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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel B. Heimovics, *Managing Editor*

Eric L. Goldstein, *Book Review Editor*

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HISTORIAN PROFILE

“A Sense of Connection to Others”:
A Profile of Stephen Whitfield

by

Deborah R. Weiner

In 350 years of American Jewish history, there is one issue that virtually all Jews have had to confront, one way or another. Historian Gerald Sorin calls it “the great American balancing act—the need for acculturation on the one side and the desire to retain something of a Jewish world on the other.”¹ For those of us who are not only American Jews but also historians of American Jewry, the tension between assimilation and Jewish identity manifests itself not only in our lives but also in our work, serving as a major theme to explore and coloring our interpretations of the past. While not all historians choose to explicitly address the theme, it often hovers in the background, whether the topic is Zionism or antisemitism, Jews in politics or Jews in Hollywood, economic mobility or religious mutability.

Stephen Whitfield has tackled the central issue of assimilation and identity directly, most notably in his recent book, *In Search of American Jewish Culture*. This work celebrates the exuberance with which Jewish creators from Irving Berlin to Bob Dylan embraced and transformed American popular culture, but acknowledges that America’s traditional openness now imperils Jewish identity and continuity more than ever. As long as a vibrant communal world existed as an anchor, Jews could delve into the secular world while maintaining a strong sense of their Jewish selves, Whitfield observes. The gradual disappearance of *Yiddishkeit* has increased the threat secularism poses to Jewish survival. “There is simply no longer a serious way of being Jewish

. . . without Judaism," he concludes. Yet Whitfield refuses to share the pessimism of those who fear the disappearance of Jewish life, noting that Jews have a long history of "dynamic receptivity" to surrounding cultures. They have managed to absorb outside influences and carry on, constantly transforming yet always retaining their Jewishness. With no such thing as a "fixed Jewish identity," American Jews face the same challenge they have always faced: to "reconcile the right to be equal with the option to be different," to "live creatively and durably with [the] ambivalence" that comes from being "suspended between . . . two alluring ideals."²

As a southern Jew and the son of immigrants who escaped Nazi Europe before the Holocaust, Whitfield is well-qualified to speak on the topic of creative ambivalence, not to mention the construction of identity. Yet, his background has served as a launching pad to probe all kinds of subjects. In fact, Whitfield's work defies categorization. In addition to exploring the intersection of Jewish and American culture, he has written on Hannah Arendt's theory of totalitarianism and southern Jewish businessmen, among other things. A deep personal relationship to these topics has not prevented him from presenting a complex and nuanced view of each. Cultural concerns generally come to the fore in his work, as perhaps befits an American Studies professor. For example, his essay on the southern Jew as businessman starts with Tocqueville and points out "how fully Southern Jews have embodied those traits which the French aristocrat concluded were characteristic of all Americans."³

Whitfield's interest in southern Jewish history, he says, stems from an impulse to "try to see my own life within a broader framework," as a way to "connect to . . . other people." It is the "sense of connection to others . . . that make[s] life itself meaningful." This impulse can be seen plainly in his work because making connections is what Whitfield does best and what he constantly does. He revels in linking seemingly disparate people, places, and events. (In the midst of a discussion of southern Jewish kin-based business networks, he notes that the initials of the movie company MGM "were said to stand for" Louis B. "Mayer's

Stephen J. Whitfield

(Photo courtesy of Brandeis University Photography Department)

ganze mishpoche."⁴) The effect is to broaden the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under investigation by presenting it in a new and refreshing light. These connections go by fast and furiously, often provocatively, adding to a breezy prose style that makes Whitfield one of the more readable academic historians.

Within the broad scope of his work, Whitfield's specific contribution to the study of southern Jewry has come in a series of essays published over twenty years. These essays pose a set of questions that challenge the reader to place the southern Jewish experience within the larger context of American Jewish life and,

indeed, the broad span of Jewish history. The South, after all, is just one more place where Jews have learned to accommodate and have struggled to maintain their heritage, Whitfield reminds us. "Probably none of the features of Jewish life in the South has been unique, unknown elsewhere in the United States, or for that matter, in the Diaspora; and assimilation is at least as ancient as the worship of the Golden Calf," he notes in one essay. "But the expression of Jewish identity was distinctive below the Mason-Dixon line . . . it did assume a discernibly different form."⁵ "But" is an important word to Whitfield: he tends to see and often to present more than one side of a particular question, not out of an unwillingness to take a stand, but out of a sense of the complexity of human beings and how that complexity multiplies when humans interact with each other.

