dating, although only three Jewish boys her age lived in the town, and two of them were her brothers. In 1955 Joel Fleet desegregated Baptist Memorial Hospital by getting the endangered black child admitted. No other patients and no nurses objected to the presence of the new patient. And from then on, the children's wards at Baptist accepted all races.¹²¹

By the standard of what was once called "minority relations," the Wolfson family was liberal and enlightened. Burned into Lou Wolfson's memory—he might not yet have been ten years old—was the sight of a black teenager whom the Ku Klux Klan had tarred and feathered, tied by a rope to a car, being paraded through the streets. The Klansmen "were laughing like hyenas," Wolfson recalled. Until that episode he and his brother Sam had

*Dr. Joel Fleet tending to a young patient.
(Courtesy of the family of Joel Fleet, MD, Jacksonville.)*

run neighborhood errands for the firemen in the station. But after observing these good ol' boys flaunting their Klan regalia, the brothers did their best to avoid walking past the station. Soon after Lou Wolfson took charge of Merritt-Chapman & Scott, he insisted on a clause in the company's bylaws prohibiting discrimination in hiring. When he took charge of Washington, D.C.'s Capital Transit in what was then a very southern city, such a commitment remained evident. The future historian Edward S. Shapiro, who grew up in Washington, D.C., has not forgotten from his childhood "seeing a white bus driver sitting in the seat behind the driver's seat instructing a black bus driver on the finer points."¹²²

The check that Wolfson gave to Fortas—a fellow southerner, a fellow Jew, and a fellow liberal—was ostensibly for studies of "racial and religious relations" in the United States. Wolfson's interest in this subject was enduring; and his opposition to bigotry was unflinching, according to Nathan Perlmutter, director of the Miami office of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) during the 1950s and 1960s.¹²³ (Perlmutter, who became the national director of the ADL and would earn a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1987, knew Wolfson well, but not merely because of a shared struggle against racial and religious prejudice. Perlmutter's first book explained how to handicap horse races.) Sensitivity to racial injustice was what Lou Wolfson remembered of his father, who had often tried to help the black laborers who worked at the junkyard to clarify and resolve their financial difficulties: "I never did forget his humility and his feeling for people." Morris Wolfson "was an uneducated man. But he knew right from wrong, and he didn't spare the rod to teach it to his sons." The Universal Marion Corporation also owned a Miami Beach newspaper, the *Sun*, that was editorially progressive; and because of lavish donations to Senator George S. McGovern's presidential campaign in 1972, Louis E. Wolfson's name was included on the enlarged list of enemies whose income tax returns a vindictive Nixon White House sought to have audited.¹²⁴ Another sign of his liberal politics is the biographer whom he hired, although the book was never published because of his wife's

objections: Robert Sherrill, the sardonic Washington correspondent of the *Nation*.¹²⁵

Any historical effort to understand Louis Wolfson requires an appreciation of context and ought to contrast his legacy with the values of one of Jacksonville's most charitable citizens. Jessie Ball duPont was the third wife and later the widow of Alfred I. duPont (who died in 1935), and the sister of the most powerful businessman in northeast Florida, Ed Ball. In 1957, when *Fortune* ranked the richest Americans, only four women in the nation were estimated to be wealthier than Mrs. duPont. With perhaps \$200 million to her name, the monthly magazine situated her in the upper brackets even well above Lou Wolfson. A very active Episcopalian layperson, she was a major benefactor of handicapped children, poor pupils, and scholarship students as well as hospitals. Upon her brother's death, the Nemours Foundation purchased Hope Haven Hospital. In 1987, renamed as the Nemours Children's Clinic, it became affiliated with Wolfson Children's Hospital. The chief of surgery was Albert H. Wilkinson, Jr., whose roots in the Jewish community could scarcely have been deeper. His great-great-grandfather was Julius Slager, a Confederate Army veteran who was, according to local historian T. Frederick Davis, among "the more prominent Hebrews of this city." Slager became an early president of Congregation Ahavath Chesed and belonged to the First Families of Jews who had moved to a mostly empty state. Wilkinson was also the great nephew of Furchgott's president, Fred Meyerheim. Wilkinson began practicing as a pediatric surgeon in Jacksonville in 1959. He has recalled that the Hope Haven Hospital that Jessie Ball duPont so generously supported then pursued a policy that he considered "an affront": black patients were not admitted.¹²⁶

Indeed she also drew the line at aiding schools in which either the student body or the faculty was racially mixed. In the summer of 1953, for example, she expressed resentment at the collapse of the "will of the majority," which for her was the essence of democracy. What Mrs. duPont dreaded was that "the minority group (negroes) must [instead] be given all the power and they must dictate the policies and way of life to . . . the majority group

