

SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

VOL. 27, NO. 1

Preserving the Past and Enhancing the Future

FALL, 2016

Natchez: "The Most Southern Place on Earth"

Mississippi's oldest Jewish community is often referred to as "the most southern place on earth." That's Natchez, host of the Southern Jewish Historical Society's 2016 conference, November 4-6. For upwards of two centuries, Jews have shaped the history of this river town, beginning with the arrival of itinerant peddlers in the late 1700s.

Natchez, a port in Adams County, developed a flourishing economy based largely on cotton as well as on the steamboat trade. During the nineteenth century, Natchez became a magnet for people from across the United States and around the world. Astonishingly, at the start of the Civil War, Natchez boasted more millionaires than anywhere else in the United States. Nowadays, Natchez still attracts visitors from all over the U.S. and abroad but the lure is the many splendid ante-bellum homes and portrayals of life in the Old South.

Early Jewish settlers to Natchez did not find a particularly warm welcome. The area was colonized by the French who propounded the Black Code. While it chiefly regulated slavery, the Black Code also expelled the Jews from this Catholic-dominated region. Fortunately, the law was not rigorously enforced. Most probably, itinerant Jews with no shortage of "chutzpah," roamed the territory. When the British assumed control of the area, life improved somewhat for the Jews who lived and worked there. While they were not considered full citizens, they were permitted to live there without harassment.

By the end of the American Revolution, the Spanish had gained control of the area. Late 18th Century court records contain entries with names such as Isaac Mayes (Mayer), Robert Abrams, F. Abrams, and Pedro Siegle. This would indicate that Jews in the area had settled there and become part of the community.

Please see NATCHEZ, page 4

Program: Sunday, September 18, 2016, at 2 pm Memphis Jewish Community Center

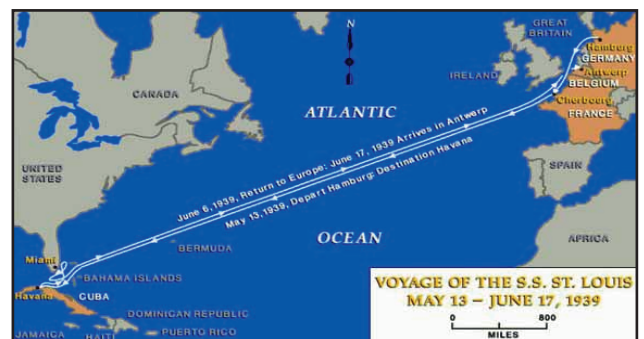
The Sumner Levine Speaker Series presents: **COMPLICIT**, A Documentary Film

The untold Story of why the Roosevelt Administration denied safe haven to Jewish refugees aboard the SS St. Louis

Followed by a discussion with Memphian Dr. Clark Blatteis, who was a passenger on the voyage

Special Guest Speaker: Robert Krakow, of the SS St. Louis Legacy Project Foundation

Complicit explores the impact of the WWII Jewish refugee issue on the Roosevelt legacy through a mythical courtroom drama that puts President Franklin D. Roosevelt on trial for complicity in Crimes Against Humanity. *Complicit* integrates painful history with compelling drama and includes rare and candid interviews with the heroic refugees who were turned away by the United States in June, 1939, and returned to the U.S. to make extraordinary contributions to American society. Don't miss this extraordinary program!



JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH - FOUNDED IN 1986
6560 POPLAR AVENUE, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38138

President's Message



When I was in college, I never signed up for a single history course. At that time, my concept of history was that it consisted of nothing more than boring lists of battles and dates, all to be memorized.

Some years later, I awakened one morning with the sudden realization that whether I liked it or not, I would eventually become a part of history. Along

with that realization came the understanding that history is truly learned only by learning about the people who lived it. History connects each generation to those that preceded it; through the study of history, future generations someday will be connected to our own.

This can happen only if our history is preserved. The mission of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South is to collect, preserve, present, and interpret the history of the lives of Jews in this region. Although we may be unable to reclaim past history that is lost, each of us should feel an obligation to ensure that there is no further loss of the stories, photos, and memorabilia that link our generation to the next.

