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Preserving the Past and Enhancing the Future

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Oral Histories Preserve Voices from the Past: A 2003 Interview With Jack Goldsmith

Jack Landman Goldsmith was born in 1910 and died in 2013 at the age of 103. He was interviewed at his home in Longboat Key, Florida, on April 20, 2003, by Sidney Friedman as part of an ongoing oral history project of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South and Temple Israel. This article contains excerpts from a transcript of that interview which can be viewed in full on our website, www.jhsmem.org. It has been edited for clarity but not for content. The information and anecdotes in these interviews are recollections of the interviewees, told in their own words; some information may not be accurate as a historical reference.

This is Jack L. Goldsmith, we are at Long Boat Key, Florida. The date of my birth is April 10, 1910. I just passed my 93rd birthday. My real name is Jack: not John, not Jacob, not Joseph. My mother wouldn't allow anyone to call me anything but 'Jack.'

The Goldsmith family started with my grandfather Jacob Goldsmith, whose father was Frederick Goldsmith and his mother was Sophie Ottenheimer. My grandfather (Jacob) was working for his uncle, Mr. (Louis) Ottenheimer, (his mother Sophie's brother) and he had his eye on his daughter, Dora Ottenheimer. Mr. Ottenheimer didn't like the idea of his nephew having an eye on his daughter. So to get rid of him, he suggested that he go down to South Memphis—he was in North Memphis—and open up a store. Well, that was like sending someone from Memphis to Nashville in those days because there was no transportation. There was no way to get from North Memphis to South Memphis, in 1870, that was.

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Robyn Helzner Returns to Memphis! **Sunday, November 17, 2019 2 PM at the MJCC** **Bridge to the Balkans** **A Jewish Shelter from the Storm**

Discover the Balkans, a little known oasis of Jewish life, through captivating stories, expressive Ladino and Yiddish songs, compelling video and striking images.

Robyn Helzner is a stunning vocalist and vivid storyteller. She also serves as Cantorial Soloist at Temple Sinai, Washington, D.C.

President's Message



As I begin my tenure as President of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South (JHSMM) I must pause to reflect on my long association with this organization. For many years I connected JHSMM with my mother, Frances Silberstein Evensky, and mother-in-law, Joanne Shroder Wolf Brod, both of blessed memory. Attending Sunday

programs with my mother gave me something to do with my mother that was of interest to us both, and it gave me a break from my kids for the afternoon.

I remember listening to my mother-in-law's presentation and interview about her grandfather, Dr. Max Goltman, of blessed memory, and his contribution to medicine in Memphis, getting chills as I realized the significance of what he had accomplished. Her interview in the film *The Jews of Memphis* beautifully captured Jewish contributions to the establishment and growth of the medical community in Memphis and memorialized her grandfather's important role forever.

I cannot say for sure that it was JHSMM that sparked my interest in Jewish history, but my interest grew into a passion for a family research project identifying the descendants of both my husband's and my great-great grandparents. Over the past ten years, I have identified over 1,000 descendants of my great-great grandparents who were from the Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, Austria, and Latvia and planned several family reunions introducing cousins and preserving our family histories.

Little did I know I would become involved personally in JHSMM. I innocently offered to help past president, Joy Wilk, joining the Board and becoming Corresponding Secretary. I then took on the task of co-chairing with Phyllis Groskind our Program Committee for the past two years. Last year we heard from Myron Sugerman who was known to be one of the last Jewish gangsters, Rabbi David Radinsky who spoke about the Jews of Charleston, Tim Lorsch who performed "The Suitcase," Dr. Josh Parshall who spoke about The Workmen's Circle in Southern Cities, Steven Weisman who spoke about "How Judaism Became an American Religion," and Chuck Fishman who spoke about Jews in Poland from 1975 to the present. All of our programs were amazing and well received by our community.

I have enjoyed planning programs and presenting historical knowledge to our community and I am looking forward to another great year working with Phyllis and Lynnne Mirvis on bringing new programs to our community. In addition to programming, JHSMM will continue to focus on

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*Of Blessed Memory

collecting and preserving the history of this region with oral histories, our archives project, and efforts to expand knowledge and access to our own Jewish histories.

