



SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

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FALL, 2015

"I've Never Walked So Straight or Felt So Tall" ... Arnold G. Blair

On March 26, 1965 Arnold G. Blair of Memphis, Tennessee, wrote a letter to his lifelong friend Warren Samuels in New York. That letter, which is held in the archives of Temple Israel in Memphis, provides insight into the strife-filled period of the American Civil Rights Movement and into the character of Arnold Blair, a staunch advocate of civil rights and a contemporary soul of heroic proportions.



Blair and his wife Isabel (Billie) were from New York. After his graduation from Wharton in 1927, he tried his hand in the securities business, but with the crash of the stock market, he came to Memphis with his wife after receiving an offer from Dreifus Jewelers to run one of their stores. At Dreifus he made friends with John Wesley, a black man who worked there as a porter.

He never considered himself heroic, but as a sixty-year-old husband and father of two young sons, Blair put his life and business on the line when he and John Wesley traveled to Montgomery, Alabama, to support the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in his third march from Selma to the capitol building in Montgomery. At that time Arnold and Billie Blair operated a retail business in Memphis, The Blair House, whose customers might have been less than pleased to learn of his activism.

The three Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965 were part of the Voting Rights Movement underway in Selma, Alabama. By highlighting racial injustice in the South, they contributed to passage that year of the Voting Rights Act, a landmark federal achievement of the 1960s American Civil Rights Movement.

The first march took place on March 7, 1965. State troopers and county possemen attacked the unarmed marchers with billy clubs and tear gas after they passed over the county line, and the event became known as Bloody Sunday.

The second march took place March 9. As the march crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the protesters met state police officers. Instead of confronting them, the marchers knelt, prayed, and retreated, as King agreed to do in last-minute negotiations with President Lyndon Johnson. The day would become known as Turnaround Tuesday.

The third march started March 21. With Alabama Governor George Wallace refusing to protect the marchers, President Johnson committed to do so. Protected by 2,000 soldiers of the U.S. Army, 1,900 members of the Alabama National Guard under Federal command, and many FBI agents and Federal Marshals, the marchers arrived in Montgomery on March 24 and at the Alabama State Capitol on March 25. With thousands having joined the campaign, 25,000 people entered the capital city that day in support of voting rights.

Please see BLAIR, Page 4

JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH - FOUNDED IN 1986

6560 POPLAR AVENUE, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38138

President's Message



My journey to the presidency of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South has been relatively brief and totally inspired by my dear friend, the late Sumner Levine. Sumner's enthusiasm was incredibly contagious and I am sure that many

of us attended our first presentations because of him.

Our program committee for this year, chaired by our Program Vice Presidents, Marcia Levy and Madelyne Daneman, is off to a fabulous start. You will see those programs listed on the last page of this newsletter. Mark your calendars!

We are so fortunate to have these two outstanding women at the helm of the community's window into our organization. Marcia is also our President Elect. She has been very involved in our community and served as National President of the Brandeis National Committee.

Madelyne's career with our Memphis Jewish Community Center spanned many years, enriching ~~multitudes~~ of lives of all ages, especially those of the seniors who traveled with her, in the states as well as abroad.

I hope that many of you will join me in attending the Southern Jewish Historical Society Conference in Nashville, October 29 - November 1. Please go to their website, www.jewishsouth.org/upcoming-conference for the multifaceted details on the exciting plans for their very special event.

Lastly, a personal note about our first speaker for our Sumner Levine Speaker Series, Liz Levitt Hirsch. I had the privilege of meeting this charming energetic lady who was the major factor in saving the incredible Levitt Shell. Please come to hear her family's story, along with the Memphians who worked diligently with her on this project, where Memphians of all cultures are harmoniously side by side for fifty free concerts every year.

Wishing a year of good health, much happiness and peace in our world for each of you and your loved ones.