The Society facilitates this effort through various projects. Our Oral History Committee conducts and records individual interviews. Our Archives Committee focuses on identifying persons in "Photos from the Past." These are stored in a special section of the Temple Israel Archives along with our collection of documents related to Jewish life in Memphis and the Mid-South. Please contact one of our Archives chairmen if you wish to donate items to the Jewish Historical Society Collection.

In addition, we present monthly programs featuring local as well as national speakers whose topics relate to Jewish history in the Mid-South and throughout the world. These programs are free of charge and open to the community. All our projects and programs are funded through memberships and donations to the Sumner Levine Speaker Series Fund. I encourage you to explore our website to view the many ways in which we are involved in preserving history.

It's an honor to serve as president of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South. Along with our excellent slate of officers and board members, I'll do everything I can to fulfill our mission in the coming year. I still have much to learn about history—come and learn along with me.

Marcia Levy

Jewish Historical Society of Memphis & the Mid-South

OFFICERS 2016-2017

PRESIDENT: Marcia Levy
VICE PRESIDENT OF PROGRAMMING:

Joy Wilk

CORRESPONDING SECRETARY: Lorraine Wolf

TREASURER: Ben Sissman

MEMBERSHIP: Phyllis Levine & Bryna Woodman

ARCHIVES: Freda Brode & Barbara Hellman

WEBMASTER: Dick Rubin

IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT: Joy Wilk

BOARD

Shaul Bar; Leo Bearman, Jr.; Mimi Clemons;
Herman Goldberger; Phyllis Groskind; Leslie Landau;
Joyce Lazarov; Linnie Mirvis; Herb Notowich;
Barbara Ostrow; Ron Perel; Shelly Pierce;
Nancy Raileanu; Asher Reese; Judy Ringel;
Rose Rubin; Harry Samuels; Bobbie Shainberg;
Steve Tabachnick

PAST PRESIDENTS

Harriet Stern*; Leonid Saharovici; Gloria Felsenthal;
David Schneider*; Steve Biller; Dr. Tom Stern*;
Sumner Levine*; Marjean Kremer; Peggy Jalenak;
Max Notowitz; May Lynn Mansbach;
Edward M. Kaplan; Gil Halpern; Dr. David Patterson;
Harry Jaffe; Harvey Reisman; Margie Kerstine;
David Ross

*Of Blessed Memory

A "Site" to Behold!

Thanks to the expertise of our Webmaster, Dick Rubin, our website has undergone a metamorphosis. The colors are brighter, and the home page now displays a slide show featuring some fascinating old photos from the Mid-South. Also on the home page is current program information which will be updated monthly.

The site is easy to use. You'll find issues of the Jewish Spectator dating back to 1897, as well as all the back issues of our own JHS newsletter. All our Oral History interviews are listed, and there is a page with histories of a number of Mid-South communities. Explore and enjoy!

The web address has not changed:

www.jhsmem.org

JHS Receives “Fedovation” Grant from Jewish Federation for *The Exodus Project*

“You can’t be happy in an unhappy country,” said Alexander Ilyin, a retired electrical engineer who came to Memphis from the Former Soviet Union over twenty years ago. “Anti Semitism permeated everything.”

“In Russia, no one smiles—in America—in Memphis—everyone smiles,” said Vladimir Voin, owner of Cobblestone Quality Shoe Repair in Sanderlin Center. Yet, for Mila Savarnaskaya of Moscow, leaving was a challenge—“you miss your friends—the smell of birch trees after the rain.”

These people are part of *The Exodus Project*, which is documenting the story of Jews who came to Memphis from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) during the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. Volunteers also are recording the stories of the people who helped in their re-settlement during and after the great Soviet Jewry Movement to free Soviet Jews.

On October 15, 2015, the Memphis Jewish Federation’s Fedovation Committee approved a \$6000 grant to the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South for *The Exodus Project* to collect these stories. Seventh and eighth graders from Bornblum Jewish Community School, the Margolin Hebrew Academy and throughout the Jewish community are playing a role in the project along with adult volunteers who are helping to interview participants, connect and listen to their stories and record their findings.

