

American Jewish History

An American Jewish Historical Society Quarterly Publication

June 2004 . Volume 92, Number 2
Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

In Memoriam

Leon A. Jick (1924–2005)*

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The March 2002 issue of *American Jewish History* featured a spirited symposium entitled “A Fresh Look at a Classic: Leon Jick’s *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820–1870*.” Now the author of that classic, who was also my teacher and predecessor at Brandeis University, has passed away. He was eighty years old.

Leon A. Jick (October 4, 1924–May 19, 2005) was born in St. Louis into an intensely Zionist family. He entered Washington University in 1941, interrupted his studies to spend “three undistinguished years”¹ in the Army Air Force during World War II, and graduated in 1946. He was the first president of the university’s then newly organized Hillel Foundation.

Jick began work in the national office of Habonim, the Labor Zionist youth movement, with the goal of getting to Palestine. Unable to obtain the necessary visa, he went instead to Marseilles, where he worked in the San Jerome displaced persons camp and promoted aliyah. In the company of a planeload of DPs, he himself made aliyah soon after the State of Israel was declared. He became part of the *garin* (seed group) that formed Kibbutz Gesher Haziv in the Western Galilee, and taught at Bet Berl Institute.

Jick returned to the United States in 1950 and, encouraged by his old Hillel rabbi, Robert Jacobs, entered Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. There he befriended historian Ellis Rivkin, and wrote a pioneering rabbinic thesis on the relationship of German industrialists to the Nazi extermination policy. This was *terra incognita* back in 1954, and it introduced Jick to one of the subjects that would occupy him throughout his scholarly career.

Following his ordination, Jick became assistant rabbi at Temple Israel in Boston, where he served for three years under Roland Gittelsohn, a

* Editor’s Note: Owing to the vagaries of publication, the date on this issue does not coincide with the date of Leon A. Jick’s passing.

1. This and subsequent unattributed short quotations are from an autobiographical essay that Leon Jick wrote on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his rabbinic ordination (2004). The text was distributed at his funeral.

powerful orator and lifelong advocate of social justice. Jick later described the position as "low in pay but rich in experience." The two men became great friends.

Striking out on his own, Jick in 1957 was elected rabbi of the Free Synagogue of Westchester in Mount Vernon, New York. His nine years there, he later recalled, "were enormously rewarding." He met and married his wife, Millicent Flink. He became active in a wide range of local civic causes, exhorting his congregation to respond courageously to the challenges confronting them. He himself played an active role in the environmental movement, the Soviet Jewry movement, and the civil rights movement, gaining fame as one of sixteen rabbis arrested in St. Augustine in 1964 during a civil rights march led by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And he worked on his doctorate at Columbia University under Robert Cross and Salo Baron.

In 1966, Brandeis University invited Jick to join its faculty as director of the newly-established Lown Graduate Center for Contemporary Jewish Studies and as professor of American Jewish history. This represented a major change in the course of his life, but, as Jick later explained, "the opportunity to teach (which I regarded as my central rabbinic function) and to engage the problems of Jewish communal life was irresistible." In time, the program that he inaugurated became known as the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service. In addition to his role in that program, Jick eventually served in many administrative posts at Brandeis, including dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and chairman of the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies.

Three years after he arrived at Brandeis, Jick convened a colloquium entitled *The Teaching of Judaica in American Universities*. Forty-seven scholars participated in that colloquium, resulting not only in the inevitable book but also in something far more consequential, the establishment of the Association for Jewish Studies, the professional organization of scholars in the field. Jick strongly advocated for the new organization—"a group devoted to scholarship and to their own intellectual pursuits, but also concerned for a total body of knowledge which is called Judaica or Jewish Studies and, in addition, committed to a special relationship with the community which is the contemporary embodiment of a continuing Jewish civilization"²—and he agreed to serve as its first president. He maintained an active interest in the Association's work to the very end of his life.

