

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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In Memoriam:
Janice Oettinger Rothschild Blumberg
(February 13, 1924–February 21, 2024)

Janice Oettinger Rothschild Blumberg was bigger than life. Although the epitome of the southern (Jewish) lady, the international cosmopolitan rejected the designation. Her first marriage to Rabbi Jacob Rothschild brought her into the civil rights movement. But Janice reinterpreted the domain of the *rebbetzin* by forging a sisterhood of Black and White women dedicated to the cause; by transforming her journalism degree into writing and producing plays for The Temple sisterhood and B'nai B'rith Women; by presiding over Theater Atlanta Women's Guild (according to the *Southern Israelite*, "the first Jewish woman to head a major group in Atlanta's cultural arts world"); by founding and cochairing the Visit Israel Program and providing outstanding leadership to Israel Bonds and Israeli tourism efforts; and by leading a (Georgia) women's march on Washington in support of Soviet Jewry. Janice's second marriage to insurance executive David Blumberg, who became president of B'nai B'rith International (1971–78), led her to extensive international travel, meeting presidents and prime ministers. Again, she transformed the role of wife and advisor by becoming a founder and chair (1991–98) of the B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum in Washington, D.C.

With these and more accomplishments notwithstanding, a remembrance in *Southern Jewish History* must concentrate on Janice's efforts as an historian. When I started my research in Atlanta and southern Jewish history in 1977, her article in the *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* (March 1973) and her history of the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation of Atlanta, *As But a Day: The First Hundred Years (1867–1967)* (1967, revised and expanded in 1987), much impressed me. I first met Janice during the early

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Janice Oettinger, 1947.

*(Courtesy of the Cuba Family Archives for
Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum.)*

1980s when I chaired a panel of Atlanta Jewish leaders including her. After serving on the board of the American Jewish Historical Society, Janice became president of the Southern Jewish Historical Society (1984–86), and we met regularly at annual conferences from then until Sandy and I provided transportation for her and her dear friend Cecily Abram to her last conference in Charleston in 2022. We shared Friday dinners in her Buckhead condo and our home in Flowery Branch, and became friends with her children, Marcia, who accompanied her mother to conferences until her untimely death, and Bill.

Unbelievably humble, Janice sought and received assistance from early SJHS stalwart Louis Schmier with her second book, *One Voice, Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild and the Troubled South* (1984), a depiction of her late husband and Temple rabbi's role in the civil rights movement. This she followed with a chapter on Rabbi Rothschild appearing in *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Civil Rights* (1997), and our collaboration began. Her publications include *Prophet in a Time of Priests: Rabbi Alphabet Browne 1845–1929* (2012); "The Bomb That Healed: A Personal Memoir," *American Jewish History* (1983); "The Bomb That Healed – A Retrospective," *CCAR Journal* (1983); "Miss Daisy and I," *Reform Judaism* (Summer 1991); "Rabbi E. B. M. Browne," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (2006); "Rabbi Alphabet Browne: The Atlanta Years," *Southern Jewish History* 5 (2002); and "Sophie Weill Browne: From Rabbi's Wife to Clubwoman," *Southern Jewish History* 9 (2006). Janice also published articles in the new *Encyclopaedia Judaica* on Atlanta and Georgia Jewry and on Mayor Sam Massell. Her memoir, *What's Next? Southern Dreams, Jewish Deeds and the Challenge of Looking Back While Moving Forward*, appeared in 2020.

Janice's transformation from journalist to historian (although the former career continued in numerous newspaper and magazine venues) began with the institution that served as her religious home: The Hebrew Benevolent Congregation ("The Temple") of Atlanta. This included pioneering work concerning the pivotal bombing of The Temple in 1958. Almost all her other publications related to her family and personal experiences. All were well-documented, placed within appropriate context, and analytic. She truly deserved the Sam Proctor Award for Outstanding Career Scholarship the SJHS granted her in 2012. In 2020 the SJHS, the Breman Museum, and The Temple inaugurated a jointly coordinated lecture series named in Janice's honor.

The following are short reminiscences composed by previous SJHS presidents:

HOLLACE A. WEINER recalls: When I accepted the SJHS presidency, I realized that very few women had held the executive position. Only Rachel [Heimovics Braun], Cathy Kahn, and Janice. Those were legendary high-heeled shoes to step into. I watched and listened when they led meetings. Whenever Janice and Cathy introduced a speaker, there was always a personal connection they shared with the audience. Listeners felt

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included in that personal circle. In the hospitality suite, I always quietly stood just outside the informal circle where Janice held court so I could eavesdrop and join the laughter. She knew we nicknamed you [Mark Bauman] the “Slasher,” and she agreed. She also realized and appreciated how you shaped her writing and her historical narratives for the better. I shall miss the cadence of her voice, her refined southern accent, her diplomatic way of critiquing what was said at a lecture, and her elegant bearing. She was southern Jewish royalty.