Through this experience they can learn about an important era in Jewish history and understand the impact of a communal effort, as well as the mitzvah of hospitality and welcoming newcomers and immigrants. Jennifer Campbell and her staff at the Temple Israel Archives are downloading the iPad video recordings and having them transcribed.

During the month of April, 2017, *The Exodus Project* will culminate with a special exhibition at the Memphis Jewish Community Center entitled “Memphis Jews From the FSU: From the Iron Curtain to the Bible Belt.” The exhibition will tell the story of multiple generations of diverse



L to R: Rita Bosina, Robyn Helzner, and Marina Levitanus

Rita Bosina and Marina Levitanus, some of the first to come to Memphis from the FSU, met Soviet Jewry Activist and performer Robyn Helzner at the Jewish Historical Society program in May.

Jews who came to Memphis and were part of the mass Exodus from the FSU. Highlights of the exhibition will include family and community photographs, excerpts from interviews and stories, documents, personal objects and hands-on experiential learning.

Collaborating with the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South on *The Exodus Project* are Bornblum Jewish Community School, Jewish Family Service Department of MJCC, Margolin Hebrew Academy, Memphis Jewish Community Center, Plough Towers, and the Temple Israel Archives.

If you know of someone who would like to be interviewed or if you would like to help in this project, please contact Lynnie Mirvis—Project Coordinator at Lynnie_mirvis@msn.com ☆

During this early period, the most prominent Jews in the area were the Monsanto brothers. Benjamin Monsanto was a slaveholder who owned 500 acres of land. Among his friends, he boasted the Spanish Governor, Gayosa de Lemos. Monsanto and his wife, Clara, had a home on St. Catherine's Creek. Unfortunately, he died suddenly during a trip to New Orleans in 1794.

There were other Jews in the area during the last decade of the 18th Century, including Abraham Buckholtz who changed his name to Buckels. When, in the late 1790s, the United States took over the area, a peddler named Henry Jacobs received full American citizenship, marking an historic first for the Jews of the area. There were other Jews living in Natchez during this period but it was nearly fifty years before the Jewish residents started to organize into a cohesive Jewish community.

The 1840's found immigrants from Alsace-Lorraine and Bavaria trickling into Natchez. Not having experience in farming, they opened dry goods stores in a rough area of town known as "Under-the-Hill," learning English on the job from their customers. Records show that in 1841, John Mayer and his wife moved from New Orleans to Natchez where he worked as both a tailor and a merchant for many years. Others began to follow suit including Aaron Beekman, Joseph Tillman, I. David, Solomon Bloom, and Simon Adler, merchants all. In a relatively short time, Jewish businesses were booming in Natchez. Schatz's ladies' ready-to-wear, started during this period, was in business until early in the 20th Century. A survey taken in 1858 revealed that of twelve Jewish-owned businesses in the Natchez area, eight dealt in either clothing or dry goods. But while the Jews in Natchez were growing prosperous, the Civil War was looming on the horizon.

Not surprisingly, the Jews of Natchez overwhelmingly supported the Confederacy. Among the outfits they joined were the Quitman Light Artillery, the Adams Light Artillery, the Natchez Fencibles, and the Natchez Light Infantry. Simon Mayer served with distinction,

becoming known as the "Little Mississippi Major" because he was just four feet, eight inches tall. Some called him "too short to shoot" but he distinguished himself by becoming an aide-de-camp for a General Sharpe.

Another Jewish soldier, S. L. Benjamin, volunteered as a private. He was captured in Grand Gulf but escaped through a prison release which led him eventually to Natchez. There he scandalized the locals by once tipping his hat to an African-American gentleman.



Temple B'nai Israel 1872

In 1863, Vicksburg fell to the Union Navy. A Union warship, the USS Essex, arrived in Natchez in search of ice for its wounded. Not only did the citizens of Natchez decline to provide aid, they started shooting at the ship. The U.S.S. Essex fired back, targeting the "Under-the-Hill" section of the city. During an attempt to flee the battle scene, a seven-year-old Jewish girl named Rosalie Beekman sustained a shrapnel injury. She uttered her last words, "Papa, I'm killed," and died, becoming the only Natchez casualty during the entire Civil War.