We are all proud of our rich Jewish heritage in Memphis and the Mid-South and all of the efforts to preserve that heritage. I appreciate the opportunity to be part of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South, fulfilling our mission to *Preserve the Past and Enhance the Future*.

Lorraine Wolf

Planning to send a donation to honor or memorialize someone? Please consider the Sumner Levine Speaker Series Fund. Make checks payable to JHSMM and include a memo designating it for the Fund.
Mail to: JHSMM, 6560 Poplar Ave, Memphis, TN, 38138. An acknowledgment will be sent to the recipient.

In addition he said, “If you go down there, I will get you \$500 worth of credit at the Rice-Stix Dry Goods Company in St. Louis and the Louisville Supply Company,” which he did. So in 1870 he moved to Beale Street to get away from Dora Ottenheimer, and with his brother they opened up a store. He prospered and married Dora Ottenheimer anyway. He had an unusual life, my grandfather. He had seven children, I don’t know how many grandchildren and great grandchildren and he never saw the death of anyone in his family. He never saw the death of my grandmother because she had Alzheimer’s and at the time she didn’t know that he passed away, so neither one of them saw a child or anyone else in the family die, which was most unusual.

Anyway, he prospered. In 1878 there was a terrible Yellow Fever epidemic in the city of Memphis. It decimated the whole town. So my grandfather didn’t know what to do. He had a little girl two years old and a pregnant wife, so he knew that they couldn’t live in Memphis. So he packed up my grandmother who was pregnant, and the two-year-old girl and took a river packet up to St. Louis. I’m sure in my own mind that it was not like taking a cruise on the QE2—I don’t think the accommodations were too good.

He had some relatives there and they stayed there, and in 1878 my father was born in St. Louis. He was the only member of the Goldsmith family that was not born in Memphis, due to the Yellow Fever, of course. In October of 1878 my grandfather got news that there was a very heavy frost in Memphis, and he figured that killed all the germs and he would come back. He came back and took the boards down from the store on Beale Street. That was the only time from 1870 to 2003 that Goldsmith’s was ever closed.

On my mother’s side, I have records and trees of the Landmans that go back to 1878. In 1878 the name was changed from Rafael, which was a French name, to Landman. It was a time when people were given the titles of the jobs they had—Goldsmith was a jeweler, so was Silverberg. In 1878 they changed their name to Landman and I have a tree going back to my

father and mother which I would like for you to see. In 1931 I went to Germany and visited Shiffer, which is a suburb of Mannheim in Lucenheim and slept in a bed that my Grandfather Landman was born in.

He had several nephews and one came to Memphis and lived with my grandmother, Mrs. Landman, and subsequently moved to Philadelphia, where he married and became very successful. The other son, Max Landman, before 1914, moved to Mexico City where he opened up a business and became the sole agency for the Oliver Plow Equipment, and he was

very prosperous. But he developed high blood pressure and had to move to a lower altitude, which was Guadalajara, where he continued to do business and was quite successful. He would come through Memphis every year when he bought a new car in Detroit. He would stop at the house and visit with us. So I got to know Max Landman, and he invited me to come to Mexico.

My mother (Aimee Landman) married my father (Fred Goldsmith) in 1906. On their wedding trip they went to San Francisco. On April 18 they had that great earthquake and my mother and father were there in the earthquake. They were married and on their honeymoon. They had a drawing room, like a state room. They ordered their dinner back in the state room. They ordered quite a dinner—duck etc. So when they brought the food in my mother said to my father, “Can you carve the duck?” My father, said, “Oh yes,” and he picked up the knife and a fork to carve the duck and it went on the floor. That’s the last time my father ever picked up a knife to cut anything.

Anyway, they survived—they were in the St. Francis Hotel in Union Square in 1906. They ran out because of the fire and my mother broke away from my father and she ran back into the hotel. My father was panicky and ran up to get her. He got up to the door and the police stopped him. He said, “My wife is in there.” They said, “You can’t go in, she’ll never come out.” But she did come out and she found my father and he was very distraught and said, “Aimee, for God’s sake why did you go back and get your jewelry, it can be replaced, but your life is more important than the jewelry.” She said, “I didn’t go back for my

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jewelry, I went back for those things that I put in my hair.” She left all the jewelry in the fire.