As for what the "discernibly different form" of southern Jewish life has consisted of, Whitfield starts from the same place as many observers of the southern Jewish experience: the dynamic generated from the clash of two seemingly incompatible cultures; urban versus rural, entrepreneurial versus agrarian, and so on. But, beyond these axioms, Whitfield points out, are people with their own motivations and idiosyncrasies, not to mention the forces of historical change: the depiction of the South as strictly rural is simply "too rigid and ahistorical to make allowances for the forms of modernization familiar to the rest of the country," he writes.⁶ And modernization in the South has been something Jews have been deeply involved in, from the peddlers whose "packs and sample cases helped [southerners] cultivate a taste for the products of the modern world" to the retirees who helped make south Florida a distinctly non-rural locale.⁷

Whitfield eschews simple answers to complicated questions. The very titles of his essays on southern Jewry evoke his sense of irony and his belief that that point of view must be taken into account in coming to grips with southern Jewish history and identity: "The Braided Identity of Southern Jewry," "Jews and Other Southerners: Counterpoint and Paradox," "Strange Fruit." In "The Prism of Literature," he looks at Jews from the standpoint of the gentile southerner (in this case, novelists

William Styron, Walker Percy, and Thomas Wolfe), something few historians of southern Jewry are wont to do. Again he finds two sides of the issue: "Both Southerners and Jews have been haunted by the past and burdened by their histories. They have sensed that they were somehow special, different. But the lessons that they have absorbed from the past have been quite different."⁸

Such declarations are evocative rather than definitive. Whitfield's essays give us a starting point rather than a conclusion, and offer thoughtful considerations to keep in mind in pursuing our own investigations of southern Jewish history. His tendency to suggest rather than explain, to make connections rather than provide descriptions, might perhaps be related to the circumstances of his life as a Jew in the South, a southerner in the North, and an American son of Europeans. In a wide-ranging conversation last February, he discussed his background and influences, the meanings of southern Jewish history, and his thoughts on Jewish and southern Jewish identity. Here is a distillation of that conversation.

An Immigrants' Son in the South

Whitfield's upbringing reflected an unusual mixture of European and American southern influences. His German-born father and Rumanian-born mother met on the ship *Ile de France*, on their way to America in 1938. Unlike most of the Jewish refugees who arrived from Nazi-dominated Europe in the late 1930s, Whitfield's father headed west, having heard of a job in California. He got as far as Houston, where he began work as a door-to-door salesman for the Fuller Brush Company, the mid-twentieth century version of peddling, and an entry-level job for many German Jewish refugees in the United States. Whitfield's parents married in Houston in 1940. He was born there in 1942 and his only sibling, a brother, was born in 1945. The family moved to Florida in 1948 when his father was promoted to manager of the company's Jacksonville branch.

"I went through 12 years of the public school system, all in a single school," Whitfield relates. The school was lower-middle to

solidly middle class, “all white, of course.” Jacksonville at that time had 250,000 people, and the Whitfields did not live in the section where most of the city’s Jews congregated. “The overall Jewish population of Jacksonville was, in fact, very small. There were three synagogues. . . . The Jewish kids tended to go to a different high school than the one I went to.” In a graduating class of around 155, “there were no more than half a dozen Jews, although one of them was my future brother-in-law and was, in fact, the star fullback on the varsity football team.

“I certainly had a consciousness of being something of an outsider, on a number of grounds. Number one, I was very much aware of being the child of Jewish immigrants. My mother spoke with no accent whatever” (her own mother was an American citizen who had moved to Rumania), “but my father had a pronounced German accent, which was often the subject of amusement, and, on his part, often of self-deprecation. . . . When my father was speaking with strangers, I often felt a sense of shame, because his accent made him—and me—stand out. And, of course, now I am ashamed of being ashamed.

