



# SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

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## Yellow Fever: The "King of Terrors" The Memphis Jewish Community in the Epidemic of 1878

*By Patricia LaPointe McFarland*

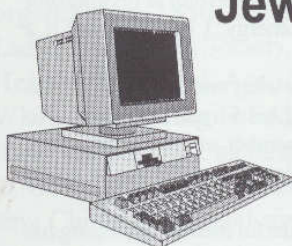
Situated on the fourth Chickasaw Bluff of the Mississippi River midway between St. Louis and New Orleans, Memphis was the economic center of a widespread cotton, lumber, and grocery market in the decades following the Civil War. The river that was the highway for commerce and large numbers of immigrants was also the vehicle for a variety of diseases, none so feared and disastrous as yellow fever, often referred to by newspapers as the "King of Terrors." During the 18th and 19th centuries, yellow fever was the most dreaded disease in America, and its especially virulent appearance in 1878 resulted in the death of more than 15,000 inhabitants of the Mississippi Valley plus an economic loss of 200 million dollars.

The warm, humid climate of the lower Mississippi Valley provided a lush breeding ground for the mosquito vectors of yellow fever and malaria. Because malaria was endemic in the South whereas yellow fever broke out sporadically, the latter was generally believed to be a disease directly attributable to poor sanitation or foul miasmas arising from rotting vegetable or animal matter. The bacterial origin of disease was not scientifically established until the 1870s when the research of Louis Pasteur in France and Robert Koch in Germany provided the proof for this major medical advance. The research that would prove mosquito



*Citizens fleeing from the stricken districts into Iuka, Mississippi*

*Please see Fever, Page 3*



## Jewish Genealogy on the Internet

**Sunday, April 21, 2002 - 2:00 p.m.**

**Bornblum Solomon Schechter School**

**Joyce Field**, Vice President of JewishGen, Inc. and former professor at Indiana and Purdue Universities, will demonstrate how to trace your family tree using the Internet and other resources. JewishGen is the primary Internet institution providing information connecting Jewish ancestry and family history. It partners with the International Association of Genealogy Societies, Yad Vashem, the Jewish Holocaust Memorial Museum, Beit Hatefutsoth and the American Jewish Historical Society.

At 10:30 a.m. April 21, Joyce will hold a "hands-on" workshop in the computer room at Bornblum Solomon Schechter.

JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH - FOUNDED IN 1986  
P.O. BOX 17304, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38187



## President's Message . . . .



Peggy Jalenak

The Jewish Historical Society is having a successful year! Capacity crowds have attended our programs, starting with "From Swastika to Jim Crow." Ellen Frankel's "Jewish Folklore," Robert Rosen's "Jewish Confederates," Martin Gilbert on "Churchill and the Jews," and Josef Yerushalmi on the Marranos have all been enlightening and entertaining. By this printing Dr. Richard Skloot will have spoken about the Jews of Cuba, and we will have held our annual Selma Lewis Scholars Program.

Be sure to mark down April 21, when Joyce Field will speak about "Jewish Genealogy on the Internet" at 2:00 p.m. at Bornblum Solomon Schechter School. Our annual meeting and elections on May 19, 2:00 p.m. at the JCC, will feature historian Mark Greenberg's talk "Discovering Jewish Heritage Along the Mississippi River," co-sponsored by the Goldring Woldenberg Institute for Southern Jewish Life. All of our programs are in co-operation with Bornblum Judaic Studies of the University of Memphis. Many thanks to David Patterson. It's a terrific partnership.

What a delight it is to work with such a supportive and energetic Board and Committee Chairs! Marjean Kremer has been especially efficient and talented taking care of our publicity and chairing the Nominating Committee. She has come up with a top-notch slate for next year. It's good to know

ange. If I can determine even half of his amazing ation and boundless energy, I will consider it a r accomplishment.

hope to maintain the variety and quality of articles David achieved during his 14 years of service. To nd, I ask that each member of the Society share me any ideas for stories you would like to see in e issues.

David has been a wonderful mentor in passing his r of love" on to me. Although this issue is the t of my work, it is also a product of David's ration.