Joy Wilk

Jewish Historical Society of Memphis & the Mid-South

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*Of Blessed Memory

When the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South announced that our speakers' series for 2014-15 was to be dedicated to the memory of Sumner Levine, a long time advocate and prime mover of the Society, there was a generous outpouring of donations. Many donors, however, were under the impression that this fund was to exist for only one year. We would like to continue this most deserved tribute and are seeking annual donations for the maintenance of this Fund, which is designated solely for honorariums for our speakers. Please mail your tax-deferred contributions to:

**Jewish Historical Society
of Memphis and the Mid-South
6560 Poplar Avenue
Memphis, TN 38138**

(Indicate that this is for the Sumner Levine Speaker Series Fund.)



"How the Levitt Shell Came to Memphis"

Thursday, September 24, 2015, 7:00 PM

(Please note day and time)

Panel Discussion introduced by Katie Smythe

Panelists:

Barry Lichterman

Henry Nelson

and special guest Elizabeth Levitt Hirsch



Liz Levitt Hirsch spearheads the Mortimer & Mimi Levitt Foundation, a private family foundation founded by her parents in 1963 to support the arts, culture and education. In this role, she travels throughout the country to bring the message of Levitt Pavilions to national recognition.

Liz lives in Los Angeles, and we are honored that she will be a part of this very special program.

Barry Lichterman is a fourth generation Memphian. He was founder and served as president of Memphis Levitt Shell for seven years and is President Emeritus of Friends of the Levitt Pavilion, Memphis.



Henry Nelson is a Memphis Radio Legend. He has been an integral part of Memphis radio and Memphis music history for over 25 years. He is Strategic Partnerships Coordinator at the Levitt Shell.



Visit our website: www.jhsmem.org

Arnold Blair's letter reads as follows:

Dear Warren,

John Wesley, a very old friend, came by the house at 2:30 AM Thursday, March 25, 1965.

It was bitter cold and raining.

He and I put a dozen sandwiches, six hard-boiled eggs, fruit and a thermos of coffee in the car; enough to last the 24 hours we would be on the road (one doesn't stop and try to eat in a restaurant in Mississippi and Alabama while traveling with a black man).

It was a long hard drive of 370 miles to Montgomery. We arrived there at 11:15 AM. On the outskirts, I asked a man at a filling station where the Civil Rights Marchers were. He looked at John, then me, then spit on the ground.

Near the capitol, we asked an Alabama National Guardsman and he shrugged.

We parked the car and started toward Main Street. We left our eyeglasses in the car and felt it best not to walk together. I was to lead and inquire and John follow.

At W.T. Grant I bought three packs of gum for 15 cents. I left the even change on the counter and the female clerk said, "Gimmie a penny tax. Something's got to pay for these niggers on parade."

A Negro preacher directed me to where the march was forming.

It was an eerie walk. The town was under siege. Six helicopters were circling overhead, very low, sounding like machine guns being fired slowly... thousands of soldiers... at every corner... on tops of buildings... emergency trucks... State Police in green plastic helmets carrying their now famous "billies"... ABC, NBC, CBS with mobile and portable cameras everywhere.

After a three-mile walk (it all seemed to be uphill) we arrived at headquarters just in time to hear a white parade organizer giving instructions over a bull horn.

"Remember to stay six abreast, women in the center. Don't answer and don't hit back, no matter what. We shall overcome!"

A group of American Historians were forming.

"I'm Van Woodward, Professor of American History at Yale—better put on your badge."

"I'm not a historian."

"Well, maybe you'll help make history today. Join us."

SSSSSo I joined Hufstadter of Columbia, Franklin of Chicago, Winkler of Rutgers, Weisberger of Rochester, Duberman of Princeton and twenty others.

"White scum! Nigger lovers!" screamed a passing truckload.

The march started. They had expected 10,000 and there were over 30,000 of us. First hundreds of reporters from all over the world: magazine writers, feature writers, the truckload of cameras; then the pink luminous shirted 300 who had marched from Selma... sneakers and legs covered with Alabama mud—the white faces red with sunburn.

"What do we want? FREEDOM! When do we want it? NOW, NOW!"

Then Martin Luther King, Ralph Bunche and every name you've ever heard of in the Rights movement. Then the marchers. The line stretched for miles.

"Go back North! Everything was wonderful 'till you came!"