“I grew up with a sense of a certain degree of marginality, not only because of my family background, but also because I loved the academic part of school, had no athletic ability whatsoever, at a time at which, then as now, boys who had athletic ability were admired and enjoyed prestige, and boys like myself were, although the term was not used, ‘nerds.’ So the sense of being intellectually oriented, and Jewish, and somebody whose father spoke with a strong German accent, all those factors made me aware of somehow being different.”

This feeling was balanced by the family’s deep involvement in the Jewish community despite being somewhat geographically removed from other Jews. “We belonged to the Reform synagogue, and my parents often took us to temple. They were very active in the synagogue.” In common with many other southern congregations of the era, “the synagogue was fairly close to strongly classical Reform. My brother and I did have bar mitzvahs.” Jacksonville also had a Conservative synagogue and a small Orthodox shul, Whitfield notes, but “I don’t remember ever

*Young Steve Whitfield meeting Henry Ford II, in Detroit, 1958
(Photo courtesy of Stephen J. Whitfield)*

Whitfield was a high school junior and a member of a tour of high school newspaper editors from throughout the United States when the meeting with Ford took place. Whitfield says of their meeting that the subject of Ford's grandfather's antisemitism never arose.

knowing a single Orthodox person during the time that I was growing up.”

Influences and Role Models

Whitfield’s career as an historian was influenced by several people. The first was his family’s rabbi, Sidney Lefkowitz, who “had a great, great influence on my life. Rabbi Lefkowitz was the first intellectual I ever knew, an adult who genuinely loved study, and loved learning, and loved books, and was able to speak about what he had read with ease and assurance. In a sense, Rabbi Lefkowitz vindicated my own temperament, my own orientation, that one could go through life, one could be an adult, by cultivating reading and learning.

“The second influence was a more remote influence, and that was Sam Proctor. And I would say not so much Sam Proctor as the *idea* of Sam Proctor, because my parents told me about an historian at the University of Florida who was Jewish, who was from Jacksonville, and who was a scholar and a teacher, and not just a businessman or a professional person. The sheer fact of his existence enabled me to imagine that I could have a career which would not be devoted to making a living by simply making money.”

In his writing on southern Jewish history, Whitfield has shown great respect for, and interest in, the Jewish businessman and the important role of commerce in the Jewish experience. But this was not a life he wanted for himself. “In terms of my intellectual and professional development, Rabbi Lefkowitz and Sam Proctor enabled me to think about emancipating myself from a world devoted to commerce or to business, which I would have found terribly, terribly narrow and stultifying.”

While Whitfield had a distinct orientation toward intellectual pursuits from his earliest years, “where my particular interest in Jewish life and Jewish history comes from is a bit hard to specify. Certainly I was well aware that Rabbi Lefkowitz was a rabbi, devoted to Jewish life.” Yet his first interest was in European history, “perhaps because my parents had come from abroad and Europe was always a part of my consciousness. It was only afterwards

that I got interested in American history, and only after that that I became interested in American Jewish history and southern Jewish history in particular." He would have been "baffled" at age 17 to learn that he would spend much of his life studying American Jewry.

Nevertheless, Whitfield took his family's strong identification with the local Jewish community along with him to Tulane, where he spent his undergraduate years. He became the religious chairman and then president of Hillel. But perhaps more important, Tulane "quickenened my interest in Jewish affairs, because for the first time I was encountering large numbers of northern Jews, people for whom Judaism was something bred in them with a certain degree of, let's say, ethnic assertiveness, or at least confidence. It seemed to be something which was ingrained within them, in ways that were rarely encountered in Jacksonville. They struck me in their own way as a bit more authentic than I was."

Whitfield found himself drawn to these new acquaintances. "I loved them. They became friends for life." Their influence was reinforced by his reading of Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*. "It told me that if this is who you are, you might as well cultivate that fact and try to make sense of it. The whole notion of authenticity that Sartre stresses, that is, you define yourself rather than being defined by others, or you give the datum of your existence meaning and purpose by trying to figure out what sense can be made of it, that is something I began to grasp as an undergraduate." His years at Tulane ended up providing "a terrific educational experience" in Jewish issues, even though academically, there was no Jewish content at all.