*Marcia Levy*

op-note state for next year. It is good to know- able Max Notowitz will succeed me. Sumner particularly helpful in all respects, and is iting trip May 26-27 to see historic Jewish ngs.

ee from this newsletter, our new editor, Marcia sset. Allen Cohen is doing a wonderful job in new and current members. Arthur Buring is Treasurer as there ever could be. Thanks to graciously stepping in as Acting Secretary. bach and Harriet Stern are working diligently rded Histories. Irwin Kaufman, founder of Society, hopes anyone interested in tracing

Mrs. Leona Dunskey  
Dr. & Mrs. Ronald Grossman  
Mr. & Mrs. Saul Kaplan  
Mr. Richard Kessler  
Ms. Bertha Landau  
Mr. & Mrs. Bernard Lapides  
Mr. & Mrs. Stuart LaVene  
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Mr. & Mrs. Raymond Shainberg  
Mr. & Mrs. Michael Sherman  
Mrs. Esther Shendelman  
Mr. & Mrs. Jason Wexler  
Mr. & Mrs. Alfred Wexner  
Mr. & Mrs. Ira Wruble

## From the Editor . . . .

To attempt to follow in the footsteps of David Schneider as editor of this newsletter is an awesome challenge. I can demonstrate our

## Jewish Historical Society of Memphis & the Mid-South Officers 2001-2002

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## WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS

Mr. & Mrs. Bert Barnett	Dr. & Mrs. Michael Levinson
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family trees will join us in discovering new insights and possibilities.

Harvey Reisman, chairing our Archives Committee, is encouraging everyone to save and share their records and items with us to preserve our Jewish past for the future. Please think of the Historical Society when you go through the papers of a deceased loved one. We will have a deed of gift if you wish to donate them or we can copy documents important to Memphis history.

We welcome input and ideas from all of our members. Be assured that we very much appreciate your participation.

*Peggy*

that the very cap Levine has been planning an ex sites in Hot Spr

As you can : Levy, is a great : keeping up with as competent a Eileen Segal fo May Lynn Mans on Oral and Re our Genealogy



## FEVER *continued from page 1*

transmission of yellow fever was still in the future.

Both during and after the Civil War the population of Memphis grew rapidly, expanded by former slaves who had left rural areas following emancipation, ex-Union soldiers and government officials, immigrants, and others looking for economic opportunity. There was a modest Jewish presence in Memphis by the 1840s, and in 1853, Congregation Children of Israel was organized to serve a mostly German Jewish membership. The fledgling congregation received a

gift of two thousand dollars from New Orleans philanthropist Judah Touro for the purchase of a lot on which to build a synagogue.

The Jewish community also organized agencies to provide charitable services, including the Hebrew Benevolent Association, organized in 1850, the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society, and the Hebrew Hospital Association. When the distinguished Rabbi Isaac M. Wise of Cincinnati came to Memphis in 1858 to dedicate the new Children of Israel sanctuary, he organized a chapter of B'nai B'rith.

With the arrival of Rabbi Simon Tuska in 1860, Congrega-

tion Children of Israel adopted a number of reforms that led conservative members to leave and form Congregation Beth El Emeth. As the number of Jews in Memphis grew, an Orthodox group would later separate from Beth El Emeth and form the nucleus of Baron



*Hungry citizens seeking food at the Commissary Depot, Memphis*

Hirsch Congregation. Both the Reform and Conservative groups had their own burial grounds. The Hebrew Cemetery (Reform) property was a gift of wealthy cotton merchant Joseph J. Andrews, deeded in trust to Congregation Children of Israel. His brother Samuel was the first known Jew to be buried in Memphis. The Beth El Emeth listing in the city directory stated that the congregation would bury without charge "all Israelites unable to pay for same."

The federal census for 1870 gives the population of Shelby County as 40,226, a number that had reached more than 45,290 when the 1878 yellow fever epi-

demic swept through the Mississippi Valley. The Jewish community numbered some 3000, and its economic base was solidly established in mercantile businesses, including dry goods, clothing, leather goods, and hats, liquor and tobacco, dyeing, salvage, and secondhand goods.

A small professional class included several attorneys, two physicians, two rabbis, a half-dozen teachers, and those in clerical jobs such as tellers, clerks, and accountants.

