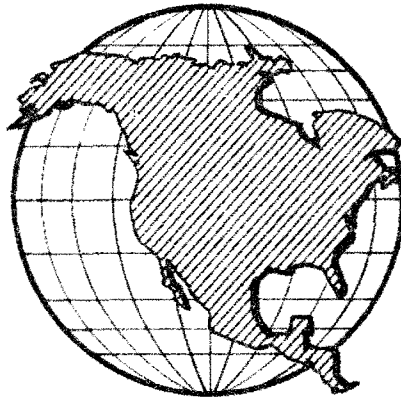


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Review Essay

**JEWISH COMMUNITY HISTORIES: RECENT
NON-ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS**

The Jewish Community of Indianapolis, 1849 to the Present. By Judith E. Endelman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. ix + 303 pp. Maps, illustrations, appendices, glossary, notes, and index. \$17.50.

Jews in Early Mississippi. By Leo E. Turitz and Evelyn Turitz. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983. xviii + 134 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$20.00 (paper).

Jews of the South: Selected Essays from the Southern Jewish Historical Society. Edited by Samuel Proctor & Louis Schmier, with Malcolm Stern. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984. viii + 131 pp. Notes. \$12.95.

Let Me Hear Your Voice: Portraits of Aging Immigrant Jews. By Mimi Handlin and Marilyn Smith Layton. Rochelle Casserd, Photographer. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984. 112 pp. Illustrations. \$19.95.

Savannah's Old Jewish Community Cemeteries. By B.H. Levy. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1983. 118 pp. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$10.95.

Third to None: The Saga of Savannah Jewry, 1733-1983. By Saul Jacob Rubin. Savannah, Georgia: Congregation Mickve Israel, 1983. xv + 426 pp. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index.

Community history is one of the oldest and most popular forms of American Jewish historical writing. Almost two hundred works of one sort or another have now appeared in print,¹ and numerous others stand waiting in the wings, ready to be published within the next few years. Professional historians have tended to be critical of all but a few of these efforts. Jeffrey Gurock, in his recently published *American Jewish History: A Bibliographical Guide*, terms communal history "a true bastion of filiopietism . . . dominated—until very recently—by local rabbis and lay aficionados, intent or content to merely celebrate the names of first families." Oscar Handlin, in his "Retrospect of American Jewish Historiography," shows more enthusiasm than Gurock does for the sheer number of works published and the amount of useful information they contain, but he too concludes that many of the volumes are "poorly organized," "fragmentary," and filled with "large elements of reminiscence."

Both men rank community histories far below other recent studies in the American Jewish history field.²

There are, as Handlin and Gurock know, important exceptions to these generalizations—works that move beyond antiquarianism and succeed in shedding light on broad questions of more than local significance. William Toll reviewed many examples of this “new Jewish community history” at the beginning of the decade and found that “like most recent American social history, the best new studies of Jewish communities emphasize the issues of employment, housing, family organization, and educational and fraternal networks that enabled traditional people to endure the daring move to modern society. Armed with statistical methods to conduct better comparative research, the most recent students of Jewish communities are able to re-create patterns of occupational and residential mobility, family reorganization, major intergenerational shifts, and the changing class position of Jews.”³ Since then, Toll’s own study of the Jews of Portland, Oregon has appeared, entitled significantly *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class*. It marks the farthest turn yet away from the traditional filiopietistic mode of American Jewish community history writing; indeed, it uses Portland as a case study “to examine the relationship between cultural continuity and social change for families of mercantile and craft traditions who migrated, over several generations, from very different cultural backgrounds.”⁴ It is also, as might be expected, forbiddingly academic—obviously written by an historian for other historians. Local residents curious to know the names and events that shaped their community’s past must look elsewhere.

For every such scholarly study, however, many appear written by those who cling to an older style: “insulated,” as Kathleen Neils Conzen aptly puts it, “from either the interpretive frameworks or the critical standards of academic historians,” and wavering “between sterile antiquarianism and uncritical boosterism, ‘so exclusively localized as to appear to have no meaning for any community but one.’”⁵ Few today would actually write as Simon Glazer did in justifying his quaint but pioneering study of *The Jews of Iowa* (1904):

The apology for this work is the preservation of the annals of a handful of pioneers who were the offspring of the greatest history-making people under the sun, whose triumph in every walk of human effort demonstrates the fact that America and Americanism stand for equal opportunities to rich and poor, humble and lofty, and to prove that Israel, if only let alone, is capable of contributing everything good to the common cause of mankind.⁶

Still, a good many practitioners of local Jewish community history write their works with the same uncritical and celebratory aims in mind.