Yet Whitfield had a variety of academic preoccupations, which he pursued while completing his M.A. at Yale and his Ph.D. at Brandeis. Not only had he not yet engaged with Jewish history, he had not settled on America as an area of study, or on history as his primary academic field. "I went through phases with other things, whether it be literature, philosophy, religion." Fate stepped in to help determine an academic direction: "The only job I was offered when I was in the job market in 1972 was in American Studies. I had never taken an American

Rabbi Sidney Lefkowitz

*Rabbi Lefkowitz and Sam Proctor (right) strongly influenced Stephen Whitfield
(Photo courtesy of Congregation Ahavath Chesed, Jacksonville, Florida)*

Studies course." He joined the American Studies faculty at Brandeis, where he remains today as the Max Richter Professor of American Civilization and where he received an award for teaching excellence. Whitfield also has served in guest professorships at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the Katholieke Universiteit in Leuven, Belgium, twice at the Sorbonne in Paris, and most recently as the Allianz guest professor of Jewish studies at Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich.

As a young scholar, he says, "my interest was more, because of the impact of the 1960s, in issues of civil liberties, issues of civil rights and race, questions of radical possibility, and not anything particular about Jews." His dissertation (and first book)

Sam Proctor

*(Photo courtesy of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program,
University of Florida, Gainesville)*

concerned the work of early-twentieth century radical economist Scott Nearing. Yet, he gradually began to turn to Jewish topics, first with his second book, on the work of philosopher Hannah Arendt. Like his parents, Arendt was a refugee from Nazism, "a fact that stirred my interest." He had read Arendt's *New Yorker* coverage of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem; "the articles were drawn to my attention by my mother, who sent them to me." Later, he read *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. "It hit me like a thunderclap, and I would still say that it's the most important book that I've ever read in my life." The result was *Into the Dark: Hannah Arendt and Totalitarianism*.

Meanwhile, a group of scholars and enthusiasts were working to revive the Southern Jewish Historical Society, and this, too, stirred Whitfield's interest. "Saul Viener organized a conference in Richmond in 1976 which was actually the first scholarly conference in which I delivered a paper as an assistant professor." Why would a scholar immersed in Arendt travel from Boston to Richmond for a conference on southern Jewish history? "It just seemed to be something that would enable me to tap back into my past. I realized that it was something that was worth exploring for the deepest personal reasons and it seemed like a fun and challenging thing to do."

*More than a Personal Connection:
The Importance of Southern Jewish History*

"That conference made me permanently interested in the southern Jewish experience," says Whitfield. "It remains in my memory as one of the best conferences I've ever attended. There were some superb papers delivered there, and the level of analysis was matched by the congeniality and friendliness and hospitality of the occasion." Keynote speaker Eli Evans "had a tremendous impact by personifying the possibility of thinking and writing about the southern Jewish experience at the highest level of intelligence and articulateness. . . . In terms of my professional development, I will be forever grateful to Saul. That meeting in Richmond really invited me to imagine, stimulated me to imagine, that this was a worthy topic of research and analysis."

The conference not only turned Whitfield toward southern Jewish history, but also toward a consideration of the larger American Jewish experience. "It got me started in approaching American Jewish history through southern Jewish history, because I realized that this was something that I knew a little bit about. . . . Rightly or wrongly, my particular interest in the South has no doubt shaped the emphases that I have tried to give to whatever work I've done in American Jewish history more generally."

Every historian's engagement with his or her subject matter is influenced by personal experience, and Whitfield acknowledges

that growing up in the South has influenced his analysis. "I never really encountered antisemitism growing up, and as a result of that, I have tended, rightly or wrongly, to minimize the extent or scope or depth of antisemitism in the South, and as a consequence of *that*, rightly or wrongly, I have tended to minimize the scope and depth of antisemitism in the United States. Not, I hope, ignore it, but to downplay it, and that has probably affected my own sense of American Jewish history."

