

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel B. Heimovics, *Managing Editor*

Eric L. Goldstein, *Book Review Editor*

2004

Volume 7



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

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

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ISSN 1521-4206

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HISTORIAN PROFILE

“What Was on Your Mind Was on Your Tongue”:
A Profile of Leonard Dinnerstein

by

Clive Webb

I doubt anyone who meets him ever forgets Leonard Dinnerstein. Forcefully opinionated and terrifically funny, he leaves as strong an impression as words etched into the bark of a tree. Dinnerstein is widely revered as one of the greatest historians of American Jewry. Much of his most significant research has focused on the southern Jewish experience. Indeed, he is one of the intellectual pioneers who first trod the path for other scholars to follow. I meet him in the sumptuous surroundings of the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Houston, Texas, where the Southern Historical Association is holding its annual meeting. Dinnerstein is here to present a paper on the Leo Frank case, the topic that first established his reputation within the historical profession more than thirty years ago. He greets me with a warm smile and a strong handshake, looking much younger than his sixty-nine years. “I have always looked very young,” he asserts. “When I was eighteen I looked fourteen and that’s very embarrassing.”¹

I first came across the name Leonard Dinnerstein when I was undertaking the preliminary research for my Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Cambridge. My interest in the role of white liberals within the civil rights movement had led to the discovery of a supposed political alliance between African Americans and Jews. I set out with the intention of examining the origins of this alliance during the interwar era. However, the focus of my research shifted when I came across a few casual references to the Jews of the American South. Initially, I simply had to come to

terms with my total ignorance of the subject. As I thought more about it, I became fascinated by the idea of a religious and ethnic minority that occupied an anomalous position within the biracial order of the South. How, I wondered, did southern Jews react to the civil rights crisis that consumed the region in the wake of World War II?

The wheels of my imagination had started to turn. What moved them into first gear was Dinnerstein's, "Southern Jewry and the Desegregation Crisis, 1954-1970."² The article depicted southern Jews as a people sympathetic to the civil rights cause but paralyzed by fear of retaliation from white segregationists. Such was the desire for self-protection, asserted Dinnerstein, that southern Jews turned on those within their own ranks who dared speak out in support of black civil rights. This anguished portrait of a community caught between the dictates of their conscience and the basic need for survival formed the basis of my research. I wrote to Dinnerstein asking for further advice and received an informative response full of bibliographic suggestions. Although I had not yet met him, Leonard Dinnerstein had become one of the formative influences on my academic career.

More than a decade has elapsed since I first read that article, and it is a strange sensation after all that time to find myself interviewing the man who wrote it. Dinnerstein proves to be an intriguing conversationalist who reflects candidly on his own career and the interpretation of southern Jewish history by other scholars.

From the Bronx to "Who was Leo Frank?"

Leonard Dinnerstein was born into a working-class community in the Bronx on May 5, 1934. His parents, Abraham and Lillian, were of eastern European descent. After receiving his B.A. from the City College of New York in 1955, he worked outside of academe for three years and then enrolled as a part-time graduate student at Columbia University. By his own measure, he made a less than auspicious start. As he puts it, "The prognosis for my career while I was a graduate student would not have been very good." Dinnerstein recalls a particular course taught by the great

Leonard Dinnerstein

(Photo courtesy of Leonard Dinnerstein)

New Deal historian William Leuchtenburg. "I would say in the seminar that I took with him, of the twelve people, if he would have had to rank them from one to twelve, I would have been ranked twelfth." Although Dinnerstein passed his major exams, he failed his minor in American government. When he retook the exam, "they passed me on the condition that I not do a political dissertation."

Dinnerstein received more positive advice from a number of sources. The first was his wife, Myra, who suggested that he research a dissertation on some aspect of civil rights. The second

source was a stranger he met in an elevator. Dinnerstein recalls leaving a meeting with Leuchtenburg at which they agreed on the broad focus of his dissertation, and being so excited, he started discussing his research with the first person he walked into. Rather than rushing out at the next floor, the woman in the elevator offered the young graduate student some shrewd advice. "Remember," she said, "the Jews were involved in civil rights." Enthused by this chance encounter, Dinnerstein then called a sociologist friend to ask for a more specific suggestion. The friend offered him a name. "And I said, 'Who's Leo Frank?'"