Although Natchez surrendered to Union troops, the citizens of the town were not totally dominated by Union control. Military governors controlled

the various areas and the quality of life in each district depended on the personality of the individual governors. Some were content to let life go on much as it had before. And some Jews, such as John Mayer, continued to work as merchants. Other governors were more militant. One General Brayman arrested numerous people for spying, including a Jewish girl who had called the general a tyrant.

The Civil War actually helped to increase the Jewish population of Natchez. A good many of the newcomers were erstwhile northerners who had served the Union Army as support staff. Two examples of new settlers who attained marked success after the war were Henry Frank and Isaac Lowenberg. Both men had supported the Union during the war but found a warm enough welcome by the Jews of Natchez. Apparently, a common Jewish background trumped local political loyalties. One result of their acceptance by the local Jewish community: both men found wives among the young Jewish

women of Natchez.

The period after the Civil War was something of a Golden Age for the Jews of Natchez. Prosperity grew and flourished, bringing the Natchez Jewish Community to a height of both wealth and prominence. During the late 19th Century, Jews made up just five per cent of the Natchez population, yet were owners of nearly one-third of the community's businesses. Family names of these prospering businesses included Geisenberger, Coleman, Frank, Beekman, and Lemle. For instance, in 1863, Henry Frank started a business on Pearl Street where he sold dry goods, boots, shoes, and notions. He served as both manufacturer and retailer, eventually becoming so successful that he served as president of the Natchez Board of Trade. During much the same period, another Northern Jew founded I. Lowenberg & Co. which sold groceries, cigars, and tobacco, eventually becoming the largest cotton handler in Natchez. Other members of the Natchez Jewish community included David Moses who was in the "cheap cash store" business and I. N. Moses who sold buggies and accessories during the 1870s and '80s. Jews also started non-retail businesses such as the Natchez Cotton and Merchants' Exchange. The Jews of Natchez became bankers as well. They were involved with the Moses Bank, First National Bank, Joseph Adolph & Son Banking, and First Natchez Bank. The success of these merchants and bankers helped draw other Jews to the area. By the late 1870s, the Jewish population of Natchez had grown to more than 200.

Not content to become merely a part of the local economy, the Jews of Natchez reached out to enter the realms of politics and society. There was significant involvement in civic affairs. Between 1882 and 1886, Isaac Lowenberg served two terms as mayor, and a couple of generations later, Saul Laub served as mayor from 1929-1936. Cassius Tillman, who owned a cigar store as well as a saloon, was elected sheriff of Natchez. Numerous other members of the Jewish community served as both aldermen and county representatives. In addition, many joined the Masons, the Odd Fellows and the Knights of

Pythias Lodge, as well as giving their time and energies to the volunteer fire department.

Desiring to make a permanent mark on the community, some of these successful Jewish businessmen built beautiful homes on Linton Avenue and Clifton Heights. Adolph Jacobs, who became a city alderman and president of the congregation B'nai Israel, owned a mansion on the corner of Orleans and Commerce streets. Today, it is known as Bailey's Bed and Breakfast.



Temple B'nai Israel 1905

Another handsome home, Glen Auburn, was built by the Moses family, just across the street from the synagogue. After the Civil War, Henry Frank, one of Natchez's richest and most influential citizens, bought Myrtle Terrace, another imposing mansion. An antebellum structure, known as the Neoclassical Guest House, was owned by the Ullman family. In later years, it was occupied by the Elks Club.

By the mid-1880s, the majority of Natchez Jews were native-born Americans. Others continued to arrive from Germany, Russia, and the province of Alsace. These Natchez Jews earned their livings as merchants, peddlers, clerks, insurance agents, and shoemakers. And there were

even a few lawyers and doctors. Dr. Philip Beekman ran a private outpatient center for surgery and obstetrics. Local lawyers included A. H. Geisenberger, Sim H. Lowenberg, and Julius Lemkowitz. As well, there were numerous successful Jewish-run businesses in the area. These included Kullman Brothers Wholesale and Geisenberger Brothers Drug Company. Others included A.D. Oppenheim and Brothers and M.M. Marks Tailor Shop. Karl Lehman, who had arrived in the area in 1867 from his native Landau, Bavaria, became involved in both the jewelry and grocery trades. Like the generation that had preceded them, this group of merchants thrived and prospered.