AAAAA one-legged man caused a chorus of "Left, left, left."

AAAAA a nun's chastity was ridiculed.

"We shall overcome... yes, we shall overcome!"

I've never walked so straight or felt so tall.

Above the capitol dome was the Alabama flag, below it the Confederate flag and on a pail set in the ground, our flag. The troops who guarded us had Confederate flags on their uniforms. There were two solid lines of State Police stretched across the capitol steps, a grandstand below them, the mobile TV units and the helicopters. Harry Belafonte, Peter Paul and Mary—they sang their hearts out while we waited an hour for the parade to join us.



Among the marchers from Selma to Montgomery were a number of rabbis, including Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel responded to King's call for religious leaders to join the Alabama voting rights march. The march was spiritually fulfilling for Heschel, who recalled feeling like his "legs were praying" as he walked with King. Pictured are: Front row from far left: John Lewis; an unidentified nun; Ralph Abernathy; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Ralph Bunche; Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel; Frederick Douglas Reese. In the second row, seen between Dr. King and Ralph Bunche, is Rabbi Maurice Davis. The leis were sent from Hawaii by Rev. Abraham Akaka, a friend of Dr. King, a symbolic gesture that affirmed Asian-American support for the Civil Rights Movement.

Blair letter, continued

"Mississippi, kneel and pray, Hallelujah." (Repeat)

"Wallace, kneel and pray, Hallelujah." (Repeat)

Then came the speeches.

"We came with the power of our souls and the presence of our bodies to love the hell out of George Wallace and the State of Alabama."

"The next time the President calls out the Guard, let's see the American flag on their shirts and the American flag at the top of the dome."

During the Star Spangled Banner, the double line of troops just stood; no salute, no hats off, not at attention.

"This thing just wasn't happening. Just a bunch of goddam niggers and beatniks."

It was 75 degrees, at times it poured, and we stood till 4:00 PM. And it was over. I asked a trooper how to get to Route 82-West.

"First turn to your left, nigger lover."

It was a long drive home; rain and cold again.

Billie let me sleep later. At breakfast I read that Mrs. Viola Gregg Liuzzo had been killed driving a Negro home to Selma!

"My country, tis of thee
Sweet land of liberty."

My love to all...

Editor's note: Arnold Blair's friend John Wesley was the father of three children, each of whom was graduated from college. One son became an architect with Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, a prestigious architectural firm in Chicago; one became a nurse; and the third became the principal of East High School in Memphis.

We are indebted to Arnold Blair's son Allen Blair, a Memphis attorney who practices with Blair Mediation, for helping us fill in many details of his father's background.

Be Sure to Mark Your Calendars for These Future Programs

Sunday, October 11, 2015: Robert Goldsmith
"The Dothan Story"

Eight years ago Larry Blumberg, a Jewish businessman, was worried that his synagogue in Dothan, Alabama, was dying. He decided to put up \$1 million to finance a program to recruit fellow Jews to move there. The \$1 million recruitment plan offered Jewish families \$50,000 in relocation assistance to move to Dothan and remain for at least five years. The deal stipulated that the family would need to get involved in the local Jewish community, which was rooted around Dothan's floundering Temple Emanu-El.

Robert Goldsmith will speak about his "labor of love" as the Executive Director of the Blumberg Family Jewish Community Services of Dothan. A native of Baltimore, Robert earned his MBA from the University of Kentucky followed by a 30 year career in higher education finance and administration. He worked at the University of Kentucky, several colleges in New York State, then at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati.

One night during 2001, while folding laundry and watching *Law and Order*, life changed when his wife Lynne asked him, "What would you think if I applied to HUC's Rabbinical School?" Robert answered, "It's about time," and thus began a great new adventure for Rob, Lynne, and their two sons Michael and Daniel. Immediately upon Ordination, August 2007, Rabbi Lynne was honored to accept "her first and last pulpit" at Dothan's Temple Emanu-El.

With humor and anecdotes, Robert Goldsmith will share with us "The Dothan Story." He also promises to answer the question that he knows will be asked: "So is this guy related to the department store Goldsmiths?"