(white).” Because of this tyranny of the minority, the government was about to deny to “our child, as we were given, the privilege of an education in an all white school.”¹²⁷ Her awareness of what she called “the darkie problem” as a postwar challenge to democratic ideals could be discerned in her private correspondence as early as 1946, especially when Mrs. duPont learned of black instructors at women’s colleges like Vassar, Wellesley, and Smith.¹²⁸ Her racism was genteel: “I do not wish them sitting in the drawing room with me.” She refused to provide scholarships at institutions in which the races were mixed on the faculty, believing that the white race was superior according to the history of all civilizations. Gunnar Myrdal’s classic plea for democratic inclusion, *An American Dilemma* (1944), left Mrs. duPont unconvinced. Unlike white southerners, “the Swede has had no experience with the negroes,” she huffed. The population of Jacksonville was then a little less than a third black, and her knowledge of this minority might be treated with some skepticism. In her will she tried to ensure that the scholarships that assorted southern colleges and universities could bestow would be confined to students “of the white race.” The IRS restrictions seemed to have stymied her, however, and nothing came of her intention.¹²⁹

Lou Wolfson’s older brother Sam lived in a different world. In 1953 he bought the Jacksonville Braves, a Class A baseball club that had finished seventh the year before. The Braves played in the South Atlantic League, commonly called the Sally League. Sam’s club thus competed with teams in the Deeper South from Montgomery, Alabama; Columbus, Augusta, and Savannah, Georgia; and Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina. In 1953 the Sally League was also observing its fiftieth birthday.¹³⁰ To mark the occasion, the Jacksonville Braves experimented with desegregation by hiring three players: Horace Garner, Felix Mantilla, and nineteen-year-old second baseman Henry “Hank” Aaron. That year this trio was so crucial in winning the Sally League pennant that, after the three players came out of the clubhouse together in Savannah, which had added two black players on its own squad, a white baseball fan was waiting for the Braves. Struggling to find the right words to convey his emotions, he

gushed: "I just wanted to let you niggers know you played a heluva game."¹³¹ (Sometimes even the primordial furies of racism yield to admiration for the skill required to hit a hard line drive to right field.) When the Braves celebrated their victory with a party in a Savannah restaurant, three players were nevertheless denied the right to join their teammates. "When we got back to Jacksonville," Aaron recalled, "there was another party for the team at a country club. Somehow, Mr. Wolfson arranged to get us in, even though black people were not included at affairs like that in the South." (A black journalist wanted to cover this breach of Jim Crow, but was blocked at the door.)¹³²

In Jacksonville, for the last home game of the 1953 season, the Braves' players were honored. When Aaron got up, Wolfson told the crowd: "Henry Aaron is like a son to me." Such praise, Aaron later noted, "wasn't the sort of thing a wealthy white man usually said about a black kid in the South." What Aaron and his two teammates had done helped to erode the foundations of white supremacy in a region that happened also to admire athletic excellence, an attitude that could not forever be reconciled with racism. As the Most Valuable Player in the Sally League, "Aaron may have started Jacksonville down the road to racial understanding," a columnist in the *Jacksonville Journal* opined.¹³³ "I'm not sure I've ever done anything more important," the Atlanta Braves' slugger concluded. That claim would reduce the significance of breaking the lifetime home run record that had been set by the protagonist of *The Babe Ruth Story* (1948), an Allied Artists film which Monogram distributed and which Sam Wolfson's younger brother Lou helped bankroll. *Variety* called this biopic "semi-fictional."¹³⁴ In 1963, when Sam Wolfson died, the obituary in the local morning newspaper ran five columns. It saw fit to mention his coin collection, business activities such as a failed bid to take over the Cleveland Indians, and even the name of the manager who was hired to bring Sally League championships to the Braves. Entirely unmentioned was the role of the deceased in advancing racial integration,¹³⁵ perhaps because the editors regarded such an achievement as ambiguous, or perhaps because such a gesture

would have done him no credit among many white readers of the *Florida Times-Union*.

As the history of the desegregation of the Sally League makes evident, race relations cannot be left out of the heritage of a southern city like Jacksonville. The Wolfson family was not alone in its liberalism or in challenging the cruelties of white supremacy.

In 1900 the population of Jacksonville was officially just over 57 percent black, while the proportion of whites did not quite reach 43 percent.¹³⁶ That same year, James Weldon Johnson, the principal of the largest black public school in the state, Jacksonville's Stanton School, made an indelible mark on African American culture by writing the lyrics to "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Although his lyrics make no reference to race, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" became "The Negro National Hymn," sung for the first time at the Stanton School. His brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, also a resident of Jacksonville, wrote the music.¹³⁷ Although James Weldon Johnson would not have been legally permitted to sit down and order a cup of coffee in a downtown restaurant, he succeeded in becoming the most accomplished and distinguished person ever to emerge from Jacksonville. He was a poet and later a Broadway song-writer, an attorney, a diplomat, and finally the executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Although a "race man," Johnson was no racial chauvinist. His autobiography expresses satisfaction with who he is. But his book also fantasizes that had he not been born black, he would have ordered a genie to "make me a Jew."¹³⁸ Johnson did not explain why. No student of his career has offered a convincing answer either. It is safe to conjecture that Jacksonville did not inspire or encourage Johnson to imagine crossing such a line into Jewishness. No biographical evidence points in that direction. No Jacksonville Jewish family appears to have befriended him in any memorable way.

