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Introduction

A Community of Scholars Who Grew a Field

Jeffrey S. Gurock

At the turn of the second decade of the new millennium, the study of American Jewish history is well positioned as a humanities discipline in academic conversation with scholars of American and Jewish studies. Its scholars publish regularly in the field's two foremost journals, *American Jewish History* and the *American Jewish Archives Journal*. Occasionally, a cutting-edge piece find its way in the quarterlies or annuals of the American Historical Association [AHA], the Organization of American Historians or the Association for Jewish Studies; organizations that regularly invite panels on subjects relating to Jewish life in America. Every two years, the Academic Council of the American Jewish Historical Society [AJHS], composed of more than 125 men and women who teach and write in about all aspects of that group's experience—many occupying chairs in that specific area—returns the favor. It invites to a plenary session of its Scholars Conference a senior scholar who does not work in American Jewish studies, and the guest respectfully compares council members' work to important labors in the wider arenas of American and Jewish studies. The American Academy for Jewish Research—an elite, elected association of academics of all areas and periods of Jewish studies—has its Fellows who specialize in the American Jewish experience

Occupying this perch, the field has fulfilled the dream Professor Cyrus Adler had more than a century ago. As a president of the AJHS, this first major Jewish academician to associate

himself with serious examinations of American Jewish life, looked forward to the day when courses would be offered at colleges and universities and chairs might be occupied in an expansive field that include not only historians, but sociologists, demographers and other social scientists.

More directly, the discipline's present-day status represents the fulfillment of the work towards professionalization that eminent pioneers like Professors Jacob Rader Marcus, Salo W. Baron, Moshe Davis and Oscar Handlin pioneered close to 70 years ago. It was Marcus who established, in the late 1940s, the American Jewish Archives on the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College, where he taught the first college-level course in that area, even as he produced, early on, enduring works on the Colonial period of American Jewish history; a subject upon which so many ancestor-worshipping dilettantes had previously dwelled. He would ultimately write substantial books on all periods and aspects of this community's experience.

Baron, for his part, was instrumental in the 1950s, and in his own words, in "turning the AJHS around" from its own sad tradition of amateurish works. This most influential Jewish historian of the twentieth century put his prestige on the line in September 1954 when he convened, under the auspices of the AJHS, a Conference of Historians in Peekskill, New York that attracted scholars of American and Jewish history from around the nation and, indeed, the world. The many who responded favorably to his call determined to put an end to "the parochialism and fragmentation that has long held the field back." Baron also used his sterling reputation to establish an enduring relationship between the AJHS and the AHA. Another sign that the field was beginning to come of age occurred in 1957 when Professor John Higham decided to publish an important article on anti-Semitism in the AJHS's journal the same year that this preeminent scholar of nativism contributed a piece on Gilded Age anti-Semitism to the prestigious *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (now the *Journal of American History*).

Davis may be credited not only with initiating teaching American Jewish history at his erstwhile home institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary [JTS], but also added an international

academic dimension to the field when, in 1959, he convinced the doyens of Jewish history at the Hebrew University to create an institute for the study of contemporary Jewry in Jerusalem which focused extensively on the saga of Jews in the largest Diaspora, the United States. During this same era of incipient professionalization and recognition, back in America, in 1954, Oscar Handlin, the parent of U.S. immigration history, composed the first respectable one-volume study of American Jewry; quite a feat of synthesis considering the dearth of the useful primary materials and reliable secondary accounts then extant to chronicle the entire sweep of the 300-year history of this ethnic group in a land of freedom.

Perhaps as important, in ensuring a brighter future for the field, was the fact that each of these scholars either mentored directly or influenced appreciably the next generation of men and one woman who would write important works in American Jewish history as their theses and other worthy, subsequent oeuvres. The list of these distinguished contributors, who rose in the decade after Peekskill, included Baron's student, Hyman B. Grinstein, Marcus's disciple Bertram W. Korn, Naomi W. Cohen who studied with Baron and Davis, Handlin's advisee, Moses Rischin, not to mention Lloyd P. Gartner, Arthur A. Goren and Leon Jick. All of these individuals—and there were others—evidenced that Baron's lament of earlier years that he "found it difficult to persuade graduate students to choose dissertations in the field because they did not find it 'interesting enough'" no longer applied to American Jewish history.