In 1976, Jick published the volume that established his reputation in the field of American Jewish history, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820–1870*. It was the first book in American Jewish history to appear under the imprint of the new University Press of New England. The volume, expanded from his Columbia dissertation, diverged markedly from the standard themes of American Jewish historiography. While most scholars of American Jewry at the time focused on the East European period in American Jewish life, emphasized the study of immigrants or their children, and wrote social history, he focused on the German (Central European) period in American Jewish life, emphasized the study of American Judaism, and wrote religious history. Other scholars tended to interpret religious reforms as cultural importations, if not evidence of assimilation, and they pointed to statements of religious ideology to clinch their point. Jick, examining these same reforms from the perspective of immigrant worshipers, found them to be pragmatic responses to new socioeconomic conditions, evidence of Americanization rather than of ideological influences from abroad. Whereas many of his colleagues gave short shrift to synagogues, preferring, if they investigated religious life at all, to talk about religious leaders, Jick made the synagogue his prime subject or inquiry. More than any other Jewish institution, he believed, it reflected the changing currents of American Jewish religious life as a whole. His goal, he later explained, was "to examine the emergence of the American Jewish pattern: the struggle to remain Jews while adapting to the new environment, the quest for authority in pluralist America, the attempts to re-create community out of chaos and to develop institutional patterns in an environment of voluntarism and permissiveness."³ The wide readership that his volume attained and the attention that colleagues devoted to the book more than twenty-five years later indicate that the volume's goals were substantially achieved.

Jick taught at Brandeis for twenty-four years. Initially, he taught a large course in American Jewish history. It featured a comprehensive reading list, itself a remarkable introduction to the field, and an assigned research paper that encouraged students to engage with primary documents. His weekly lectures were memorable. Jick had been trained in homiletics, and he knew how to project, always speaking clearly, loudly, and passionately. He also had a fine sense of humor. Students could not but be inspired.

Late in the 1970s, Jick began to teach what became a famous course on the Holocaust, one of the most successful courses in the history of

2. Leon A. Jick, ed., *The Teaching of Judaism in American Universities: The*

3. Leon A. Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820–1870*

Brandeis University. Many hundreds of students studied the Shoah under his tutelage, and he put his heart and soul into every class. He also published an oft-cited article in the 1981 *Yad Vashem Annual* on the "Uses and Abuses of the Holocaust," an early treatment of themes that would later become central in the field. Having been personally affected by the Holocaust through his work with DPs, he was able, through his teachings, to affect the lives of a whole generation of students born after the Holocaust, who sought to understand its meaning and impact.

Jick continued to teach long after he retired from Brandeis in 1990. He served as a visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin and was praised in the university newspaper as one of the best teachers and lecturers that students had ever experienced. He taught at Arizona State University, for the American Jewish Committee, at various temples, and finally for the Brandeis Adult Learning Institute, where he lectured to senior adults. Everywhere he taught, he was a great success. He also devoted himself to a range of community activities in the Boston area, notably the establishment of Gann Academy: The New Jewish High School of Greater Boston. And he spent a great deal of time with his extended family, including his four sons and six grandchildren.

At his crowded funeral on May 22, 2005 at Temple Isaiah in Lexington, Massachusetts, an anonymous poem entitled "The Rabbi," written by a former congregant of Jick's, was distributed. While too lengthy to reproduce here in full, the following excerpts capture central features of his personality and temperament, especially his enduring impact on young people and the joy he took in personal interactions.

He was brilliant.
 He scared, awed, inspired.
 Charismatic
 was what he was;
 His wide smooth forehead
 radiated intensity,
 sincerity, light
 and power.
 We kids knew
 he knew
 what he was talking about,
 knew he was the genuine article. . . .

His eyes pierced—
 with crystalline accuracy—
 the humors and riddles
 of our young minds.
 The integrity

of his authority
 was nearly as comforting
 as his candor and warmth.
 "Come in," he'd say,
 from his office door.
 "Let's schmooze.
 It's been a long time. . . ."

May the memory of Leon A. Jick be for a blessing!