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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Eric L. Goldstein, *Book Review Editor*

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NECROLOGY

Saul Viener (1921-2006)

by

Bernard Wax

Meeting Saul Viener for the first time was usually an eye opening experience for someone unaware of the fact that Saul could exude boundless knowledge and culture almost without effort. In a quiet, modest manner he would engage the listener in a litany of information about a Richmond Jewish cemetery, a Civil War site, or the role of history and its effects on mankind. In his courtly manner Saul personified the ideal southern gentleman of the "Old School" but who, with a wink and a nod, admonished me to "dress British but think Yiddish."

I first heard about Saul after becoming director of the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS) in 1966 and learned of his involvement in the 300th anniversary celebration of the 1654 arrival of the first group of Jews to settle in what became the United States. Of particular note was that he had stressed the importance of the role of the Jews of the South in the nation's development and had helped create a short-lived Southern Jewish Historical Society (SJHS) which faltered in the latter part of the 1950s.

His early interest in American Jewish history was demonstrated by the fact that his 1947 master's thesis dealt with the political career of Isidor Straus, who had roots in Georgia soil, and he subsequently wrote articles for the *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* on Richmond Jewry. Although he did not pursue an academic career, his life was suffused with the study of history and the Jewish experience in its many aspects. It was not surprising to find Saul at meetings of many national Jewish

organizations, which he served in some important capacity at which matters of Jewish cultural concern were discussed and addressed. His knowledge of communal politics and personalities and his adroit maneuvering in the early 1970s helped create the Joint Cultural Appeal in which agencies such as AJHS were, for the first time, to be collectively given allotments of funds raised by the Jewish federations.

With the advent of the American Bicentennial celebrations Saul envisaged the revival of SJHS. Working with AJHS, the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Richmond Jewish Community Council, and Virginia Commonwealth University, a joint effort which only he could accomplish, a conference on southern Jewish history was held in Richmond in 1976. The meeting proved to be a huge success with a large attendance, and a subsequent volume of the proceedings, *Turn to the South*, ensured the society's revival. Naturally, Saul was elected its first president.

From that point SJHS became one of his major concerns. Not only did he provide leadership but also, after his presidency, he offered sage advice to the society's officers and board. Often he would step in to help solve problems which inevitably arise with the formation and operation of a volunteer organization. At times he would be in almost constant contact by phone and mail offering suggestions, advising officers, and establishing contacts for the society. After he acquired a computer his emails were even more frequent and helpful. Rare was a person in the organized Jewish community whom Saul did not know, and he used these personal associations and friendships on the society's behalf. This "gift" was evidenced on several occasions when some difficulty arose in finding a host community for the society's annual conference. After contacting Saul, a location would be found and a host committee soon formed.

Simultaneously Saul became increasingly active with AJHS helping to develop membership and fundraising as well as promoting the establishment of local Jewish historical societies throughout the country. He proved to be the prime ambassador of good will for AJHS and ultimately became its president in 1979. It was during his tenure that the society created its award winning

exhibit "On Common Ground" which detailed the history of the Boston Jewish community from its roots to 1980. Saul proved crucial in securing financial support and publicizing this project nationally, again through his widespread personal contacts.

Little is known of his assistance in creating what is now known as The National Center for Jewish Film. Originally formed by AJHS as the Rutenberg-Everett Yiddish Film Collection, Saul took a leading role in securing and buttressing aid for this new endeavor which had been designed to ensure the collection and preservation of Yiddish films. He saw these as a form of historical manuscript shedding light on the experience of European and American Jewry in a personal and emotional fashion. No doubt he was privately driven by his affection and past use of the *mamaloshen* as the son of immigrant parents.

Saul had a particular interest in a program between AJHS and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The purpose of The America-Holy Land Project was to document the relationships which existed between America and pre-state Israel by locating and recording the existence of manuscripts, archives, books, and documents which reflected those ties. Ultimately several documentary guides were published and over sixty volumes relating to the subject were reprinted in cooperation with one of the divisions of the *New York Times*. Saul not only participated in an America-Holy Land scholarly conference at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., but also arranged for a similar session in Richmond and helped secure funding for both meetings.

Because of his respect for the role of academic historians in serving as guides and mentors to local and national communities Saul immersed himself both in cultivating their friendship and, ultimately, their involvement in Jewish historical study. His support was crucial in establishing the Academic Council of AJHS, an advisory body that helps to arrange professional meetings and raise the standards of the society's publications. Evidence of this is manifest in the contributions of Melvin I. Urofsky of Virginia Commonwealth University who was crucial to the formation of the 1976 conference, co-edited *Turn to the South* with the late Nathan Kaganoff of AJHS, served as a speaker at SJHS conferences,

and authored both an outstanding volume on the Levy family and its role in preserving Jefferson's Monticello and an exhibit catalog, *Commonwealth and Community: The Jewish Experience in Virginia*. Without Saul's diplomatic prodding and encouragement, Urof-sky's fruitful and insightful research might never have taken place.

Saul reveled in the history of the entire Richmond and Virginia communities and served on the board of the Virginia Historical Society and contributed to the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*. He was the ultimate tour guide for Richmond taking the visitor throughout the area and noting the significance of a particular building, cemetery, park, or neighborhood. His enthusiastic descriptions filled with details were evidence of his dedication to getting the facts "straight" and to making them both informative and fun. Aware of the need for collecting and preserving records of the Richmond Jewish community, Saul took a leading role in the establishment of the Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives at his home congregation where he was eventually honored by the establishment of the Saul Viener Fund for the Study of the American Jewish Experience in recognition of his service to the congregation, Richmond, Virginia, and the nation.

Finally, a personal note: although Saul invariably served as a friend, mentor, and instructor to me and many others, I found him to be a good listener, avid for new information and insights that I might provide. One of my lasting memories was observing his almost childish delight in visiting Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, absorbing information about its history and waxing enthusiastic over the nation's oldest surviving Jewish house of worship. He excitedly pointed out that the building was physical proof of the existence of the Jewish community in the colonial period. And then he noted that the building and congregation were associated with George Washington's letter declaring "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance" thereby demonstrating the integral importance of the Jewish community to the establishment of religious freedom in the United States. At the time I recalled Saul's admonition "to dress British and think Yiddish." I concluded then that it would be best "to think Viener."