Prior to the catastrophic 1878 yellow fever epidemic, Memphis had sustained small outbreaks in 1855 and 1867

and a major occurrence of the disease in 1873, with a death toll exceeding 2000. The summer of 1878 was extremely hot and mosquitos flourished, a fact noted in the newspapers. Early in August the press confirmed the appearance of yellow fever in New Orleans. The fever was reported in Grenada, Mississippi, a few days later, and the first confirmed yellow fever death in Memphis occurred on August 13.

Actually, several transients had died in Memphis of yellow fever prior to that date, but there was disagreement among the health authorities over the cause of death.

*Please see Fever, Page 4*



## FEVER *continued from page 3*

Lacking the scientific tools to make a positive diagnosis and given the similarities of symptoms between yellow fever, dengue, and malaria, physicians were dependent on the gross manifestations of the disease such as its severe jaundice or black vomit to confirm the presence of yellow fever. On August 23, 1878, the Board of Health declared yellow fever epidemic in the city.

Within a few days of the confirmed yellow fever deaths, more than half of the terror-stricken population had fled Memphis, including a sizable number of the city's Jews, many of whom went to St. Louis, Louisville, or Cincinnati, where they had family or business connections. Typical of those who fled Memphis in 1878 were Isaac and Jacob Goldsmith, founders of a mercantile business that later became one of the largest in the Mid-South. As single men, both had stayed in Memphis during the 1873 epidemic, but five years later, with their young families, they sought safety in St. Louis.

Most of the estimated 19,485 people who remained in Memphis in 1878 were African-Americans, poor immigrants, and others lacking any means to flee. The report of the Hebrew Hospital Association states that "the suffering among our co-religionists was as great as any. The bulk of them were poor and destitute and unable to reach places of safety . . . (when) the fever reached its zenith . . . To our utter dismay we found every avenue leading to the city densely packed with Jewish families, and

with few exceptions did any escape the force of the fever."

There remained, however, one group of courageous men and women who stayed on to minister to the inhabitants of the stricken city. It included members of the clergy, sisters of religious orders, doctors, nurses, and a number of prominent businessmen. Most of them worked either through the Howard Association, an organization first formed in New Orleans to deal with the devastation of the disease and named in honor of the English philanthropist John Howard, or through the Citizens Relief Committee, a group that assumed some governmental functions and also distributed food, medicine, and needed medical supplies.

Two other small organizations,

the Hebrew Benevolent Association and the Hebrew Hospital Association, also provided some care through the epidemic. Officers of these Jewish service groups were men whose financial means would have allowed them to take refuge elsewhere. Several of these brave men died and only one escaped the fever.

Information pertaining to the experience of the Memphis Jewish community during the 1878 yellow fever epidemic is scattered in various sources; however, several detailed reports provide enough information to reconstruct its impact on this group. Although few in number, those Memphis Jews who remained in the city to provide emergency care and services acted with extraordinary courage, and their names are en-



*Headquarters of the Board of Health. Disinfecting wagons about to start on their rounds.*



shrined with the heroes of that major urban disaster.

Notable among those who risked all to aid others was Nathan Davis Menken, who had married Sallie Andrews, daughter of Joseph J. Andrews, wealthy cotton merchant and one of the city's earliest Jewish residents. A native of Cincinnati, Nathan D. and his brother J. Stanwood had volunteered for service in the Union army. When J. Stanwood resigned his commission because of shattered health, he came to Memphis and established a dry goods business before the end of the Civil War. He was later joined by his brothers, Jules and Nathan to form the firm of Menken Brothers Dry Goods.