Whitfield sees southern Jewish history as having much to say about the American Jewish experience. "Contrary to expectations, it seems to me that Jews have felt very much integrated, an integral part of the South, in ways that I've increasingly come to appreciate, and that has encouraged me to believe that that's also true of America in general." When asked whether southern Jewish history should be seen more properly as a branch of southern history, or as a branch of American Jewish history, he replies, "I'm very hesitant to plunk down for one or the other option. There's certainly a lot about southern Jewish history that is deeply, deeply intertwined with southern history. And very, very many southern Jews wanted to believe that and acted on that belief. On the other hand, I want southern Jews to be a part of Jewish history because I want readers and audiences to be aware of the sheer diversity and plurality of the modern Jewish experience. I want people to realize that the South should not be ignored, if justice is to be done to the sheer range of possibilities of being Jews in America, or being Jews in the modern world.

"The South simply has to be reckoned with if you want to see how patterns of assimilation, or the development of Reform Judaism, or small town life took the forms that they did—and above all how, under circumstances that would not be especially promising, how amazingly enough, Jewish life was able to sustain itself and to show its resilience and its power. The South is a wonderful site for showing the tenacity and the force that Jewish life was able to achieve under circumstances in which it could easily have succumbed. And that's why I want the South to be integrated into Jewish history and Jewish studies more broadly even if the numbers don't necessarily warrant it."

The central issue of assimilation versus Jewish identity and continuity can be viewed in stark relief in the South, Whitfield observes. "It's an extreme version of what American Jews experience elsewhere. The South pushes close to its furthest limits, the challenge of how to sustain Jewish identity when the numbers do not exist to make it feasible to do so and when there are all sorts of conformist pressures, and all sorts of ways in which the majority culture is enormously appealing. So the South is a wonderful example of both the ease with which Jews could abandon distinctiveness, and it's also a tremendous place to see how that distinctiveness could somehow be preserved."

Southern Jewish history, especially recent history, also illuminates southern history. With the South going through a process of urbanization and growth, the Jewish experience in the region has changed. "In recent decades it's become increasingly difficult to separate southern history and southern Jewish history from American history and American Jewish history. There're still obviously important ways in which distinctiveness has to be reckoned with, but the generalizations that could once be made about the South are less and less likely to be tenable," Whitfield says. Trends in urbanization, industrialization, mobility, and modern life in general reveal "all the ways in which the South is resembling the rest of the country. Although that process is far from complete, it's clearly moving in that direction. What I'm increasingly struck by is how that forces us in a sense to rethink southern history and southern Jewish history, because it forces us to come to terms with the receptivity of the South to forces that were once seen as alien and threatening. The South was less rigid, less xenophobic, less opposed to instability than perhaps we might have recognized earlier. The tricky part is that in insisting upon that, I'm not arguing that we should ignore all the forms of rigidity and opposition to change that existed in the past, only that they obviously could not be effectively sustained."

However, despite recent trends that are causing the South to lose its distinctiveness and despite the important ways that southern Jewish history speaks to the larger American Jewish experience, Whitfield disagrees with the view held by some scholars

Steve and Lee Whitfield

*Lee Cone Whitfield traces her own
southern roots to antebellum Florida.*

(Photo courtesy of Stephen J. Whitfield)

that southern Jewish history is not all that different from American Jewish history in general, and that the impact of region has been overemphasized. "While small town Jews in the South probably have more in common with small town Jews, say, in Iowa than they do with Jews in Miami or Atlanta," he says, "I think that there's plenty of evidence" of distinctiveness. "The chief argument is that southern Jews themselves think that they are different, are conscious of being different. That subjective awareness of not be-

ing like other Jews is, it seems to me, a datum of history that in my opinion should be acknowledged. As long as you grant people the right to choose who they think they are, the degree to which they choose to think of themselves as southerners should not be dismissed by historians as simply a product of, say, false consciousness."