Many non-professional works do nevertheless make valuable contributions. Indeed, it is impossible today to generalize glibly about non-academic Jewish community history; the field has become much too broad and diverse. The time has come instead to examine more closely the various *forms* of

recent non-academic local Jewish community history to see both the strengths and weaknesses of each, and how all together contribute to a larger understanding of American Jewish life.

Two definitions, however, are necessary at the outset. First, I define "Jewish community," following Daniel Elazar, as "the corporate dimensions of American Jewish life, embracing within it both the strictly religious and the not so clearly religious dimensions of Jewish existence, the ethnic ties of individual Jews and the political striving of Jews as a group." Within this broad matrix different authors of community histories may make different choices. All, however, are ultimately rooted in some sense of ongoing Jewish group identity, even as the basis for this identity necessarily changes over time.⁷ Secondly, and admittedly more idiosyncratically, I define "non-academic history" to refer to historical works of every sort *except* those written by academicians exclusively for other academicians. These latter seem to me to form a separate genre, precisely because they are written for the profession alone, without any broader audience in mind.

Given these definitions, recent non-academic contributions to American Jewish community history may be divided into four major categories:

(1) *Antiquarian volumes*. Sheer love of the past motivates these volumes, and at their best they reflect this enthusiasm. But this by no means makes them invariably popular. Some of the most enduring antiquarian studies, in fact, make no concessions at all to popular interest, with the result that they may reach an even smaller readership than their academic cousins. Such is likely to be the case with B.H. Levy's study of *Savannah's Old Jewish Community Cemeteries*, one of the purest pieces of American Jewish antiquarianism to appear in some years. The volume is exacting, brimming with learned footnotes, and it reflects long hours of painstaking research. The history of Savannah's earliest two Jewish cemeteries—the burial plot informally allotted to the Jewish community by Col. James Oglethorpe in 1733, and the Jewish Community Cemetery established by Mordecai Sheftall forty years later—has never before been told so precisely, complete with annotated capsule biographies of those known "or reasonably believed" to be buried there.

One might easily shrug off such a fact-filled volume as a pedantic curio, valuable, if at all, only to genealogists and those looking for precise information on one or another early Savannah Jew. But as so often the case with antiquarianism, much more is concealed here awaiting historical analysis. Levy's work, for example, makes it possible for the first time to perform a quantitative analysis of early Savannah Jews, and then to compare the results with data available from published Jewish cemetery records in New York and Charleston.⁸ It also sheds light on questions of Jewish identity (at least one of those buried in the Jewish cemetery seems to have been a member of Christ Church), and on the relationship of early Savannah Jews to Jews elsewhere

(merchants living in Charleston, New York, Newport, and London were among those appointed cemetery trustees). As a primary source of data, then, this is, at least potentially, a wonderfully useful book, crammed full with facts crying out for imaginative historical study.

Jews in Early Mississippi represents a different and from a historian's point of view far less valuable sort of antiquarian research. Rather than focusing narrowly, it uses facts and photographs to cover a broad swath of Mississippi Jewish history, from roughly the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Names and faces abound in this volume, but they tend to be the names and faces of the most successful Mississippi Jews—and Turitz shows them off at their best. Documentation is spotty, photographs mostly depict dry portraits unaccompanied by any analysis, and the faint odor of apologetics wafts over too many pages—particularly those that discuss black-Jewish relations. Perceptive historians may still find golden nuggets to mine from a volume like this—the history of Mississippi Jews has been so little studied that almost any book on the subject is welcome. But where B.H. Levy's narrow and precise volume may be considered definitive, a building block from which new structures may be created, Turitz's broader and more popular study barely skims the surface. It reflects many of the faults endemic to books of its genre, even as Levy's volume highlights their potential strengths.