The Leo Frank case is one of the most infamous episodes in American Jewish history. On April 29, 1913, Frank was arrested for the murder of Mary Phagan, a thirteen-year-old who worked as his employee at a pencil factory in Atlanta, Georgia. The chief prosecution witness was a black janitor, Jim Conley, who claimed that he helped carry the body of the dead girl to the coal cellar where it was later found by police. It took the jury only four hours to find Frank guilty. News of his conviction was received ecstatically by the thousands of people who had assembled outside the courthouse. For the next two years Frank's fate remained uncertain as his defense team launched a series of appeals. Although the defense failed to establish the innocence of their client, they did eventually secure the intervention of Governor John Slaton, who commuted Frank's sentence to life imprisonment. Two months later, a band of men seized Frank from the state prison farm and hanged him from a tree near Mary Phagan's birthplace in Marietta.

Although other authors have written about the case both before and since, the study by Leonard Dinnerstein remains the best. The dissertation was completed in 1966 and published two years later by Columbia University Press. In more than thirty-five years, it has never been out of print.

Yet the book was almost never written. At the outset of his research, Dinnerstein contacted a number of people for advice. Among them was journalist and author Harry Golden, who informed Dinnerstein that he was working on a book about the

Progressive Era which would include a chapter on the Frank case. Dinnerstein was still working on the dissertation when Golden published *A Little Girl Is Dead*.³ The murder of Mary Phagan was no longer a solitary chapter, but the sole focus of the book. It was every graduate student's worst nightmare: to labor in obscurity for years on a research project only for a famous author to preemptively publish a book on the same subject. "I felt it was like a giant stepping on a cockroach," admits Dinnerstein. Had he known Golden would publish the book, he would have abandoned his own dissertation.

It is a blessing that he did not abandon it. *The Leo Frank Case* is a brilliant critical analysis of the causes and consequences of that notorious criminal trial. Dinnerstein situates the case within the broader context of the turbulent social and economic changes that beset the southern states in the early twentieth century. He demonstrates how the emergence of the factory system was seen by many southerners as a momentous threat to their traditional way of life. The rural laborers who migrated to Atlanta in search of employment suffered material deprivation and cultural dislocation. Urban life destabilized the traditional order of laborers' lives by weakening old family and community ties. Wages were low and working hours long. Laborers returned home after a twelve-hour shift to the overcrowded and unsanitary slums that bred crime and disease. Working people needed someone to blame for the appalling degradation they endured and, in the words of Dinnerstein, it was Leo Frank who was "chosen to stand trial for the tribulations of a changing society."⁴ In the minds of many ordinary Atlantans, the murder of Phagan was emblematic of the evils of urbanization. Southern society idealized the supposed innocence and virtue of white womanhood. Male laborers were thus tormented by guilt at their failure to protect their wives and daughters from the corruption and vice of city life and the physical hardships of the factory system. Leo Frank was a scapegoat for the shame and anger of the white working classes. Dinnerstein notes how southerners in times of crisis, such as the Civil War and the agricultural depression of the late nineteenth century, blamed Jews as the source of their troubles.

The Leo Frank case was therefore not an isolated incident, but part of a larger pattern of persecution against Jews. As a northern Jewish industrialist, Frank was seen as a cultural outsider who ran roughshod over southern sensibilities in his pursuit of wealth. The sexual assault and murder of Mary Phagan, therefore, symbolized the sense of victimhood that thousands of working class men and women felt at the hands of their rapacious employers.

Since the publication of the book in 1968, the Leo Frank case has become firmly embedded in the collective cultural memory. The story has been translated into almost every medium. There are several novels, most notably *The Old Religion* by David Mamet; a television miniseries, *The Murder of Mary Phagan*, starring Jack Lemmon; and even a musical, *Parade*, written by the author of *Driving Miss Daisy*, Alfred Uhry.⁵ The ghost of Leo Frank clearly still haunts Dinnerstein himself, as testified by the fact that he is presenting a paper on the case at the conference where we meet. That paper does not cut much new interpretative ground, but rather reiterates the same conclusions that Dinnerstein reached in the 1960s. When I ask him how he accounts for the almost iconic status that Frank has attained, he laughs disarmingly and admits, "God only knows."