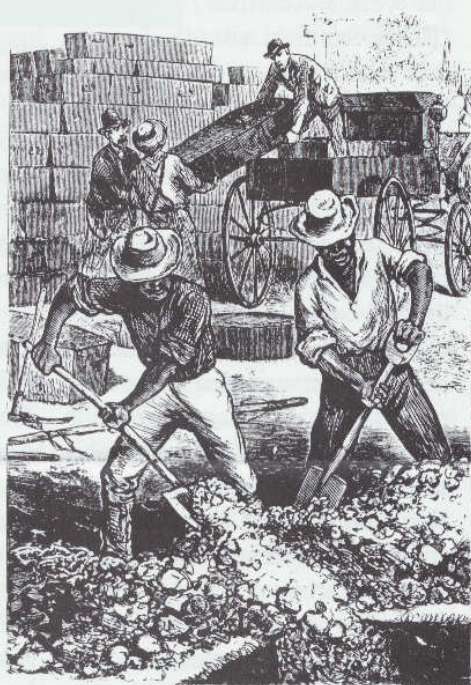
Nathan D. Menken quickly became a successful and respected member of the business community and was known for his generous response to those in need. During the 1873 epidemic, Menken offered to raise money to build a yellow fever hospital. When the 1878 epidemic struck Memphis, he could have fled, and no one would have questioned his decision. Sending his wife and two children north, Menken offered his services to the Howard Association.

A notice in the Memphis Avalanche of Friday, August 16, reported that "the Hebrew Hospital Association was reorganized as follows: N. D. Menken, president; David Eiseman, treasurer; Edward Goldsmith, secretary." Menken labored night and day to provide for the sick and dying, working in that

part of the city most severely stricken with the plague. Exhausted, he succumbed to yellow fever and died September 2, 1878.

John McLeod Keating, editor of the Memphis Appeal and the author of a history of that calamitous event wrote:

"The name of Nathan Menken, who died September 2nd, will



*Victims of the fever awaiting burial at Elmwood Cemetery, Memphis*

never be forgotten by the people of Memphis. He died at his post, a noble example of zeal and courage on a field where many brave men had fallen before him. He might, like many other of his class, have sought safety in flight, but he preferred to share the lot of the people to whom he was known as an honorable, enterprising merchant, whose money seconded every suggestion he ever made in the public interest.

"Early in the fight he saw that few of the public men or noted

merchants would remain to lead the small company who proposed to do the work of nursing the sick, burying the dead, and caring for the impoverished; he therefore volunteered, and first, as the leader of a little band of his co-religionists, and afterward as a Howard, he went about day and night doing good . .

"For some weeks he labored with the Hebrew Hospital Association . . . All the time giving of his own bounty, his purse as open as his heart. He wrote to his wife advising her of his good wishes. The good he did is known only to the God he served so faithfully. His loss was a severe one, and his death was felt to be a public calamity . . . We hope . . . That his virtues as a devoted father, husband, and patriotic citizen will be indelibly inscribed in our memory."

One of the grimmest duties of the epidemic was burying the dead. Louis Daltroff was in charge of the Howard burial corps. Keating wrote: "A young Hebrew, Louis Daltroff, deserves special mention for his courage and discretion with which he performed this sad office, often alone and unaided." Daltroff's special responsibility was burying the Howard doctors and nurses who died of the fever. He also buried a large number of Jews in response to pleas of relatives.

A keen observer of the tragedy being played out in Memphis, Keating asserted that "those who were not in the city can never realize the sorrows and pressure of duties resting upon the few who

*Please see Fever, Page 6*



## FEVER *continued from Page 5*

remained during the epidemic. Nothing was so significant of its effect upon Memphis as the attendance at the Jewish synagogue, corner of Exchange and Main, on September 27." Keating described the Rosh Hashanah service as follows:

"The occasion was one of the most interesting and sacred to the Hebrew race—the ushering in of the new year. When the fever was first announced, there was a Jewish population of about 3000. Of this number only eighteen were present at the solemn services, made more so by the surrounding sorrow and the evidence these few bore to the effect of the plague. Of the eighteen, nine were fever convalescents, three were nurses from distant cities, the remaining six being those who (to that time) escaped . . . the disease. Mr. A. S. Myers, acting president of the Masonic Relief Board, read the service . . . There was not a dry eye among those present, as they recalled the festival as it was observed in other and happier years, and remembered brave and noble Menken and many others who had passed away, the heroes of these times that try men's souls. It was a sad and mournful ushering in of the new year—a ceremony that will live in the hearts of all present to their last hour."

A. S. Myers, who read the service was an active worker during the epidemic. He, with his wife and five children, had yellow fever but all survived the disease.