(2) *Oral history*. The success of *By Myself I'm a Book! An Oral History of the Immigrant Jewish Experience in Pittsburgh*⁹ inspired many imitators in the Jewish community history field. Here was a new way to move beyond elite history, to describe the experience of the "voiceless Jewish masses"—and it required neither quantitative nor linguistic skills. The results have been mixed. On the one hand, a great deal of primary data has been collected on subjects not usually found in written sources—material, for example, on Jewish home remedies and midwives. On the other hand, oral history suffers from what Oscar Handlin once referred to as "deceptive retrospect." Since memory plays tricks, those who uncritically accept everything told to them by informants may find themselves woefully misled.

Let Me Hear Your Voice uses oral history somewhat differently than previous Jewish efforts. Where earlier works attempted to weave together quotations from various informants to create a unified flowing narrative—a Jewish immigrant ideal type—this volume lets immigrants speak for themselves. Fifty men and women now living in Seattle, ranging in age from sixty-five to over one hundred, and natives of everywhere from Eastern Europe to Central Europe to Turkey, recount stories from their own past—a single episode in some cases, a full-scale narrative in others. The stories are priceless human documents, moving tales of courage and spirit. Taken together, and read with one eye on the magnificent photographs accompanying each narrative, they capture the richness and diversity of the Seattle Jewish immigrant community in a way that traditional narrative history could not. Of course, the editors

have been severely selective in what they printed, restricting each narrative to less than one thousand words. There is a danger here, and in all oral history, of giving undue stress to the unusual and vivid, at the expense of the ordinary and banal. Nor have the editors made any effort to check the stories they print against other sources for accuracy. Nevertheless, this volume and the type of popular history that it represents makes a valuable contribution. It harmonizes popular history with the concerns of the new social history, and lays the groundwork for a new more anthropologically based Jewish community history—one concerned less with leaders and institutions than with the varied, multi-layered character of Jewish life as lived and experienced by a range of community members.

(3) *Semi-popular commissioned works.* A large fraction of Jewish community histories are commissioned works, occasioned in most cases either by a local anniversary or by a general upsurge in historical consciousness such as that accompanying the 1954 celebration of three hundred years of Jewish life in America, or the more recent United States Bicentennial. Professional historians have written the best-known and most enduring volumes of this sort—Lloyd Gartner was involved in no fewer than three of them. But many others have been written by non-professionals: rabbis, librarians, local enthusiasts. In every case, definitional questions have proved to be the most elusive: what is a Jewish community, how broadly should it be conceived, what should be included in its history? Questions that academic historians might consider to be still more significant—comparative questions, questions of community power, and questions concerning the function of the ethno-religious community in the life of its members—have been asked far less frequently.

Marc Lee Raphael in his *Jews and Judaism in a Midwestern Community*, a highly professional but still highly readable study of Columbus, Ohio,¹⁰ set forth the broadest model yet of Jewish community history—one that embraced religious, organizational, economic, social and recreational life, elites and non-elites, affiliated Jews and marginal ones. He employed an impressive array of sources, including public documents of a type never before utilized in Jewish community history, and he made extensive use of quantitative analysis. His model, however, cannot be duplicated for most communities. The cost in time and money alone would be prohibitive, and the training required is far too specialized to expect of non-professionals. The question then is whether traditional local history, with its emphasis on institutions, professionals, lay leaders, and elites still has much to contribute. The answer as evidenced by two recent studies is yes—provided always that it is *good* traditional history, objective and accurate.

Saul Jacob Rubin's *Third To None: The Saga of Savannah Jewry* promises good traditional history. Published on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the Savannah Jewish community, it is a labor of love and heavily freighted with footnotes. The early chapters nicely synthesize existing research (includ-

ing B.H. Levy's study of the cemeteries, and recent articles by Malcolm Stern), and present information not elsewhere available. As the volume proceeds, however, the concentration on "religious and cultural developments" narrows down to become little more than a history of Congregation Mickve Israel. This may be understandable, since Rubin is rabbi of Mickve Israel, his congregation sponsored the book (and had it handsomely printed), and the key primary sources used were the congregation's own. But it is also misleading and tendentious. Written as a synagogue history, the volume would have been far more successful.