But what of their lives as Jews? The earliest efforts to form a congregation took place in the 1840s although it became inactive during the Civil War. When the war was over, merchant John Mayer spearheaded the effort

to restart the synagogue. He and others ran the congregation in the Orthodox tradition. However, their womenfolk, as well as newcomers to the area such as Sam Ullman, began pressing for the adoption of Reform Judaism. The conflict was heated but, ultimately, Ullman won out and the congregation, called B'nai Israel, became affiliated with the Reform Movement. By 1866, the congregation had purchased land on which to build a synagogue. The temple was built at the corner of Washington and South Commerce streets. In 1873, they reaffirmed their commitment to Reform Judaism by becoming a charter member of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Tragedy struck just thirty years later when faulty wiring caused the synagogue to burn to the ground. The congregation found temporary quarters in a nearby Methodist church where they held worship services and made plans to rebuild their synagogue. Two years after the fire, the congregation erected a new and larger building on the site of the old one. By 1902, temple records show, the congregation had nearly 150 member families and seventy-five children in their religious school. When the new synagogue was dedicated in 1905, Natchez boasted a Jewish population of 450, the largest it would ever have.

However, the temple was far from the only Jewish organization founded in Natchez. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries numerous Jewish groups emerged, a number of them begun by women. In 1865, the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Association was founded, later changing its name to the Hebrew Ladies Aid Association. The group ran the temple religious school and visited the sick. A local chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women was formed in 1896. The Hebrew Relief Association assisted newly-arrived immigrants to find work and places to live.

In the social realm, a group of prominent merchants founded a Jewish social club. Begun in the early 1890s, and known as the Standard Club, it was located at the corner of Franklin and Pearl Streets. The Standard Club functioned as a Jewish clubhouse and featured dances and balls, as well as providing a comfortable environment for playing cards and billiards.

As previously mentioned, the Natchez economy was based largely on cotton. In 1908, the boll weevil arrived. The impact on the general community, as well as on the Jewish community was severe. Some Jewish

businesses were forced to close. Compounding the difficulties, a series of floods plagued the city. One result of these misfortunes was the membership at B'nai Israel shrunk so low that the congregation had trouble paying its dues to the UAHC. In less than thirty years, the Jewish community of Natchez lost nearly 300 residents. The community would never again reach the size it was in 1905 when it dedicated its splendid new synagogue.

Despite the plagues of insect pests and flood waters, for much of the population of Natchez business continued as it always had. As the 20th Century progressed, the Jewish community responded to the U.S. entry into World War I, with many young Jewish men serving

in the Armed Forces and the women working at home with the Red Cross to support the troops.

On the home front, Jewish businesses continued to prosper. In 1919, the Seiferth family opened a dry goods store that remained in operation until the late 1960s. B. Kullman and Company was open till well into the 1920s. During the following decade, this family succeeded in saving some of their European family members whom they helped to escape before the beginning of World War II.

A handsome local landmark arose in 1927 when Isadore and Leon Levy, citizens of both New Orleans and Natchez, built the Eola Hotel, named for Isadore's



Natchez Temple Sanctuary

daughter. The family-run hotel remained in business for just a few years. In the wake of the stock market crash of 1929, they were forced to close.

By 1936, there were still nineteen Jewish-owned businesses in Natchez. Several, such as Geisenberger & Friedler, Krouse Pecan Company, and Abrams Department Store had attained the status of local institutions.



As in many small southern communities, the Jews of Natchez enjoyed close and amicable relationships with their Gentile neighbors. In a moving display of neighborly good will, many Christians contributed generously to the temple building fund after the synagogue fire in 1903. The Jews, for their part, made considerable effort to adapt to the Southern way of life. In 1932, a young Jewish woman, Jane Wexler, was crowned the second queen of the Natchez Mississippi Pilgrimage. Not surprisingly, her mother was a founding member of the Pilgrimage organization, which was dedicated to celebrating the old plantation South and its mythic heritage with fancy-dress balls as well as historical re-enactments displaying the valor of the Confederate soldiers.