Nevertheless, it is important to see southern Jewish history in a broad context, not simply as a regional phenomenon. "It's still southern Jewish history but the links still have to be forged. Obviously in general one should never isolate a subject from anything else." In this case, "I would insist upon the need to reduce the isolation by moving in two directions, both Jewish history and, of course, southern history and, broadly speaking, American history."

The 350th Anniversary of Jews in America

Through a wide-ranging career, Stephen Whitfield has refused to restrict himself to a narrow field of specialization. As he became more involved in Jewish history, he also continued to pursue other interests in American and southern history, producing books on the culture of the Cold War and the death of Emmett Till. Even his work in Jewish history has covered seemingly unrelated topics. Yet, the connections have always been apparent. His concern with the tension between assimilation and identity, prominently addressed in *In Search of American Jewish Culture*, informs his thinking on southern Jewish history and, as well, his reflections on the 350th anniversary of Jews in America.

"The phrase that continues to occur to me is the title of the book that Oscar Handlin used for the 300th, which is *Adventure in Freedom*. Which, it seems to me, is both the joy and the challenge. Freedom can obviously be abused; it can even be scuttled, but it can also be an extraordinary challenge that can be met. And it seems to me the American Jewish experience and the southern Jewish experience in particular are both two-sided and open ended. You can't help but be aware of the extraordinary losses that have occurred through assimilation and through the choices that Jews have made to opt out of the Jewish faith by taking

advantage of the freedom that America provides. But the amazing thing, and the reason why I still remain basically affirmative, is that the capacity of the Jewish people to renew itself in the South is also quite heartening and impressive, and I think belies the pessimism that is certainly a feature of Jewish consciousness.

"I would say that the key to that sort of renewal, the key to that sort of optimism, if there is a single key, has got to be knowledge of Jewish destiny and the Jewish past, which journals like *Southern Jewish History* are designed to promote. . . . The connection between the Jewish future and the Jewish past is an extremely intimate and intricate one, and the 350th anniversary is an ideal moment to rededicate ourselves to that goal of knowledge of the past as the key to conserving the future."

Reflections on the Southern Jewish Historical Society

Whitfield's long association with the Southern Jewish Historical Society began at the 1976 Richmond conference. A key attraction, he says, is the distinctive mix of people who attend: professional historians as well as people who simply love southern Jewish history. "It represents a wonderful combination of an ideal of scholarly rigor and a natural effort to authenticate the meaning of one's own life and family and friends. The southern Jewish experience, as we all know, is sort of one vast kinship network and it seems to me that there's something both charming and noble about the effort to salvage it and do justice to it, whether by professionally-trained historians or by amateurs who do so out of love and an effort to honor one's family. And that, it seems to me, makes conferences of the Southern Jewish Historical Society at least as enjoyable and engaging as the more formal professional conferences I have attended.

"At its best, the two groups complement one another rather than engage in conflict. And, at its best, it means that one group can learn from the other and be energized by the other. I don't deny that there's a certain schizophrenic quality to the organization," and that tensions have resulted from the sometimes conflicting needs of lay people and professional historians. "But I prefer to see the positive features. The curse of academic

life is really the esoteric nature of it, and the inability or the lack of interest in making scholarship accessible and meaningful. And the presence of all sorts of lay people in the SJHS obliges scholars to figure out how their work can be made accessible to people besides other scholars.”

Appendix

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NOTES

¹ Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880–1920* (Baltimore, 1992), 168.

² Stephen J. Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover, NH, 1999), 23, 246–247. For a list of Whitfield’s publications, see the Appendix on pages 65–69.

³ Stephen J. Whitfield, “Commercial Passions: Southern Jew as Businessman,” *American Jewish History* 71 (1981–1982): 342.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁵ Stephen J. Whitfield, “The Braided Identity of Southern Jewry,” *American Jewish History* 77 (March 1988): 367.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁷ Whitfield, “Commercial Passions,” 356, and “Blood and Sand: The Jewish Community of South Florida,” *American Jewish History* 82 (1994): 73–96.

⁸ Stephen J. Whitfield, “The Prism of Literature,” in *Voices of Jacob, Hands of Esau: Jews in American Life and Thought* (Hamden, CT, 1984), 248.