Savannah, the third oldest Jewish community in America, has been surprisingly little studied. The data presented here, particularly that relating to Mickve Israel's first century and a half, adds much to the available record. But the record is marred, especially in later chapters, by embarrassing errors of fact and interpretation. Even the name of one of the congregation's most influential ministers, Raphael de Cordova Lewin, is wrongly rendered. Scrupulous attention to "truth" has traditionally been the hallmark of non-academic history—its answer to those in the profession who sometimes spin fine theories from scant evidential threads. Carelessness, particularly in a work that claims to have examined "every source with an eye to error," shakes at least this reader's confidence. The problem here seems to stem from haste, a desire to meet an anniversary deadline. More time, effort, and care would have yielded far better results.

Judith Endelman's *The Jewish Community of Indianapolis* reflects a higher standard. Unlike Rubin's book, it was supported by a historical society, and subjected to professional criticism (including my own) in advance of publication. The resulting volume, while not nearly so broad or comprehensive as Raphael's study of Columbus, does deliver just what its preface promises:

What I have written is not so much a history of the Jews who have lived in Indianapolis, but a history of the community they have created. My interest has been in the institutions they developed and the purposes they served. I have attempted to follow social change in the community as it is reflected in the changing nature and function of communal institutions (p. viii).

Beyond this, Endelman reveals, especially in her introduction, an appreciation for the larger significance of her work. She rightly stresses the need to look "beyond New York" in order to understand the experience of Jews in smaller cities. She highlights similarities and differences between the Indianapolis Jewish community and others, noting in particular the fact that Indianapolis Jews faced a rural and largely homogeneous non-Jewish population, far different from those faced by Jews on the East and West coasts. She even uses her data to test (successfully) John Higham's theory positing a relationship between the prominence of Jews in the early history of a city and the course of Jewish-Christian relations later on.¹¹ In doing this she uses no more than traditional historical methodologies: wide reading in primary and

secondary sources, supplemented by oral interviews. She deals only briefly with the "internalities" of Jewish life—family life, social life, personal religious observance—and hardly at all with social mobility and class structure. But if not a pathbreaking scholarly book, hers is a model of what a perceptive, well-researched, and interesting non-academic Jewish community history can be. It is a volume that both professionals and laymen can read with profit.

(4) *Edited Volumes*. In recent years, an increasing number of Jewish community histories have appeared as edited works made up of essays by different contributors viewing their community from different vantage-points.¹² While these volumes have inevitably been uneven and incomplete, they have succeeded in bringing together fascinating combinations of articles by professionals and non-professionals, as well as individuals representing different ideological and religious community perspectives. Coherence may have been sacrificed in these efforts, but diversity and cooperation have been gained. Expertise has also been gained, for individuals who would never have agreed to write a full-scale community history have in some cases been tempted to write that portion of the history that they know best.

Murray Friedman, in the volume he edited entitled *Jewish Life in Philadelphia*, sought to overcome some of the problems connected with a disparate volume of essays by writing an interpretive introduction—a largely successful effort to tie key themes together and set forth identifying characteristics of Philadelphia Jewish life. Unfortunately, his example has yet to be emulated. In *Jews of the South*, a regional volume of essays by professional and non-professional historians connected with the Southern Jewish Historical Society, the omission is particularly unfortunate. The nine essays of varying quality presented—seven of them biographical, one autobiographical, and one a case study of Jewish-Gentile relations in Valdosta, Georgia—share nothing in common but the South itself. That may be sufficient given the uniquely distinctive identity of Southern Jews, but if so that should be demonstrated, not assumed. The questions Jacob R. Marcus poses in his foreword are the essential ones: "is there a special Southern Jewish regional history, a distinctive Southern Jewish psyche, mind-set, ethos? In a larger sense, is the South really different from the North?" The best of these essays—and some are truly excellent—hint at answers, but none grapple with the questions head-on.¹³

What is true for the South as a region is equally true for other regions and for Jewish community history generally: questions of uniqueness, efforts to determine and explain the distinctiveness of a region or community, have been rare. A sense of geographic determinism pervades the literature, whereas a more complex model needs to be developed involving such factors as the religious and ethnic character as well as the diversity of the host community, the size, density and make-up of the Jewish community, the historical proximity of Jewish to non-Jewish date of settlement, and the socioeconomic

relationship between the community's Jews and non-Jews. From these and related factors it should eventually be possible to develop a typology of American Jewish communities—a kind of Jewish equivalent to Edward M. Cook Jr.'s *The Fathers of the Towns*.¹⁴ This would in turn facilitate comparative study designed to find out how Jewish communities have compared to one another and to other American ethnic and religious communities. It would also permit more sophisticated general questions about communal change over time, as well as better answers to such specific questions as why East European Jewish immigration affected some American Jewish communities so differently from others.