Rabbi of Congregation Children of Israel was Dr. Max Samfield, whose labors in behalf of

the sick and dying were unrelenting. He also conducted many burial services in the Hebrew cemetery. His absence from the Rosh Hashanah service was caused by a serious case of yellow fever. One account of his work notes that "Rabbi Samfield visited the poor and lowly, the sick and destitute, regardless of age, sex, or condition. He repeated the Sh'ma for the last time with the dying and recited the burial services at every funeral in his own congregational cemetery." Samfield recalled years later that he often accompanied one of the priests from St. Mary's Catholic Church which was located near his synagogue. These houses of worship were located in the heart of the Pinch neighborhood, a riverfront area composed mostly of poor Irish and Jewish immigrants.

When Dr. Samfield died on September 28, 1915, the entire city of Memphis mourned his passing and hundreds thronged his funeral service. Rabbi Samfield's death was widely reported in the area press, in numerous periodicals, and in the national Jewish news. Accounts of his death noted that his had been a life of service to the entire community and recounted his courage and heroism during the 1873 and 1878 yellow fever epidemics. This tribute appeared in *Elkdom*:

"During the terrible yellow fever scourges of 1873 and 1878, when the city was being depopulated by disease and hundreds were



*Silver Commemorative Tray, Adler Judaica Collection, Temple Israel Museum. Dated 1885. Presented by the Hebrew Relief Association of Memphis to Dr. R. L. Laski for his dedicated service during the yellow fever epidemic.*

fleeing to other cities with their families, Dr. Samfield stood by his post . . . a never-to-be-forgotten hero."

Significant information about Jewish benevolence appeared in an article written for the *Philadelphia Times*, reprinted in the *Memphis Appeal* on September 29, 1878. The account states that at the beginning of the 1878 epidemic there were some 12,000 Jews living in the areas affected by yellow fever and details the charity provided by Jews in the North to their afflicted brethren in the South:

"New Orleans, containing 6,000 Jews, the largest Jewish population of any city in the South, has received the bulk of Jewish charity. The Touro Infirmary and the Hebrew Benevolent Association of New Orleans, acknowledging the receipt of \$20,000, have spent \$500 per day out of their private fund since the first day of the plague. In Memphis the Hebrew Benevolent Association exhausted a fund of \$10,000, and a branch of the same society in Vicksburg is expending \$50 per day. The Jewish synagogues throughout the infected district



have suffered greatly from the plague. Several rabbis have died of the fever. Dr. (Felix) Sarnier, Orthodox rabbi, died in Memphis last week."

Dr. Felix Sarnier, rabbi of Congregation Beth El Emeth, died on August 15, also having remained to serve his community. He was attended by D. Julius Wise, one of two resident Jewish physicians. Dr. Wise was a member of the Howard Society Medical Corps. When the report of that valiant group was submitted at the end of the epidemic, Dr. Wise was recorded as a "hero of heroes." He was tireless in his service to the afflicted of Memphis.

Dr. R. L. Laski, who had come to Memphis about the time Union forces occupied the city in 1862, worked in every area of Memphis, even though he was not affiliated with any relief agency. His politics as a strong Union supporter during the Civil War, as well as the fact that he was not a member of any local medical organization, made him "odd man out" with many of his medical colleagues.

Jacob Kohlberg is among those Memphis Jews whose service under unbelievably horrific circumstances is worthy of note. Dr. T. O. Summers of Nashville, a volunteer physician, wrote that "Jake Kohlberg is a host in himself. He is up at all hours of the night, and going all day, caring for the sick, burying the dead, and carrying peace and comfort everywhere throughout the city." Kohlberg was a member of the Howard Association and the Citizens Relief Committee.

Because no officer remained who could present a written report

for the Hebrew Hospital Society, Kohlberg assumed this task. His detailed account gives statistics on the assistance provided, as well as a vivid descriptive narrative of the suffering endured by so many. The full toll of deaths among Memphis Jews exceeded the number listed in Kohlberg's report. With a known number of deaths in the city exceeding 5000, as well as many more deaths that went unreported, the total number of deaths among Memphis Jews based on the death rate in the general population could have been as high as 300.

The death and desolation of 1878 indelibly marked the city of Memphis taking from its citizenry some of its most productive members. Many who had fled the stricken city never returned. Numbers of Jewish children who lost one or both parents were sent to Cincinnati for placement with relatives or in the Jewish orphanage.