Recent years have also witnessed the publication of two new case studies of the trial. In a book published in 2000, Jeffrey Melnick uses the affair as a lens through which to examine the relationship between African Americans and Jews in the South. Melnick takes issue with scholars, such as David Levering Lewis, who see the lynching of Frank as having shattered the security of the Jewish community and convinced its leaders to create a political alliance with their fellow victims of violent prejudice, African Americans. Instead, Melnick claims that the case inflamed bitter ethnic conflict between the two peoples. He emphasizes how the defense team sought to implicate Jim Conley for the murder of Mary Phagan by exploiting popular stereotypes of black rapists. The black press interpreted the tactics of the defense team as an assault on the reputation of all African American men and launched an indignant counterattack on Frank.⁶

Leonard and Myra Dinnerstein, 2002
(Photo courtesy of Leonard Dinnerstein)

Dinnerstein is dismissive of this interpretation. He claims that Melnick “completely missed the boat” in reading the case as a struggle between two competing minority groups. It is nonetheless notable that, despite the implications of a black janitor being used as the chief prosecution witness against a Jewish defendant, Dinnerstein does not address the reaction of the African American community in his own study of the trial. Had he done so, he would have discovered that the black press did close ranks around Conley. The *Savannah Tribune*, for instance, dismissed the efforts of Governor Slaton to commute Frank’s sentence to life imprisonment, commenting that he would “have a hard time convincing the people of Georgia as to the innocence” of the condemned man.⁷ Although Dinnerstein constructs a much more coherent narrative of events, readers interested in the case should seek out Melnick for an important alternate perspective.

Dinnerstein is much more positive in his evaluation of *And the Dead Shall Rise* by Steve Oney.⁸ He is impressed both by the

“massive amount of detail” that Oney has uncovered and by his dramatic recreation of the trial, particularly the “mesmerizing effect of Jim Conley” on the courtroom. His one criticism of the book is that it does not convey the carefully calculated political strategy of Jewish organizations in mobilizing public support for Frank. Dinnerstein describes how Jews lobbied newspaper editors, political representatives, and other influential public figures to issue statements proclaiming Frank’s innocence. The use of these “Gentile fronts” was essential in such an incendiary political climate, safeguarding against accusations of a Jewish conspiracy to subvert the criminal justice system.

Contributions and Controversies

Although Dinnerstein will always be associated with his work on the Leo Frank case, it is by no means his only research on southern Jews. In 1970, Dinnerstein was appointed to a position at the University of Arizona, an institution to which he would eventually provide more than thirty years of service.⁹ During his tenure he made a number of additional contributions to the historiography on southern Jewry. In 1973, he and Mary Dale Palsson produced *Jews in the South*, an anthology of previously published work on the subject.¹⁰ Dinnerstein also wrote a series of important articles. In “A Note on Southern Attitudes Toward Jews” (1970), he took issue with such renowned scholars as Oscar Handlin, John Higham, and Richard Hofstadter over their interpretation of southern antisemitism. Dinnerstein accused these historians of basing their assertion that antisemitism was a weak political force within the region on unsubstantiated generalizations. More thorough research would, he argued, reveal that prejudice toward Jews was a more pervasive ideological and political force than had hitherto been realized. Dinnerstein also asserted that what little had been written on southern Jews purposely underestimated the strength of antisemitism. The scant community studies that did exist emphasized the civic virtue of southern Jews at the expense of a more rigorous critical study of the past. As Dinnerstein observed, “a good deal of the writing by Jews about themselves has been steeped in filio Pietism and

provincial pride." The article therefore established a new research agenda by encouraging greater analytical reflection on the history of southern Jews.¹¹

Dinnerstein further defined the field with the publication in 1971 of "A Neglected Aspect of Southern Jewish History." The article developed his revisionist analysis of southern antisemitism by arguing that "latent prejudices" toward Jews periodically rose to the surface in times of crisis. Dinnerstein cited the Civil War as one such example, as well as the social and economic tensions that surrounded the Leo Frank affair. The persistent threat of antisemitism had, according to Dinnerstein, circumscribed the public behavior of southern Jews in a manner unseen in other regions of the United States. Fear compelled uncritical conformity with the cultural mores of the South, including support of racial segregation and states' rights. In a clear refutation of earlier interpretations of southern attitudes toward Jews, Dinnerstein concluded that "The fear of anti-Semitism is pervasive among Jews in the twentieth century South. This sets the tone for a good deal of Jewish behavior in the region."¹²