They went to the Presidio Park—my mother said it was very interesting. Enrico Caruso was there, the great tenor, and he would come out and sing because he was concerned that he might have lost his voice in the earthquake, but he didn’t. My father wanted to get back to the family to let them know that they weren’t dead, but he didn’t know what to do. He said that after eating an orange, he saved the peelings of the orange thinking that would be the last food that my mother and father would ever eat together.

So he said he had to get out and get some news to his family. So he went down to the Embarcadero, which is the wharf, and he saw a fisherman who was crossing over to Oakland, which is across San Francisco Bay. He tore the cuff off his shirt and he wrote on it that he and my mother were well. He gave the cuff with the message on it to the fisherman, and he sent it to my grandfather in Memphis, that they were all well and fine. I never heard my father or mother ever say a word about the experience. My father did say that the earthquake was bad but the fire was what caused most of the damage. But they successfully came back.

After the earthquake my father and mother came back from San Francisco. Before they left, they had decorated an apartment. It was a brand new apartment building about three houses from where my grandmother lived. They fixed it up and were going to come back and live there. So they get back to Memphis from San Francisco and the second night they spend in their new apartment, my mother said to my father, “Fred, I’m homesick,” and my father said, “Aimee, you’re three doors from your mother, how can you be homesick?” and she said, “I’m homesick Fred, I want to go home.” So my father said, “Whatever you want to do is fine.” My father gave in. So they spent two nights in the apartment and then moved in with my grandmother. It’s where I was born. My sister (Dorothy) was born first, I was born, and then Fred Jr. was born. After Fred was born, I think they kicked us out. And we moved on Peabody Avenue. It was the most fun household—it was like a three ring circus going on all the time.

My grandfather was the warden of the Temple for a while and held some other offices. He was interested in the operation of the Temple. I was the only member of the family—four boys: my father’s two sons and uncle’s two sons—I was the only one who was Bar Mitzvahed. I was promised a beautiful watch

and lots of presents, so that is what really got me to be Bar Mitzvahed. But it was the biggest disappointment of my life. I went through it all and you should see the presents I got—I got fifteen fountain pens, six pairs of cuff links, two tie clips. I got nothing that was worth the effort it took me to become Bar Mitzvahed.

I went to Bruce School and the first day a boy comes up to me and hits me in the face and says “You’re a Christ killer.” And I said, “Who is Christ? I’ve never even heard the name.” So I came home and asked my mother, “Who is Christ? Someone told me that I killed him—I never killed anybody.” She said, “Who told you that?” and I said “A boy.” She said, “You go back there and hit him as hard as you can.” I said, “No, I won’t do that.” His name was Conway Ford and he was six or seven years old. Later on Conway Ford was a buyer at Phil A. Halle, a fine men’s store, in the boys’ department. I was also the boys’ buyer at Goldsmith’s and we became quite good friends. I never did remind him that he knocked the hell out of me the first day of school. That was my first introduction that there was a Christ.

I went to camp in Maine—to a boys’ camp for three years and a girls’ camp for one year. The girls’ camp was an interesting experience. My sister was going to a camp in Maine too. A lady came by, as she did every year, to visit the mothers of the girls that went to the camp. She came by the house to see my mother, asking if Dorothy was going back to camp. My mother said she didn’t think so. I was in the back yard practicing on a bugle. I was going to take a Boy Scout test or something. The lady’s name was Miss Henigan. She said to my mother, “Who is that blowing the bugle?” My mother said, “That’s my son out back—he said he was going out there to take care of his horse—he has a horse out there that he rides.” She said, “I’d like to talk to him.” So my mother called me in. And this lady says to me, “You can blow the bugle? And you got a horse you ride?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “How would you like to come up and be the assistant riding master at my camp in Maine? I’ll build you a special little bungalow on the lake for yourself and your job will be to assist the riding master and also to blow the bugle and ring the bell and clean up in the morning and so forth.” So I took the job.