By 1882 the Jewish community had regrouped and in August formed the Young Men's Hebrew Association. The resiliency of Memphis Jews can be seen in their increasing social activities. The report of a fancy dress ball in April

1890 noted that those in attendance represented the "elite of Hebrew society."

From the 1840's there was a Jewish presence in the small river town of Memphis. While small in numbers, the city's Jews worked hard, survived war and pestilence, absorbed other Jewish immigrants as they arrived, and established themselves both in the business and religious communities.

Although not as large a percentage of the total city population as Jews in other major metropolitan centers, Memphis Jews have deep roots and a long history of contributing to the growth and development of Memphis. The courage shown by many leading Jews during the calamitous 1878 yellow fever epidemic serves as a lasting testimony to their dedication to fellow citizens and their community.

*Patricia LaPointe McFarland is Curator of the Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Shelby County Public Library. Woodcut illustrations accompanying this article originally appeared in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, New York, in the issue of September 21, 1878.*

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## **Jewish Historical Society Trip To Historic Hot Springs, Arkansas May 26-27, 2002**

- Stay at the newly restored Park Hotel
- Visit historic Jewish homes
- Lunch at Congregation House of Israel
- See Levi Hospital . . . and much more!

**JHS Members: Double occupancy \$125 per person--single occupancy add \$30**  
**Non-Member: Double occupancy \$175 per person--single occupancy add \$30**

Limited to first 50 reservations

For details call Sumner Levine  
682-5935



## NOMINATING COMMITTEE REPORT

Max Notowitz has been nominated to serve as president of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South for the 2002-2004 term, succeeding Peggy Jalenak. Elections will be held at the Society's annual meeting, May 19, 2:00pm, at the Jewish Community Center.

Edward M. Kaplan has been nominated vice-president. Dr. David Patterson and Allen Cohen will continue as vice-presidents. Arthur Buring continues as treasurer and Eileen Segal, who has been acting secretary for the past several months, has been nominated to the position for the upcoming two-year term.

Bert Bornblum, Marilyn Notowich and Greg Siskind have been nominated to three-year terms on the board. Nominated to fill unexpired terms are Bernice Cooper and Randa Rosenblum. Madelyne Daneman, Dr. Jack Rosensweig, Sally Grinspan, and Lynnie Mirvis will continue as directors.

Continuing in their positions are Steve Biller, counsel; Shirley Feibelman, historian; Marcia Levy, editor; May Lynn Mansbach and Harriet Stern, oral history; Gilbert Halpern, information technology; Irwin Kaufman, genealogy; and Harvey Reisman, archives.

Marjean Kremer, immediate past president, served as chairperson of the nominating committee. Committee members were Madelyne Daneman, Beverly Halpern, Sumner Levine and Harvey Reisman, with Peggy Jalenak and Max Notowitz serving in an ex-officio capacity.

### You Can Help Preserve Our Jewish History

The Archives Committee of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South is seeking historical records, artifacts, and items of interest to preserve memories of Jewish life in the Mid-South. These would be processed and catalogued but would still be available to you and your family. If you prefer, we welcome the opportunity to photocopy or photograph your documents and/or artifacts and would return the original to you.

Please consider sharing some mementos. By doing so, you are helping to preserve the exciting Jewish history of our community and the many contributions Jews have made to Memphis and the Mid-South.

Contact Peggy Jalenak, (901) 683-7425 or Harvey Reisman, (901) 767-1741.

### Annual Meeting and Elections

May 19, 2002, 2:00 p.m.

Jewish Community Center

*"Discovering Jewish Heritage Along  
the Mississippi River"*

**Mark Greenberg, Ph.D.**

Dr. Greenberg, formerly Historian-in-Residence at the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life in Jackson, MS, is now Director of the Resource Center for Florida History and Politics, University of South Florida in Tampa. He received the year 2000 Humanities Scholar Award from the Mississippi Humanities Council, which recognized his "outstanding work in oral history, historic preservation and community service."

*Co-sponsored by Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of  
Southern Jewish Life. In partnership with Bornblum  
Judaic Studies, University of Memphis.*



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JEWISH HERITAGE**

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