New Orleans, by contrast, had the Karnoffsky family, Lithuanian immigrants who started at the bottom by working as (what else?) junk peddlers. To draw attention to the items on their wagon, they hired a black child to blow a tin horn. He became

part of the Karnoffsky family, joining them at dinner and coming to cherish Jewish cuisine. He spent more time in their home than with his own family, sensing that such Jews differed in their social attitudes from most other southern whites, and vowing that "I will love the Jewish people all of my life." Louis Armstrong got very good on that tin horn and on an old cornet that Morris Karnoffsky helped him buy.¹³⁹ However absent an equivalent experience in the life of James Weldon Johnson, at least the Jacksonville years did not discourage an appreciation of the Jewish heritage and of its legatees.

Unfortunately the atlas of what Mark Twain skewered as "the United States of Lyncherdom" includes Jacksonville, where two black men were lynched in 1919. During the following decade the Ku Klux Klan held rallies in Hemming Park, where the central plaza featured a tall Confederate Monument that faced the Cohen Brothers store. And a race riot—with blacks and whites battling one another downtown—broke out in 1960. The following year, the Reform synagogue was vandalized by a nineteen-year-old sailor, who painted a swastika as well as the word "*Juden*" on a side of the building and hurled a rock through a stained glass window. The culprit was alleged to have objected to the unfair trial to which the former *Obersturmbannführer* Adolf Eichmann was about to be subjected in Jerusalem.¹⁴⁰

But Jacksonville generally managed to escape the turmoil that erupted in other southern communities in the 1950s and 1960s. In Orlando, for example, two NAACP lawyers, Thurgood Marshall and Jack Greenberg, arrived in 1952 to defend a young black man before an all-white jury. The defendant was accused (with three other blacks) of beating a white man and then kidnapping and raping his wife although no medical evidence proving rape was ever produced. Orlando tested the South's reputation for hospitality when the Klan welcomed Marshall and Greenberg on Saturday night with a torchlight parade. Because of racial segregation, the two attorneys were separated; and throughout the night Klansmen surrounded Greenberg's hotel with trucks and torches. The defendant was convicted and sentenced to death, though the governor commuted the sentence.¹⁴¹

The menace that the Klan projected might be contrasted with what happened in Jacksonville that very year, when the great contralto Marian Anderson came to town. Probably for the first time in the city's history, a racially integrated audience was permitted, though several hundred white music-lovers boycotted the performance at the Duval County Armory and demanded a refund. So direct a violation of Jim Crow policies was not immediately repeated, however, and a figure as distinguished and unthreatening as Marian Anderson was needed to take even that modest step toward decency. It might be added that another three years passed before even the Metropolitan Opera allowed a black singer to perform on its stage, when Anderson undertook the role of Ulrica in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*.¹⁴²

During the 1950s Jacksonville far exceeded Orlando in size, which may partially explain the different reception granted to outsiders in 1952; urban scale probably tended to promote a temperate, live-and-let-live attitude. In Jacksonville it was a bit easier than in many other parts of the South for blacks to distinguish "the Man" from the Klan, although even to this day Florida's statute books protect the Confederate flag from "mutilation or disrespect."¹⁴³ The civil rights activist Andrew Young once remarked that, without Atlanta, Georgia would be Mississippi. But even Atlanta had a terrifying race riot in 1906; and local Jews had to confront the consequences when a little girl was found dead in 1913, and then in 1958 when a synagogue was bombed in a "city too busy to hate." Mayor Young might also have had trouble explaining why Birmingham did not make Alabama little more than Mississippi. But at least Florida also meant Miami, where increasingly numbers of northern Jews settled. Those who were Communists or labeled as such were especially dedicated to championing civil rights and enjoyed some impunity in doing so. The two fish-out-of-water agitators whose commitment to equality is nicely resurrected in Raymond A. Mohl's monograph, *South of the South* (2004), had no counterparts in Jacksonville. One of the activists, Matilda Graff, had to flee Miami and seek refuge in Canada. As late as the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, segregation was firmly enforced in Jacksonville,

where even black teachers who held charge accounts at Cohen Brothers were prohibited from sitting down to eat in its lunchroom.¹⁴⁴ The city did, however, harbor some Jewish businesspeople who rejected the regional commitment to racial injustice.

In the antebellum South, Jews willingly sought black customers. In 1856 the northern liberal traveler and landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, reported that "a swarm of Jews, within the last ten years, has settled in nearly every Southern town." They were "opening cheap clothing and trinket shops" and were "engaging in an unlawful trade with simple negroes, which is found very profitable." These tradesmen's shops, Olmsted added, were located "in the narrowest and meanest streets, which seem to be otherwise inhabited mainly by negroes." In 1870 one of the Furchgott family's two Charleston stores was reported to "do a negro trade."¹⁴⁵ Fyodor Dostoevsky, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright leveled the accusation of exploitation at Jewish tradesmen who cheated southern blacks in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century. It is safe to say, however, that such generalizations are tricky, and "exploitation" fails to do justice to such interactions. The standard should not be John Brown, a martyr to the cause of black liberation, but instead a modest range somewhere below the heroic and yet above the malicious. Especially in the critical postwar years, Jacksonville's merchants were probably no more sympathetic to civil rights than were coreligionists who owned stores elsewhere in the region. But no one in Jacksonville was as intransigent as Charlie Leb, a deli owner in Atlanta who had the distinction of refusing service to Harry Belafonte. Leb's hostility to civil rights was so intense that he expressed solidarity with the Ku Klux Klan. Atlanta Jews reacted to him with such enmity that by the end of the 1960s he went bankrupt because of the dramatic decline in their patronage. Jewish merchants in Jacksonville were close to the norm. Very few of those "immersed in the desegregation struggle were inherently hostile to change. On the contrary," the British historian Clive Webb has concluded, "many had earned a reputation for moderation."¹⁴⁶