RACHEL HEIMOVICS BRAUN observes: Janice Rothschild Blumberg was one of the most remarkable people I have known. Talented, beautiful, charismatic, brilliant, creative, generous, and often fun to be with, she carried herself high throughout her long life. My friendship with her goes back to the years immediately following the Bicentennial when I served on the board of the American Jewish Historical Society. I would see her at AJHS

*Janice Rothschild Blumberg acting as president
of SJHS at the 1985 annual conference in Memphis.
(Courtesy of College of Charleston Special Collections.)*

board meetings and annual conferences. But I got to know her better when, in 1985, as a newly minted southerner, I attended my first SJHS meeting in Memphis. At that time, she was SJHS president. When she finished her presidency, she put all existing papers relating to the society (papers of incorporation, minutes, membership rolls, etc.) in an old, somewhat battered, suitcase with the initials DMB (for her husband David M. Blumberg) and passed it on to her successor, Sam Proctor, who, in turn, passed it on to me when I succeeded Sam. I had frequent opportunities to work with Janice as she was a repeat contributor to *Southern Jewish History*. Her first article in 2002 (volume 5) was about her colorful and multi-degreed ancestor, Rabbi Alphabet Browne. She loved to talk and write about her interesting family. Janice was often the first to greet me at annual SJHS conferences; sometimes we “did the town” together on a free evening. We also saw one another on her visits to Central Florida and when I was in Washington D.C. Once I stayed with her in Washington and attended a dinner party in her home. That was really elegant as was everything about her.

SCOTT LANGSTON writes: “I came to know Janice through my work in the SJHS. I was rather starry-eyed when I first met her and found out she was the rabbi's wife at the time of the famous Temple bombing. I couldn't believe I was talking with someone who was so close to this historical event. She soon became a friend and a great encourager. She made me feel like the work I was doing was important—and interesting. That's unusual in academia, especially for someone like me. I was a nobody, but she was someone of some prominence in southern Jewish history circles, both for her connection to significant events and for her scholarship. She always seemed genuinely interested in me and wanted to talk with me and share a meal when we would see each other at SJHS conferences. Through the SJHS, I came to respect her as a person, a scholar, a leader, and a friend. She was a great lady whom I admired, and I am thankful she did not allow her prominence to keep her from noticing me and making me feel worthwhile.

According to PHYLLIS LEFFLER: Janice was incredibly gracious and welcoming to me when I joined SJHS and later became president. She had strong ideas about what the society should be doing, presented those ideas with vigor, and always demonstrated a commitment to the organization.

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Her grandson and my son had been buddies growing up, having met at Camp Judaea one summer. Unfailingly, she always remembered that connection, and whenever we met, she asked me about my son's current activities and, of course, filled me in on her grandson! It was a connection that felt very meaningful. Substantive to the end, she nonetheless brought a personal touch and charm to relationships. SJHS has lost a true friend.

BRUCE BEEBER remembers: *Rebbetzin* Janice Rothschild Blumberg always was a valued teacher. Three examples:

1. Knowing that I wanted to write an article for the local newspaper here covering Jewish Columbus, Georgia (one of her early hometowns), she connected me to helpful, articulate, historically centered members of that community.

2. She already had served as president of the SJHS when I began my term as its leader. In one of my earliest actions, there was a need to transition one of the society's publication editors [Rachel Heimovics Braun]. That accomplished, I advised that the person formerly in that role be listed henceforth as "Emeritus." "Emeritus?" Mrs. Rothschild Blumberg questioned me privately. Even while not in disagreement with the designation, she asked poignantly, "do you realize what Emeritus will mean here? Have you discussed this appointment fully with your Board?" Another very good lesson.

3. Years later, at a Jewish museum event that included honoring Mrs. Rothschild Blumberg, my wife and I were privileged to have the official photographer take our pictures together with her. In the midst, an acquaintance of the *rebbetzin* sitting at her table looked over and asked me: "May I borrow your ink pen?" Janice, always again with good advice in my direction, whispered "Be careful. You'll probably never see that pen again." And don't you know, she was right.

LEONARD ROGOFF, one of Janice's myriad distant relatives, reminisces: Janice was the Grand Dame of Southern Jewry, but it was more than her link to the storied past that made her so engaging. As a memoirist, biographer, and historian, she spoke and wrote with the authority of lived experience. Having antebellum southern Jewish roots, she retained the

grace and graciousness of her upbringing. She had lived our history most famously during the tumultuous civil rights era when she and her husband, Rabbi Jack Rothschild, were intimate friends of Martin and Coretta Scott King and The Temple was bombed. Beyond the innate dignity of her presence, she was always warm and welcoming. One hundred years wasn't long enough.