This analysis was articulated in more detail in the 1973 article "Southern Jewry and the Desegregation Crisis, 1954-1970." Dinnerstein argued that the public position of southern Jews on the race issue was determined by the prevailing opinion of the white community. In his words, "Where the gentiles are cosmopolitan the Jews are likely to be also. Where the Christians are more conservative, one finds Jews similarly inclined." Although Dinnerstein offered some illustrations of Jews who had been able to speak out in public support of desegregation, his general portrait was of a people frightened into silence by the force of white racism. In most southern communities Jews dared not demonstrate racial nonconformity for fear of retaliation by the white gentile majority. They were at particular pains not to be tainted by the same brush as liberal northern Jews. "The Jew worries if another Jew is 'identified with a position that is extremely unpopular' because he feels that all Jews will then be visited with economic reprisals or social ostracism." Dinnerstein captured the paradox of southern Jewish reactions to the civil rights crisis.

Southern Jews believed that their social and economic security relied on public compliance with the forces of white massive resistance. Yet, by offering their tacit support to racist organizations, such as the White Citizens' Council, they sustained a climate of intolerance and hate in which they could never be truly safe.¹³

Dinnerstein consolidated his interpretation of southern Jews in one of the chapters of his outstanding study, *Antisemitism in America* (1994). The recurrent theme of his research is the tenuous social and economic status of southern Jews. According to Dinnerstein, Jews were never entirely welcome in the South, but rather they were tolerated on the condition they did not challenge the customs of the region. As he argues, "The almost total acculturation of Jews in the South allowed them to maintain a facile cordiality with Gentiles even though just beneath the surface lay a bed of prejudice ever ready to label Jews as Christ-killers and Shylocks."¹⁴

Some scholars have taken issue with this assessment of southern attitudes toward Jews, emphasizing the relative weakness of antisemitism in the region. Dinnerstein is nonetheless adamant that the defining characteristic of southern Jews has been their fear of incurring the wrath of the white Christian majority. His analysis appears to be based on his own upbringing in the Jewish neighborhoods of the Bronx. Dinnerstein claims that he was reared in a social climate that encouraged children to demonstrate intelligence and wit more than humility and respect for their elders. This was an environment in which children were both seen *and* heard. "Now, I grew up in the Bronx and whatever was on your mind was on your tongue," he asserts. "Good manners was nowhere on the list of socialization...I used to think confrontation was the normal way of talking with people." The assertiveness of Bronx Jews contrasts sharply with what Dinnerstein sees as the timidity and caution of their southern coreligionists. In the Bronx, he insists, Jews were never taught about "knowing your place." By contrast, "If you were born in Alabama, you never misbehaved in public. Never, ever. 'Cause you're a representative of the Jews, and what will people think of the Jews?"

Dinnerstein is therefore critical of the revisionist literature that has appeared in recent years, which emphasizes the strength of southern Jewish involvement in the civil rights movement. In 1997, Mark Bauman and Berkley Kalin published a collection of essays titled *The Quiet Voices* that demonstrated substantial southern rabbinical activism in support of racial integration. I pushed this analysis further in a book published four years later, *Fight Against Fear*, by arguing that a significant minority of southern Jews supported the assault on Jim Crow.¹⁵ Dinnerstein considers that neither book accurately captures the sheer sense of terror and panic that seized southern Jews during the civil rights crisis. As he bluntly expresses it, "Those rabbis were frightened."

The racial attitudes of southern Jews have been historically determined by their relationship with the white Christian majority. Much of the focus of Dinnerstein's study of southern antisemitism has therefore focused on white prejudice toward Jews. He has, nonetheless, addressed the issue of black hostility against Jews in one of the chapters of *Antisemitism in America*. Dinnerstein traces black antisemitism to the religious indoctrination of slaves in the antebellum South. The Protestant fundamentalism of their masters taught slaves to distrust Jews for having crucified Jesus and refusing to accept Christianity as the one true religion. "African Americans were continually instructed with the Christian gospel, and within their culture the word 'Jew' became synonymous with the enemy, lacking humility or gentleness, always the antagonist of Jesus."¹⁶ The secular stereotype of Jews as avaricious money-makers also penetrated the consciousness of African Americans, compounding the strength of their prejudice.