Jacksonville's Jewish merchants undoubtedly exhibited a range of attitudes toward their customers. Evidence is spotty, but here are some historical examples. During the Great Depression when the Rothstein family could support higher education for only one son, Abe got the chance to go to law school and Dave sold shoes downtown at the edge of a black neighborhood. Many of Dave Rothstein's customers worked for Ed Ball's Florida East Coast Railroad, which never paid wages high enough to enable unskilled black laborers to acquire the capital that a capitalist system privileged. At least the Duval Shoe Store allowed such customers to buy shoes on credit, and when these hardworking men got paid, they stood in line to ask the owner, "Mr. David, will you cash my check?" He agreed to do so. One of his former employees continues to doubt that Rothstein ever deducted the entire price of the shoes or ever charged interest. A more complicated figure was Nathan Shmunes, who owned a department store on Davis Street. Shmunes hired a black man to run the men's clothing department, and customers could use a "layaway plan" so that they did not have to pay interest. One customer, Shmunes's daughter recalls, was so loyal that the Canadian-born merchant reciprocated by paying for some of her groceries and for her physician. Yet Shmunes's remarks about blacks were tainted with racial prejudice, which vulnerability to crime undoubtedly fortified. When one holdup man demanded the contents of the cash register, Shmunes told him to work for money if he wanted it. The advice was rejected rather explosively, but the pistol aimed at the owner misfired. Such incidents spurred Shmunes to close the Davis Street Department Store.¹⁴⁷

In James Weldon Johnson's novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), its anonymous narrator, raised in the North, is advised that few of "the respectable coloured people" travel in the South; and when they do, "they generally have friends in the towns to which they go" who host them. When the narrator gets to Jacksonville, he stays at "a respectable boarding-house for coloured people." Prior to World War I, the era in which Johnson's novel is set, few options existed in the region besides rooming houses or hospitable friends and relatives. Even the segregated

YMCAs and YWCAs, heavily funded by the Chicago philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, were scarce and suitable only for brief layovers. After World War II, when motels became noticeable features of the American landscape, the Chicago-born Lionel Gaines built and owned the Astor Motel, off of Highway 90 in Jacksonville. His was among the very few motels in town where black travelers including musicians like Lionel Hampton could stay in the final decades of the Jim Crow era. Other Jews who catered to a black clientele included Harry Finkelstein, who owned a pawnshop on the same corner as a nightclub where a musically promising student from the Deaf and Blind School in St. Augustine performed. The young pianist later took the name Ray Charles.¹⁴⁸ Close by was the ornate Strand Theatre, which was built after World War I and which showed movies and put on vaudeville acts.

Arvin Rothschild, Roy Benjamin's son-in-law, managed the Strand as well as two other black movie theaters, the Roosevelt and the Frolic. Located on Ashley Street, west of Broad Street, all three theaters were incorporated into another of the Wolfsons' companies, a black cinema chain called National Theatre Enterprises, which later merged into Continental Enterprises. A native Indianan, Rothschild was free of racial prejudice and could be sardonic about the absurdities of the rules enforced on both races. In 1958 Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier played a pair of escaping chain-gang prisoners in United Artists' *The Defiant Ones*, which opened locally at a movie house restricted to whites, the Five Points Theater. Rothschild teased its owner, Sheldon Mandell, that his box office policy should be: "Whites manacled to Negroes will not be admitted to this theater." Future social worker Richard McKissick remembered another African American, an ex-con, asking the owner of the Roosevelt Theater for a job: "Rothschild gave him one, explaining that everyone needs a second chance." Since the early 1970s McKissick has regarded Rothschild as his "mentor." Later McKissick worked at keeping young offenders from falling back into crime for the Greater Jacksonville Economic Opportunity Corporation (GJEOC) and other civic agencies. Head Start was perhaps the most famous and admired

feature of the GJEOC anti-poverty program. When the organization was established in 1965, Rothschild served as its first president. Because a black president of such an entity could not yet have been imagined given the Jim Crow environment, what was needed was a white man with soul and Rothschild fit the bill.¹⁴⁹