There were some Memphis girls there—Louise Goodman, a beautiful girl—some more Jewish girls from Memphis. So everything was fine and then something happened. My clock went off at 6:00 o’clock and I got up and rang the bell and blew the bugle and all the girls came out to go to breakfast.

The mess hall was dark—there was nobody there. Somebody had slipped into my cabin and set my clock back an hour. I wasn't very popular after that. So they wait until Saturday when I could go into the little town with the counselors. So I'm all dressed up with my suit and my money and my watch and everything. I thought I was dressed pretty well, and about fifteen girls came and picked me up and took me out to the end of the dock and threw me into the lake—coldest water—I almost froze.

So some years later I'm living on Longboat Key and a lady at the end of my canal said, "Are you the Jack Goldsmith that blew the bugle that woke everybody up at the camp and was thrown in the lake?" I said, "That was me," and she said, "My name is Ellie Berger—I live down the road from you." So she came down and we visited.

I went to Culver Military Academy with Ira Samelson and Lester Samelson, Alvin Hattendorf, William Goodman. Before I went to work in 1931, I took a trip, with Ira Samelson. We took a Grand Tour of

Europe for about 4 months. I left New York and went to Iceland and then down through the North Cape and up to the Fjords in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland. I went to Russia in 1931 and I saw Stalin in a car and I had a very interesting time. I ran out of money in Paris and was embarrassed and had my brother send me a few dollars to get home.

My first job was receiving and marketing at Goldsmith's. I had worked in the summer time in different departments and different parts of the store. But the first real job that I worked six days a week was in the receiving department opening boxes and looking at merchandise. I stayed there one year.

I was running the boys' department in 1931-1932. This was in the heart of the Depression and at Goldsmith's business was very bad. The only way they could struggle and exist was to eliminate people. The common word today for firing people is 'downgrading.' There just wasn't enough business to satisfy keeping the help that we had. It was either survival or not. So one day when I was head

of the boys' department, I get a letter from the office which went out to all the people (all the buyers) that we had to get rid of two people in the boys' department.

The two people were two ladies—one's name was Mrs. Baldridge and one was Miss Foot—you know how many years this goes back and I still know these two ladies' names. The message came down that I had to let them go. So I called Mrs. Baldridge back in my office and I talked to her. I knew I worked with her a couple years in the department—she had a sick husband and two little girls. The salary then was \$12.50 a week, which we felt pretty good paying our employees \$12.50 a week because Gerber's was paying theirs \$10.50 and we were paying above scale.

So Mrs. Baldridge came back in my office and I said to her, "You know I'm going to have to let you go," and I explained all the reasons why—business wasn't there, for this, that and another. She said, "Oh Jack, I've got a sick husband and he can't work and two little girls and only making \$12.50 a week." She said, "I can't exist," and she just starts

crying and I start crying. I'm thinking this is terrible. This I can't do, I just can't do it. So I had the same experience with Miss Foot and it was the same thing and she was crying and all three of us were crying.

So I said, "Just wait a minute," and I went upstairs to my Father. I said, "You know I've got to let these two ladies go and they're both very good people and I just can't do it and explained why they need the money. I said, "Look, I'm making \$150 a month. I don't need the money—give it to them. Keep them on the payroll. Nobody I know has any money. I'm living at home—everyone is doing fine. I have my car, I get the gas at Goldsmith's. I have no problem. I don't need any money. Give it to the ladies." So he said, "That's very nice Jack, I don't think you'll have to do that. I can take care of it." So we kept Mrs. Baldridge and Miss Foot on the payroll. But it was a serious situation. It touched everybody.

I was commissioned in the United States Army in

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Goldsmith Department Store executive Jack Goldsmith at his desk in 1945.

1931. I was ten years in the Reserves. In 1941 when the war started I was sent to Philadelphia and then transferred to Washington where I stayed three and a half years in the Pentagon in the office of war plans and operation. I was honorably discharged in 1945.

Let me tell you a story about St. Jude. A good friend of mine was Ed Barry who was a young lawyer. Ed never married and his chief occupation in life was raising money for charities. So I get a telephone call from Ed in my office one day and he said, "Jack, I've got a fellow in my office that I want to come down to introduce you to." I said, "I'll walk up to your office, I need the exercise." He said, "No, Jack, I'm coming to your office." So I said, "Okay, come on down." So he walks in and I looked at this fellow and recognized him from some place, but I didn't know who he was. Then Ed said, "Jack, I want you to meet Danny Thomas."