This interpretation of African American religion is, in my opinion, too reductionist. Black Christianity was more ambiguous toward Jews than Dinnerstein supposes. Slaves had a strong respect for Jews as God's chosen people. They drew explicit parallels between themselves and the ancient Israelites, predicting that they, too, would be led out of captivity and delivered to the Promised Land. Dinnerstein cites slave spirituals such as "De Jews done killed poor Jesus" in support of his analysis. However, there

Leonard Dinnerstein in Norway, 2002
(Photo courtesy of Leonard Dinnerstein)

are many other spirituals including “Daniel in the Lion’s Den” and “Go Down Moses” that offer an altogether different depiction of Jews.

Whether or not Dinnerstein will return to such issues is unclear. His scholarship has never focused exclusively on southern Jews. *Natives and Strangers*, a history of immigration and ethnicity in the United States written with Roger L. Nichols and David Reimers, is, arguably, the best classroom text on the subject. The book for which he is perhaps best known outside of the United States is not *The Leo Frank Case*, but his 1982 study, *America and the Survivors of the Holocaust*. Now retired from the University of Arizona, Dinnerstein is still an active participant in academic conferences and is currently completing a book on the Holocaust, “for people who have never heard of Adolf Hitler.”

More than thirty years ago, Dinnerstein wrote that “The major difficulty in understanding the nature of southern attitudes is

the lack of significant scholarly analysis of southern Jewry."¹⁷ Dinnerstein did more than simply identify the problem. No scholar arguably has done more to establish southern Jewish history as a distinct field of study. During the interview, Dinnerstein tells me that he suffers the occasional loss of memory, but it is I who forgets that we are supposed to meet later in the hotel lobby. I am nonetheless reassured that neither I nor anyone else has heard the last of him.

Appendix

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 NOTES

¹ Annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association, where the author interviewed Leonard Dinnerstein, took place in Houston, November 6 to 9, 2003.

² Leonard Dinnerstein, "Southern Jewry and the Desegregation Crisis, 1954-1970," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 62 (1973): 231-241. For a list of Dinnerstein's publications, see the Appendix on pages 40-44.

³ Harry Golden, *A Little Girl Is Dead* (Cleveland, OH, 1965).

⁴ Leonard Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case* (New York, 1968), xv.

⁵ David Mamet, *The Old Religion* (New York, 1997); *The Murder of Mary Phagan* (Orion Pictures, televised by NBC, 1988); Alfred Uhry (book) and Jason Robert Brown (score), *Parade* (1998).

⁶ Jeffrey Melnick, *Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South* (Jackson, MS, 2000).

⁷ *Savannah Tribune*, August 30, 1913.

⁸ Steve Oney, *And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank* (New York, 2003).

⁹ Dinnerstein has been a Fulbright German Studies Seminar Participant (2002), and a recipient of several National Endowment for the Humanities fellowships and research grants from the Immigration History Research Center, the Harry S. Truman Library, Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, Herbert Hoover Library, American Philosophical Society, and American Jewish Archives. He was recognized with the Distinguished Humanist Award from Ohio State University and a University of Arizona Social and Behavioral Sciences Research Professorship (1990).

¹⁰ Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Palsson, *Jews in the South* (Baton Rouge, 1973).

¹¹ Leonard Dinnerstein, "A Note on Southern Attitudes Toward Jews," in *Uneasy at Home: Antisemitism and the American Jewish Experience* (New York, 1987), 73-82 (quotation on 78).

¹² Leonard Dinnerstein, "A Neglected Aspect of Southern Jewish History," in *Uneasy at Home*, 83-102 (quotations on 87 and 94).

¹³ Dinnerstein, "Southern Jewry and the Desegregation Crisis," 232, 233.

¹⁴ Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York and Oxford, 1994), 177.

¹⁵ Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin, eds., *Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s* (Tuscaloosa, 1997); Clive Webb, *Fight Against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights* (Athens, GA, and London, 2001).

¹⁶ Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 198.

¹⁷ "A Note on Southern Attitudes Toward Jews," 77.