Born in Philadelphia, Bob Myers served as a U.S. Army captain in World War II before moving to Jacksonville in 1947. As the owner of Purcell's and Nancy Scott women's clothing stores downtown, he catered to white customers. In less than two decades, perhaps coinciding with his presidency of Congregation Ahavath Chesed, he may have been the first white, downtown merchant to put a black employee in a sales position out front. The woman had worked in the receiving department in the back of Purcell's when Myers decided to promote her to sales. His son Johnny Myers recalled: "I remember some white customers closing their charge accounts in protest, and there was some graffiti on the store windows. But my father did not back down. Later the other white merchants followed suit."¹⁵⁰ What clothiers like Bob Myers did, however modestly, should be contextualized within the *Weltanschauung* of the immediate postwar era. Consider two Nobel laureates from the South. William Faulkner, the winner of the literature prize in 1949, famously expressed his faith in the human triumph over adversity. Earlier he had praised southern blacks like Dilsey Gibson, the "mammy" of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), because "they endured."¹⁵¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., had already made it clear that southern blacks had endured enough when he received the Peace Prize in Oslo fifteen years after Faulkner's award. The velocity of such changes could scarcely have been anticipated.

Beyond Business

Not everyone who belonged to the Jacksonville Jewish community stayed in business, or in Jacksonville, although no one could escape the influence of the stores and companies that the families mentioned in this essay created and continued. Even those who pursued other vocations benefited from the wealth that

businesspeople generated, and even those who were disaffected could not disentangle themselves entirely from the dominant impulses of the community. Differences did not necessarily mean distance, except broadly over time. "I must study Politicks and War," John Adams famously asserted in a 1780 letter to his wife Abigail, "that my sons have the liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy . . . [and] Commerce . . . in order to give their children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry and Porcelaine."¹⁵² The linear evolution that Adams described did not mark the trajectory of his own family, which pursued the vocation of "Politicks" for two more generations. His expectations did not fit the intergenerational aspirations of the Jewish mercantile class either. But Adams raised the right question about the uses of struggle in securing freedom for posterity. How financial well-being could be activated across time, and how economic comfort could provide options for progeny against the headwinds of history constitute the final section of this essay.

Let the Zacharias family be illustrative. Its founder, Aaron Zacharias, was born either in Prussia or New York City in 1845. After the Civil War (probably in 1866), he came South with his younger brother, Abraham. Aaron grew tobacco for the cigar factories of Tampa and, as early as 1870, was listed in Jacksonville's first city directory as a general merchant as well as tobacco dealer, conducting business downtown. Zacharias became the secretary of Congregation Ahavath Chesed at its founding in 1882. He and his wife, the German-born Theresa Budwig Zacharias, had a son, Isadore, who became an attorney. In 1901, the year of the great fire, Isadore Zacharias married Irma Kaufman, whose father just happened to be in the scrap metal business in Jacksonville. In the building boom after the fire, the legal practice prospered and the family could afford to employ several servants at their Laura Street home. Irma Zacharias, a violinist, became dedicated to the art John Adams spelled as "Musick." Their son Jerrold was born in 1905. In 1922, right after he graduated from Duval High School (then the only high school for whites), the Zachariases decided to move to New York. For a while Isadore managed to commute almost weekly to his hometown to practice law. But it became clear

that, because of the superiority of New York's musical life, Jacksonville would no longer be their residence. Jerrold Zacharias did very well academically at Duval High School and enrolled at Columbia College. Yet he recalled learning little or being truly stimulated in Jacksonville, which educationally "never laid a glove on me."¹⁵³

Had this branch of the family remained in Florida, he would never have met Isidor Isaac Rabi, a future Nobel laureate.¹⁵⁴ At Columbia they began a lifelong friendship that reinforced Jerrold Zacharias's commitment to physics. He helped pierce the secrets of the atom, specializing in particle physics. During World War II, Zacharias worked at MIT on the development of radar defense systems and at Los Alamos where he helped to make the atomic bomb. In 1956, inspired by one of Rabi's ideas, Zacharias developed the first practical atomic clock. As though that invention were not enough, in the same year he became a pivotal pioneer in precollegiate science education (even as Jacksonville's taxpayers seemed to be buckling under the strain of supporting their public schools). Zacharias dedicated himself to the development and reform of the physics curriculum through the Physical Sciences Study Committee that the National Science Foundation supported.¹⁵⁵

After the shock of Sputnik in 1957, Zacharias argued that it was even more crucial to inspire pupils to understand how scientists work through observation, measurement, and the distillation of evidence. The history of discovery is punctuated by failure, and by the imperative to learn from mistakes, he insisted. By redirecting pedagogy toward an appreciation of the uncertainties of experimentation, Zacharias "started a revolution in science teaching in the United States," President Kennedy announced in 1961. (The juxtaposition in the early 1960s was too striking to pass over in silence. The public school system in Jacksonville that had spawned Zacharias was so deficient in lab facilities that all of its high schools stood on the brink of losing accreditation.) Appreciating the deepening civic need for advanced science, he served on the Science Advisory Committee of presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. In that postwar, Cold War

climate, the nation's most politically influential physicists belonged to the Los Alamos generation and typically taught in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Zacharias belonged to that inner circle. By the time of his death in 1986, he had served as Institute Professor of Physics at MIT, where he directed the Laboratory for Nuclear Science and Engineering.¹⁵⁶ So consequential were his contributions to science education in particular that he inspired a biography by a fellow physicist, Jack Goldstein of Brandeis University.