So I said, "Hello, Mr. Thomas," and I'm thinking "What the hell is he doing here?" So he sat down. Ed said, "Jack, I'll tell you why Danny Thomas is here. He wants to build a hospital." Danny Thomas explained. He said, "I want to open a living shrine, a children's hospital, and nobody pays and they will do children's research. How much would it take Mr. Barry?" Ed said, "At least a million and a half." and Danny said, "If I can get \$750,000, can I get the city of Memphis to match with \$750,000?" and Ed said, "If Jack takes chairman of the big gifts committee, I think we can do it."

I said "Okay, but let me ask a question: Why did you select Memphis for this hospital?" Danny Thomas said, "It's very simple. I was dead broke during the Depression—I didn't have a dollar to buy my wife, Rosemarie, a Christmas present." Incidentally, Danny was a very devout Catholic, who was raised in a Jewish neighborhood and spoke Yiddish fluently. He said "I made a Novena to St. Jude—do you know who St. Jude is?" and I said, "No." Danny said, "He's the patron saint of the poor and destitute and I was both. If I was ever successful, I wanted to build a shrine to St. Jude.

The next day my career took off and I went to the 606 Club in Chicago. I didn't know what kind of shrine to build, so I went to the Cardinal in Chicago, who is Cardinal Stritch. So I told him that I said the Novena and I had the money and I wanted to build a hospital and where did he think the hospital should be built in Chicago. He said, "Danny why do you want to build it in Chicago?" Danny said, "Cardinal,

do you have a better place you can suggest?" The Cardinal said, "Yes, there is only one place to build this hospital," and Danny said, "Where is that?" and he said, "Memphis, Tennessee." So Danny said to the Cardinal, "Why Memphis, Tennessee?" and the Cardinal said, "That's my home," and that's why the hospital is in Memphis.

Ed and I called a meeting at the Peabody of 100 top business people. Most businesses had excess profits and they all had a lot of money and we raised the easiest amount of money I have ever seen raised for a cause in my life. Before that they had a party and it was called "The Shower of Stars." Dinah Shore, Carmen Cavallero, Jane Russell.

Carmen Cavallero was a pianist. Mr. Crump had changed all the streets—those going east and west were streets and the ones going the other way were avenues. It happened that they changed Beale Street to Beale Avenue and there was a great deal of dislike of that idea in Memphis, but they weren't going to change it. Carmen Cavallero wrote a song, "Please Mr. Crump don't start changing Beale Street to Beale Avenue." They started playing the music on the radio stations and Beale 'Avenue' is the only one that's different from the rest of the city streets and avenues.

As for my advice to the younger generation, I would say this: first, is to be honest and honorable—that's your personal life; in your business life, try to select the best people and the best contacts you can make. It's just common sense—there is no simple formula. It's just doing the right thing. I can remember my mother—I came in and told her that I did something real well and told her about it and I thought she was going to say "That's good Jack." She said, "Why shouldn't you do that?" I wasn't going to get credit for doing the right thing—that was expected. I was taught when people do the right thing, it should be normal, you should do the right thing. I never heard my father say anything against anybody. He always said if you can't say anything good, don't say anything. That pays off too. ☆

The Oral History Project is carried out by volunteers. One portion of the collection is comprised of interviews done by Selma Lewis for her 1998 book, A Biblical People in the Bible Belt. Also in the collection are interviews of individuals involved in the community who have significant knowledge of its past. Transcripts of additional interviews are available on our website: www.jhsmem.org.

Award Winning Journalist Esther Bindursky

Although women originally were restricted by custom from access to journalism occupations and faced significant discrimination within the profession, a few women operated as editors, reporters, sports analysts and journalists even before the 1890s. In the early 1930s, Esther Bindursky, reporting from her home in Lepanto, Arkansas, became a correspondent for the Memphis Commercial Appeal, which served as a daily newspaper for east Arkansas. She began with reports of natural disasters, highway fatalities, violent crimes, and obituaries and later progressed to feature stories carrying her byline.