JAY SILVERBERG shares the following anecdotes: Most conversations with Janice were ventures into her vast memory that would take you to places and events that she experienced and with people—historical figures in many cases—whom she knew. Discussions with Janice, though, were not simply personal remembrances. She spoke with a reverence for those she knew and an appreciation for the events she lived with people who shaped history. To know Janice, to be in her presence, was to be a part of history. Her presence will always remain with her writings and videos, and her legacy to preserve and promote southern Jewish history is embedded with those of us fortunate to have known her.

The first time I met Janice was in Nashville. You [Mark Bauman] pulled me aside and urged that I forego attending some talk to meet Janice and Cathy Kahn, who were seated together outside the lecture room. You took me to them. Cathy recognized my name, of course, knew my family. Janice asked me to sit next to her. I think Cathy knew what was coming next. She politely excused herself and off she went. Janice proceeded to ask me about, well, me. She asked about my research, my family, etc. Mark, I had no clue who she was. She knew that. Not once did she ever say who she was. The lecture ended, people exited, some of her friends walked over and before leaving, she turned to me and said how wonderful it had been to talk with me, to keep in touch and lastly, 'write about your history. It's important.' I said my goodbyes. I may have asked you who she was. I remember someone telling me, "Wait, you don't know? Well, she is . . ."

I bought the book about the temple bombing, started it that night in my hotel room and finished it on the flight home. I didn't see her again for four years, when Phyllis Leffler asked my wife and me to drive her and Cecily from D.C. to Charlottesville. Nearly four hours in a car with Janice—each way. I prepped. So did my wife. We had questions. She spoke about people and events so effortlessly, but so precisely, and with such

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meaning for what she experienced and usually the relevance to current events. It was an experience.

I also had Janice and Alfred Uhry alone for about thirty minutes before the Zoom lecture/discussion he gave as the first Janice Rothschild Blumberg lecture. They carried on like teenagers, talking about Jewish life, people they knew, their work. I'll never forget it. I love reading the books and listening to you and your colleagues talk about southern Jewish history. Listening to those two was just as meaningful.

Onward . . .

ELLEN UMANSKY expounds about Janice: Long before we met, I admired Janice Rothschild Blumberg, the self-described “First Lady of The Temple” from 1946, when she married Rabbi Jacob Rothschild, until his death in 1973. During that time, she saw herself primarily as the wife of Jack Rothschild and the mother of Marcia and Bill, according to her memoir. Yet after I began teaching at Emory University in 1982, I met many people long active in the Atlanta Jewish community who shared their memories of Janice’s deep involvement in The Temple and the greater community and her decades-long friendship with Coretta Scott King. I read her book, *One Voice: Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild and the Troubled South*, which revealed not only what a fine researcher and gifted writer Janice was (and the historical significance of Jacob Rothschild’s rabbinate) but also the actions she took after The Temple bombing in 1958 and the 1960 sit-in against the policy of segregated facilities at Rich’s department store, and the role she played in the planning of the city-wide banquet to honor Martin Luther King, Jr., after he’d been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

I first met her at one of the society’s annual meetings during the mid-1990s. I particularly remember the key role Janice played in helping to organize the SJHS panel I chaired almost twenty years ago featuring wives of southern rabbis active in the civil rights movement including Janice, Helen Wax, widow of Rabbi James Wax of Memphis, and Louise Stern, widow of Rabbi Malcolm Stern of Norfolk, and her helping to make our 2007 conference in Washington, D.C. such a great success. By then, Janice and her late second husband, David Blumberg, had long made Washington, D.C., their home. After Janice returned to Atlanta in 2009, she became the “guiding spirit” behind Emory’s Tam Institute for Jewish Studies’ annual Jacob Rothschild Memorial Lecture, established by a group of donors

to honor Rabbi Rothschild's social justice work.* I was honored when Eric Goldstein, then Interim Director of the Tam Institute, asked me to give the inaugural Rothschild Lecture. He said that he and Janice thought that given my scholarly work on Reform Jewish leaders who saw social justice as central to their sense of religious mission, I would be the ideal person to deliver it. On April 7, 2010, after a wonderful dinner with Eric, Janice, Bill (whom I knew from the years in which I taught at Emory), Marcia (with whom I became good friends), and my son, Abe, who was then at Emory Law School, I gave a talk titled "Here I Am, Send Me: Mission, Social Justice and Modern Jewish Identity." Through Janice's and my ongoing involvement in the SJHS, it was fortunately only one of many evenings that we subsequently spent together.

Janice Rothschild Blumberg lived, made, and wrote about history. Her memory is truly a blessing to everyone who knew and loved her.

Mark K. Bauman

* Eric Goldstein, "In Memoriam: Janice Rothschild Blumberg (1924-2024)," Tam Institute for Jewish Studies, March 4, 2024.