Other Zacharias family members remained in Jacksonville. Besides Isadore, four sons and two daughters grew up in the Laura Street home of Aaron and Theresa Zacharias. Pauline Zacharias, before marrying Max Oberdorfer, Sr., served as first president of the Jewish Women's League, the forerunner of the Temple Sisterhood. Among her successors was Theresa Zacharias plus the former Adele Strassberger of Baltimore, whose husband, Herbert Zacharias, was another son of Aaron and Theresa. In 1896 Herbert had been a member of the first confirmation class at Congregation Ahavath Chesed, and his wife Adele served as temple organist and directed the Temple Choir.¹⁵⁷ Percy Zacharias worked as a vice president of Cohen Brothers. Another of Aaron and Theresa's sons was Ellis Mark Zacharias, born in 1890. As a boy, his biographer claims, Ellis loved to roam the waterfront. At age eight, he was fascinated by the Navy patrol boats that came to Jacksonville to protect the coast against a badly overmatched Spanish navy during the Spanish-American War. Eager to join the U.S. Navy, Ellis left Duval High School to attend a preparatory school in Annapolis and in 1908 entered the Naval Academy. Following graduation four years later (along with Richard E. Byrd), Zacharias became an ensign.

It could not have been easy for a Jew to serve as an officer in the U.S. Navy; just ask Uriah P. Levy or Hyman Rickover to rejoin the living in order to show you their psychic scars. Still Ellis Zacharias persevered. In particular he became a close student of Japanese society and culture in the interwar period. While serving as naval attaché to the American embassy in Tokyo during the 1920s, Zacharias achieved fluency in Japanese. His chief interwar

*Admiral Ellis Zacharias on ship during World War II, 1941.
(From the Collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida,
originated by Marcia Jo Zerivitz, Founding Executive Director.)*

responsibility, however, occurred in the following decade in Washington, where he headed the Far Eastern division of the Office of Naval Intelligence. His warnings that, if hostilities were to break out in the Pacific, imperial Japan would launch a surprise attack and that Pearl Harbor would be a vulnerable target, were evidently either ignored or could not be effectively implemented. Such remarkable claims, it is important to

note, have been rebutted. Nor can they be evaluated here, although it is incontestable that Pearl Harbor was the nation's most catastrophic intelligence failure prior to September 11, 2001. Zacharias's memoirs do not suffer from vagueness and even assert that he predicted an attack upon Oahu on a Sunday morning.¹⁵⁸

And the war came. Captain Zacharias commanded a heavy cruiser, the *Salt Lake City*, which carried out early assaults on the Gilbert and Marshall Islands, as well as on Wake Island. In April 1942 the *Salt Lake City* also protected the aircraft carrier, the *Hornet*, from which Lieutenant Colonel James H. Doolittle launched the daring B-25 bombing raids that lasted thirty seconds over Tokyo. Zacharias also commanded a battleship, the *New Mexico*, that participated in the assaults on Saipan and Tinian (Operation "Forager"), and served as Deputy Director of the Office of Naval Intelligence from June 1942 until August 1943. In the summer of 1945, he participated in the psychological warfare program of the Office of War Information, seeking to break Japanese morale through the fourteen radio broadcasts that he delivered in Japanese and directed at the home islands. After V-J Day Captain Zacharias publicly doubted whether the defeat of Japan had required the dropping of the atomic bomb, the terrible weapon that his brilliant nephew, Jerrold R. Zacharias, had helped to develop as a member of the Manhattan Project. Brandishing commendations that included five battle stars, Ellis M. Zacharias won promotion to Rear Admiral upon his retirement in 1946. He died fifteen years later. Readers of the official history of Congregation Ahavath Chesed are bound to be touched by how democratically his name appears on the list, in simple alphabetical order, among the members of the synagogue who served in the world wars.¹⁵⁹

But what about the "Painting, Statuary, Tapestry, and Porcelain [sic]" that John Adams implied were the ultimate expressions of civilization that the masters of war and politics might bequeath to their posterity? Among Jacksonville Jewry, perhaps the chief benefactors of the arts have been Jay Stein and Morton Robert Hirschberg. Such a list might be contrasted with a

few other southern sites where the impact of Jewish philanthropy has been more decisive. In 1911 Isaac Delgado, a sugar and molasses dealer in New Orleans, established an art museum. In 1971 the Isaac Delgado Museum was renamed the New Orleans Museum of Art. The wealth that the Cone Mills Corporation generated in Greensboro, North Carolina, when channeled through the exquisite taste of the sisters Claribel and Etta Cone, made possible the remarkable collection of French paintings in the Baltimore Museum of Art. The Nasher Sculpture Center, based on the distinctive collection of Raymond and Patsy Nasher, is found in Dallas.