Non-academic history plays an important role in moving American Jewish communal history to this new level of comparative inquiry. However parochial it may be, the data it makes available must inevitably be the starting point for any broader study. Well-conceived and executed local histories, no matter how narrow their focus, and even if they are filiopietistic and unimaginative, can shed unexpected light when subjected to secondary analysis. By encouraging non-academic history, historians generally and American Jewish historians in particular can stimulate popular historical interest, ensure greater concern for excellence, and pave the way for new levels of interchange from which all alike may benefit.

Jonathan D. Sarna
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NOTES

1. For selected bibliographies see Harry L. Lurie, *A Heritage Affirmed* (Philadelphia, 1961), pp. 457–467; and Daniel Elazar, *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry* (Philadelphia, 1976), pp. 394–399.

2. Jeffrey Gurock, *American Jewish History: A Bibliographical Guide* (New York, 1983), p. 11; Oscar Handlin, "A Twenty Year Retrospect on American Jewish Historiography," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 65 (June 1976): 298. For a critique of Gurock's views, see William Kramer's review in *Western States Jewish History*, 17 (October 1984): 89.

3. William Toll, "The 'New Social History' and Recent Jewish Historical Writing," *American Jewish History*, 69 (March 1980): 325.

4. William Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class: Portland Jewry Over Four Generations* (Albany, N.Y., 1982), p. 4.

5. Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Community Studies, Urban History, and American Local History," in *The Past Before Us*, ed. Michael Kammen (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), pp. 270–271. Conzen is partly quoting Constance McLaughlin Green, "The Value of Local History," in *The Cultural Approach to History*, ed. Caroline F. Ware (New York, 1940), p. 279.

6. Simon Glazer, *The Jews of Iowa* (Des Moines, 1904), p. x.

7. Elazar, *Community and Polity*, p. 4; cf. Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Immigrants,

Immigrant Neighborhoods, and Ethnic Identity: Historical Issues," *Journal of American History*, 66 (December 1979): 603-615; Jonathan D. Sarna, "From Immigrants to Ethnic: Toward A New Theory of 'Ethnicization,'" *Ethnicity*, 5 (1978): 370-378.

8. See Barnett A. Elzas, *The Old Jewish Cemeteries at Charleston, S.C.* (Charleston, 1903); and David de Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone* (New York, 1952).

9. Ailon Shiloh, ed., *By Myself I'm A Book! An Oral History of the Immigrant Jewish Experience in Pittsburgh* (Waltham, Mass., 1972).

10. Marc Lee Raphael, *Jews and Judaism in a Midwestern Community: Columbus, Ohio, 1840-1875* (Columbus, 1979).

11. John Higham, *Send These To Me* (New York, 1975), pp. 164-165; cf. Richard L. Zweigenhaft and G. William Domhoff, *Jews in the Protestant Establishment* (New York, 1982), pp. 87-88.

12. See, for example, Jonathan D. Sarna, ed., *Jews in New Haven* (New Haven, 1978); Joseph P. Schultz, ed., *Mid-America's Promise: A Profile of Kansas City Jewry* (Kansas City, 1982); and Murray Friedman, ed., *Jewish Life in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1983).

13. See also Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky, eds., *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry* (Charlottesville, Va., 1979), and Stephen J. Whitfield, *Voices of Jacob. Hands of Esau: Jews in American Life and Thought* (Hamden, Ct., 1984), pp. 211-271.

14. Edward M. Cook, Jr., *The Fathers of the Towns: Leadership and Community Structure in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Baltimore, 1976); for a preliminary effort at typology, see Elazar, *Community and Polity*, esp. pp. 141, 229.