The 20th century in the Natchez Jewish Community told a story of decline. It has been some time since the dwindling membership of B'nai Israel has been able to afford the services of a full-time rabbi. Young people have found greater opportunities in larger cities. The remaining members of the community are few and, for the most part, elderly.

Finally, in 1991, Temple B'nai Israel went into partnership with the Museum Department of the Goldring-Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. When the synagogue finally closes its doors, it will become a museum relating the history of this onetime flourishing Jewish community. Although the community is now a shrinking one, its important legacy will be preserved through the efforts of the museum. ☆

The source of information for this article was the Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities on the website of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life.

For more information about the SJHS Conference in Natchez, visit www.jewishsouth.org

	<h2 style="margin: 0;">Conference Registration Form</h2> <h3 style="margin: 0;">Jews in the Southern Hinterland</h3> <p style="margin: 0;">41st Southern Jewish Historical Society Annual Conference Natchez, Mississippi, November 4–6, 2016</p>	
<p>Name _____ Spouse/Companion _____</p>		
<p>Mailing Address _____ City/State _____ Zip _____</p>		
<p>Phone _____ Cell _____ Email _____</p>		
<p>Registration for full program:* Includes lunch/dinner Fri., lunch Sat., transport to all events. \$135/person (\$150 after Oct 1). \$ _____</p>		
<p>Jackson-Natchez round trip bus fee (See below for bus options) \$55/person. \$ _____</p>		
<p>*Full conference registrants must be members of SJHS. If you are not a member or wish to renew, include membership dues. \$ _____</p>		
<p>Daily options (local residents only) \$50 Fri program, lunch, dinner ____ \$50 Sat program, lunch ____ \$ _____</p>		
<p>Meals: ____ Require vegetarian meals. (Kosher meals are not available.) Total Payment: \$ _____</p>		
<p>Bus options: ____ Pick up at 9 am Fri, Nov 4, at Jackson Hilton for morning bus tour to Vicksburg, Port Gibson, & Natchez ____ Pick up at 1 pm Fri, Nov 4, at Jackson-Evers International Airport for direct bus to Natchez ____ Pick up at 9 am Sun, Nov 6, at Natchez Grand, drop off at Jackson airport, 11:15 am ____ Pick up at 12:30 pm Sun, Nov 6, at Natchez Grand, drop off at Jackson airport, 2:45 pm ____ I will arrange my own transportation to Natchez</p>		

Register online at jewishsouth.org OR, submit this form with your check (made out to **Institute of Southern Jewish Life**) to: Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, P.O. Box 16528, Jackson, MS 39236.

Early bird registration deadline is October 1 (postmarked). Take advantage of the reduced rate and help your conference organizers by registering early. Registration must be cancelled by October 21 to receive a refund. Bus fee is non-refundable.

Questions? Contact Rachel Myers at rmyers@isjl.org or 601-362-6357.

HOTEL MUST BE RESERVED SEPARATELY.

***SJHS dues:** (circle appropriate level)

Student (individual only)	\$15
General member (individual or family)	\$36
Patron	\$50
Century	\$100
Cedar	\$500
Sycamore	\$1,000
Magnolia	\$2,500

Mark Your Calendars!

Program Schedule 2016-2017

September 18: Film: *Complicit*, with Robert Krakow, of the SS St. Louis Legacy Project Foundation and Memphian Dr. Clark Blatteis

No program scheduled in October because of the Holidays

November: TBA

December 18: Marlene Trestman, author of *Fair Labor Lawyer: The Remarkable Life of New Deal Attorney and Supreme Court Advocate Bessie Margolin*

January: TBA

February: TBA

March 26: Stephen Whitfield, Max Richter Chair in American Civilization, Brandeis University: *Jews and the Ku Klux Klan*

April 3: Program in conjunction with opening of *The Exodus Project* exhibit

May 21: Robyn Helzner returns

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
MEMPHIS, TN
PERMIT NO. 533