In contrast, wealthy Jews have generally been ancillary to the support of the fine arts in Jacksonville. That list of patrons is even shorter once Jay Stein's recent arrival is considered. Upon moving to the city in 1984, he joined the board of the Cummer Gallery of Art and of the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra. Stein later became a member of the board of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., as well as a founding benefactor of that city's U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. He is also among the most generous contributors to the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life.¹⁶⁰ Lonnie Wurn served as a lifetime trustee of the Cummer Gallery, which has been perhaps best known for its collection of what John Adams had singled out: porcelain. Wurn and his son Larry especially committed themselves to the support of the Gallery's collection of early Meissen treasures.¹⁶¹ That the roll call of Jewish benefactors is not larger is not easily explainable, though oral history can slightly buttress the record of support. For example, Ben Stein's wife Ruth had two pianos in their home and the couple supported the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra. After one of its concerts, which featured Isaac Stern, the Steins invited the violinist to their home for a party. At the end of the evening, Stein presented the virtuoso with a bottle of wine. He hugged his host as an expression of appreciation and promptly dropped the bottle, which smashed. The damage had no effect upon the Steins' patronage of classical music in the city.¹⁶²

Morton Hirschberg, who brings this story full circle, was the only other significant Jewish patron of the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens. His mother, Mena Williams Hirschberg, was the niece of Morris Dzialynski, and recalled in a short memoir having been chosen in 1885 "to make the presentation speech of the flag of the State of Florida at the inauguration of Governor Edward A. Perry at the Capitol in Tallahassee." A photograph of her at the gubernatorial inauguration is reproduced in *Mosaic* although the flag that the young Mena Williams is shown holding happens to be Old Glory. Her husband, Julius Hirschberg, had owned the cigar factory in Tallahassee where his nephew, Day Apte, the diarist's husband, secured his first job. After the turn of the century, Julius Hirschberg moved to Jacksonville, where he became a successful real estate developer. Their son, Morton Hirschberg, born in Tallahassee in 1897, was confirmed at Jacksonville's Congregation Ahavath Chesed in 1911.¹⁶³ Coincidentally that was the year Arthur Ruppin, the most eminent social scientist of the Jews in that era, published *Die Juden der Gegenwart* (The Jews of the Present), and lent his authority to the view that "the Jewish race is the incarnation of the capitalist-business spirit." Also in 1911 the most influential scholarly work on the Jewish adherence to that very spirit appeared: Werner Sombart's *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben* (The Jews and Economic Life). In challenging Max Weber, Sombart substituted medieval and early modern Jews for the Calvinist worldly ascetics, and like Ruppin argued that this beleaguered people was hardwired for commerce. Despite Sombart's pro-Nazi proclivities two decades later, his scholarship and interpretations have sometimes been taken quite seriously. David Ben-Gurion even translated one of Sombart's earlier books into Hebrew.¹⁶⁴

Hirschberg shrewdly expanded the investments that he had inherited, and, upon his death in 1978, his estate provided the largest single bequest ever received by the synagogue that his great-uncle had founded barely a century earlier. The sum that Hirschberg allotted even topped the bequest of Philip N. Coleman to Congregation Ahavath Chesed in 1974, two years after his death.¹⁶⁵

Conclusion: Businessmen as Citizens

The philanthropy such financial acumen made possible typified some of the businessmen whom this essay portrays and stimulates the larger scholarly question that Sombart posed. "His claims may be absurd," the great English historian H. R. Trevor-Roper concluded, "but at least we cannot deny the economic importance of the Jews." To be sure Sombart's extravagant historical speculations did not impress the great Jewish historian Salo W. Baron. He could nevertheless discern a "metaphysical sympathy" of the Jews for capitalism and acknowledge their affinity for enterprise. The diasporic experience reflected "their detachment from the soil, the bourgeois spirit of their urban life, [and] the artificiality of all Jewish existence . . . as against peasant concreteness." Money, Baron added, is "the most abstract and irrational of values." It encouraged "the Jews [to be ready] to carry its implications to the logical extreme." Take, for example, the declaration of Sol Nazerman, the Holocaust survivor and protagonist of *The Pawnbroker*, that "next to the speed of light, which Einstein tells us is the only absolute in the universe, second only to that I would rank money." A sociological correlate can be discerned today in the United States, where 4 percent of Catholic households earn more than \$100,000. Mormons are commonly regarded as superbly equipped for free enterprise, so that it comes as no surprise that the proportion of their households above \$100,000 is triple that of Catholics. Thirteen percent of Mormon households earn more than that figure. But that proportion is only half of the 27 percent of Jewish households that earn that much.¹⁶⁶

A president of the Jacksonville Jewish Community Council during the Great Depression, Hirschberg had served in the U.S. Army during World War I and in the Navy during World War II. Such enduring patriotism also typified a gratitude that generations of Jews expressed in various ways toward the republic that gave them refuge and sheds an eerie light on the advice that one of President John Adams's recent successors, Richard M. Nixon, gave in the Oval Office in 1972. Learning of the friction his daughter Patricia "Tricia" Cox was facing in making public appearances in museums, Nixon recalled that his other daughter,

Julie Eisenhower, had participated in a museum program in Jacksonville. The president of the United States could scarcely have been more dismissive: "The arts—you know—they're Jews, they're left-wing—in other words, stay away."¹⁶⁷ The example was ill-chosen. None of the Jews who helped enhance the artistic life of Jacksonville could be characterized as left-wingers, nor could any of the other Jewish business people who prospered there be so designated. They were hardly animated by the desire to fight the power, but in some cases hoped to join it in a city where enterprise and initiative could pay off—at least for some.