Sunday, November 15, 2015: Dr. Ralph Nurnberger
"Yitzhak Rabin - Personal Reflections on Israel's Man of War and Peace"



Born on March 1, 1922, in Jerusalem, Yitzhak Rabin was emblematic of the "new Jew", a strong pioneer committed to building the modern Jewish state. Rabin fought in Israel's War of Independence and, as Chief of Staff of the Army, helped to design Israel's stunning victory in the Six Day War. It was during his second stint as Prime Minister from 1992 to 1995 that Rabin transformed his legacy from "war hero" to "warrior for peace." He was murdered by a Jewish extremist at a post-Shabbat peace rally on November 4, 1995.

In this special lecture, Dr. Ralph Nurnberger, who addressed the Memphis Jewish Historical Society last year to discuss how the Danes saved over 95% of the Danish Jews from the Nazis, will combine an academic assessment of Rabin's career with personal reflections about one of Israel's most consequential leaders. He will discuss Rabin's life and legacy.

Dr. Ralph Nurnberger taught at Georgetown University since 1975; he was named Professor of the Year by the Graduate School of Liberal Studies in 2003 and received another award in 2005 for over 20 years of excellence in teaching. His most recent course at Georgetown was a graduate seminar on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

As the first director of "Builders for Peace", an organization established in 1993 to encourage private sector investment, Dr. Nurnberger worked closely with international leaders including Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, then-Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, as well as American and international business and political leaders.

40th Southern Jewish Historical Society Annual Conference

October 29 - November 1, 2015 Nashville, Tennessee

"Jews in the Urban South"

A complete conference schedule can be found at www.jewishsouth.org

CONFERENCE REGISTRATION FORM

NOTE: Full conference registrants must be current members of SJHS. If you have not yet joined or need to renew, please do so before registering for this conference.

Registration deadline is October 18. A \$25 fee per person will be added after that date.

Registration must be cancelled by October 18 to receive a refund.

HOTEL MUST BE RESERVED SEPARATELY. Rooms have been reserved at Homewood Suites, 2400 West End Avenue. Call (615) 340-8000 to make your reservation.

Name * _____

Spouse/Companion _____

Mailing address * _____

City * _____

State * _____

ZIP Code * _____

_____ Quantity: Annual Conference Registration, Price: \$125

Includes lunch and dinner Friday, lunch Saturday, and transportation to all events.

Optional tour on Thursday NOT included

_____ Quantity: Optional Conference Tour Registration, Price: \$25

Optional tour to Cairo Rosenwald School and Fisk University on Thursday.

Includes transportation.

Please indicate below how many guests will:

Attend optional Thursday tour * _____

Ride bus to concert Saturday night * _____

Ride bus to Nashville tour on Friday * _____

Need vegetarian meals * _____

Program Schedule for 2015-2016

***Thursday, September 24, 2015 7:00 PM: "How the Levitt Shell Came to Memphis"**

Special Guest: Liz Levitt Hirsch of the Mortimer and Mimi Levitt Foundation

Sunday, October 11, 2015 2:00 PM: "The Dothan Story"

Robert Goldsmith, Executive Director of the Blumberg Family Jewish Community Services of Dothan

***Sunday, November 15, 2015 1:00 PM: "Yitzhak Rabin: Personal Reflections on Israel's Man of War & Peace"**

Dr. Ralph Nurnberger, Professor, Georgetown University

Sunday, December 13, 2015 2:00 PM: "David's Sling: The Development of the Israeli Defense Industry"

Dr. Stephen Stein, Associate Professor, History Department, University of Memphis

Sunday, January 17, 2016 2:00 PM: "Beyond Ruleville: Journey of a Delta Jew"

Gene Dattel, Financial historian, author of *Cotton and Race in the Making of America*

Sunday February 14, 2016: TBA

Sunday, March 13, 2016 2:00 PM: Film

April: TBA

Sunday, May 22, 2016 2:00 PM: "Jews of the Soviet Union"

Robyn Helzner, vocalist and storyteller (Back by popular demand!)

All programs will be at the Memphis Jewish Community Center

*Please note changes in day and times

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