Bindursky was born on January 28, 1904, in Drew, Mississippi. Her father, Meyer Bindursky, born in Bessarabia (which was divided between Moldova and Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union), was a merchant, and her mother, Minnie Iskewitch, a native of Poland, was a homemaker. Bindursky had three brothers.

Shortly after her graduation from high school in 1922, she moved with her parents to Lepanto, Arkansas. As a young woman, she played the piano for silent movies in the Lepanto movie theater. When the devastating Flood of 1927 struck the east Arkansas Delta, she became secretary of the Poinsett County American Red Cross chapter and then became a caseworker for the Arkansas Emergency Relief Commission.

In 1937, Guy Graves, who was publishing two weekly papers in Poinsett County, established the weekly Lepanto News Record and asked Bindursky to be its editor. From 1937 until her death in 1971, Bindursky was the only staff member of the paper. She wrote all the news, features, society stories, and obituaries. She designed and sold ads, took pictures, and wrote a column titled "This One's On Me," with the frequent subtitle, "Draggin' Main." She often assumed the duties of printer in making up pages. She was a charter member of the Arkansas Newspaper Women when it was founded in 1949 and was its president in 1950. This organization was a precursor to the Arkansas Press Women.

Her mastery was evident in the first-place awards she received from national and state press organizations. These included a National Editorial Association award for community service; awards from the National Federation of Press Women for photography, advertising, and feature writing; and awards from the Arkansas Press Association and Arkansas Newspaper Women for column and feature writing, gen-

eral excellence, typography, photography, and community service. This recognition led to Bindursky being invited to be the featured weekly editor at the University of Missouri's Journalism Week in 1956.

In addition to reporting on local events, she wrote features for the Commercial Appeal and the Arkansas Gazette. In 1937, the national Literary Digest magazine gave a full page to her coverage of Lepanto's annual fall event, the Terrapin Derby. Her story about a young Lepanto man, Staff Sergeant

Jimmy Hendrix, who received the Congressional Medal of Honor, ran as a feature in the October 20, 1945, issue of the Saturday Evening Post. She was also a skilled photographer. One of her nationally circulated news photos of a nun who survived a 1955 train wreck in Marked Tree, Arkansas, that killed five people won a first-place National Federation of Press Women award and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Bindursky used vacation time to attend national editorial and press organization meetings, and she developed a nationwide circle of friends and admirers. In 1960, the National Editorial Association invited her to be among the first group of American journalists to visit eight European countries, including the Soviet Union. When Lepanto civic leaders learned of the invitation, they secretly raised money to cover the tour cost of \$1,575, and surprised her with it at the annual Chamber of Commerce dinner, at which she was named Woman of the Year.

During the delegation's visit to Russia, she had her picture taken in front of a golden door at the Palace of the Czars and said of it, "My father, who once had to serve in Czar Nicholas's Army... would have gotten a bang out of that solid gold door. Strange, the Russians, who abhor money as a dirty, capitalistic menace, should guard and treasure this memento of the past."

Bindursky died of lung cancer in Memphis on April 23, 1971. Her death was reported in a three-paragraph obituary in the April 25, 1971, issue of The New York Times. She is buried in the Memphis Temple Israel Cemetery. She had never married and had no children. ☆

A portion of this article was originally published in *Arkansas Biography: A Collection of Notable Lives*.



Mark Your Calendars!

Program Schedule 2019-2020

November 17, 2019: Robyn Helzner, Vocalist & Storyteller
Bridge to the Balkans

December 8, 2019: Kirsten Fermaglich, Author
A Rosenberg by Any Other Name

January 5, 2020: Rabbi Micah Greenstein
Jews of Cuba & film: *Cuba's Forgotten Jewels: A Haven in Havana*

February 9, 2020: MJCC Film Festival Partnership

March 22, 2020: Schelly Talalay Dardashtay, Journalist, & International Speaker
Sephardi and Converso Jews Research

April 5, 2020: Film & Discussion with Donna Kantor, Speaker & Director
The Presence of Your Absence