The neo-Marxist project of writing "history from below," the challenge of recounting "history from the bottom up," would therefore not be suitable for Jacksonville's Jews, many of whom did not stay down long. The faith in free enterprise particularly propelled the first and second generations. The prospect of upward mobility, the exaltation of personal autonomy, and the dream of liberation from poverty have been central ingredients in the ideology that was shared throughout the nation, by the native-born and the newcomers, by prospectors and peddlers, by winners and also by losers such as Teach, the small-time hoodlum who struts in David Mamet's 1975 drama, *American Buffalo*. This profane punk defines the economic options that the society makes available as "the freedom . . . of the *Individual* . . . to Embark on Any [expletive deleted] Course that he sees fit In order to secure his honest chance to make a profit. . . . This country's *founded* on this."¹⁶⁸ Four years after Congregation Ahavath Chesed had been formed, the class of 1886 at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama showed the ubiquity of this ideology by picking as the class motto what proved to be a cruel delusion in the era of systematic racial segregation: "There Is Room at the Top." Sinclair Lewis's George Babbitt's exhortation to himself ("Gotta hustle") expressed the ethos of making it (or at least faking it, since there is not room at the top for all).¹⁶⁹ A can-do spirit, a ferocious yearning not to accept destitution as though it were destiny, were widespread in the republic a century or so ago. Such attitudes were virtually idiomatic and were absorbed with notable intensity among Jacksonville Jewry.

However, generational change did mean a lesser commitment to achieving success in business. Jacksonville could not be entirely exempt from the national impact of the 1960s. Soon after that tumultuous decade, journalist Harry Golden came to the city to interview the rabbi of Congregation Ahavath Chesed. Sidney M. Lefkowitz informed Golden that younger Jews were “turning away from profit-oriented careers and seeking work in areas bringing personal satisfaction” such as the professions and education. Active participation in competitive capitalism could exact a high psychic price, and one scion of a Jacksonville family bequeathed a touching testament to a business civilization and its discontents. A great-great-nephew of pawnshop owner Harry Finkelstein (previously mentioned), Kenneth N. Fink, married the daughter of Ben Friedman of the Vogue Shops and became a Jacksonville attorney specializing in securities law. In his profession Fink was driven. So dependent was he upon the fetish that transforms time into discrete units, upon the Algeresque icon that marks the regularity and punctuality of modern work, that a senior partner remarked that Fink happened to be wearing two watches. “It only increased my embarrassment when I noticed that they were both on the same wrist,” he recalled. But a debilitating illness (possibly chronic fatigue syndrome) suddenly and mysteriously provoked an acute resistance to the pressures of the corporate culture. The various remedies Fink sought included kabbalistic healing, astrology, clairvoyance, and Sioux “sweat lodges.” His spiritual autobiography records a transition “from the boardroom to the ashram.” Having already joined the ranks of those who were “materially comfortable,” Fink could discern what was emotionally missing in “a life that was competitive and demanding.” From it he could disentrall himself and experience “a new kind of freedom” that tapped into “my interest in subtle energies and . . . different planes of consciousness.”¹⁷⁰

Fink’s chronicle of disenchantment is quite rare among Jacksonville Jews. So are the exact equivalents of the very great Jewish fortunes built from a single company rooted in a southern community. Jacksonville lacks a counterpart to, say, Atlanta’s Home Depot, founded primarily by Arthur Blank and Bernie Marcus in

1978, and which became the nation's second largest general retailer (after Wal-Mart). Charlotte can boast the Family Dollar variety store chain, founded in 1959 by the twenty-two-year-old Leon Levine, the son of a Rockingham, North Carolina department store owner. Family Dollar spread into nearly every state and employs over 35,000 full-time and part-time workers. Leon's son Howard Levine is currently the chief executive officer of this *Fortune* 500 corporation. The 2,200 retail outlets of Zales jewelry had their origins in Wichita Falls, Texas, in 1924, although the company moved to Dallas two decades later. Founder Morris Bernard Zale (né Zalefsky) revolutionized access to what had once been a largely upscale business. Austin boasts Dell Computer, which founder Michael Dell made into one of the world's largest manufacturers of personal computers. Nor has the company of any Jacksonville family ever enjoyed the cachet that consumers have bestowed on a business outside the South like Baskin-Robbins, founded in Glendale, California, by two brothers-in-law who had drawn largely on their bar mitzvah money.¹⁷¹ Ditto the Cincinnati family that succeeded so well at baking and marketing matzo that an astronaut, thrilled to be walking on the moon, could exclaim: "Man, oh Manischewitz!"¹⁷²

The annals do not reveal any such equivalents in Jacksonville. Yet the city can still rightfully make its claims on historical attention. For anyone curious about the Jewish experience in the South and in America itself, the commerce of this community ought to be in play. The aim of this essay, then, has been to amplify what historians have learned of Jewish enterprise elsewhere through plugging a hole in the historical knowledge of Jacksonville.

NOTES

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