Still, despite the approbation of leaders in the humanities, like Higham, and, of course, Baron's advocacy, the study of American Jews had a long way to go to gain full acceptance as an academic discipline. For example, as late as 1970—close to twenty years after Baron had started to "turn the society around"—the contrarian and yet respected American historian David Hackett Fischer, in delineating so much of what he saw as wrong with the study of history in America, would still characterize the work of the AJHS as "antiquarian" done by "a gentleman (or lady) of respectable origins who is utterly alienated from the present." Such people, he said, were "collector[s] of dead facts which [they] stuff full of sawdust and separately enclose in glass cases." At "the American

Jewish Historical Society," he suggested factitiously, "there may be an elderly gentleman at work on an article called 'A Jewish Tourist at the Battle of Bladensburg.'"

Indeed, for Fischer, of all "the tunnels in historiography… the narrowest and darkest are the ethnic tunnels. And of all the ethnic tunnels, none is quite as dark as that which is called [American] Jewish history… The present mode of writing is a scandal and an abomination in its profound provincialism." Evidently, Fischer was either unaware or unimpressed that his college, Brandeis University, had established in 1966—four years before Fischer's *Historians' Fallacies* was published—its Lown Graduate Center for Contemporary Jewish Studies and had appointed Jick as its professor of American Jewish history.[1]

Indeed, the paucity of courses proffered at other non-Jewish schools at that time evidences the harsh reality that many other colleagues shared Fischer's views. Into the early 1970s, the three most noteworthy schools where American Jewish history was taught, on an ongoing basis, were the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, the Jewish Theological Seminary and Grinstein's Yeshiva College, Jewish schools where the subject was especially relevant to rabbis and educators in training to serve communities. In stark contrast, at secular schools like Hunter College, when Cohen began teaching, she was unable for many years to convince her colleagues of the value of a course in American Jewish history. She contented herself with teaching primarily American foreign policy and U.S. Constitutional history. A portion of the Jewish story probably found its way into her courses on immigration history. Only after she had long been a full professor was she able to push successfully for teaching in the field where she had already won a number of awards for her scholarship. And notwithstanding Baron's approbation of the field's possibilities, he never taught American Jewish history at Columbia nor brought in a specialist as a visiting scholar. As it turned out, during the 1972-73 academic year, Cohen was the first to teach her research specialty on Morningside Heights.[2]

It remained for the next generation of scholars—men and women who presently range in age from their mid 50s to their 70s—to witness and contribute to the full growth potential of their field

within the academy. Both skilled and fortunate, these academics rode the crest of the growth of ethnic, racial and gender studies within contemporary scholarship even as they have expanded their own discipline's purview through bringing these sensitivities into American Jewish scholarly work. (One indication that at the present moment, all is well with their work—despite some naysayers who remain dismissive of what has been accomplished—was David Hackett Fischer's service in 2015 as a dissertation committee member in American Jewish history at the Lown Center that Jick's successor now heads.) For themselves, these senior scholars have deposited deep in their memory banks discouraging words about what they chose to study. All to be told, this is the success story that this volume chronicles. Here is presented a representative sample of this cohort who together have made a difference—chosen among those who have served in leadership roles in the field's national and regional academic institutions or publications, and whose works are widely cited in bibliographies, or students course reading lists, both here and abroad—in conversation about their career paths and ultimately about the past, present and future of the writing of American Jewish history.

In recruiting the men and women whose works I have read, admired, and sometimes critically reviewed, to join me in this retrospective, introspective, and, ultimately, prospective intellectual journey, I asked for essays that were more than intellectual autobiographies or reports on the state of the field. Rather, without abandoning academic rigor, I challenged them to compose—in their own idiomatic voices—personal reflections of how and why these men and women found their ways into the field of American Jewish history, along with some of the struggles they have faced, with all due reference to their teachers and other scholarly influences that molded and directed them.

Readers of these memoirs will immediately note that my fifteen colleagues and I came to our present common labors from different places in the world of ideas and with many different academic aspirations. These peregrinations tell us as much about the evolution of our discipline as it does about how we became scholars. In other words, even if today we now share an abiding

interest in growing further a field that but two generations ago had only begun to be cultivated, most of us did not start our careers that way.

While as adolescents we all imbibed young adult histories of American and Jewish heroes—and not enough heroines—and as college students, most of us were intrigued with the ultimate professional goal of a life in the academy—careers as attorneys seems to have been a frequent second choice—only the fewest even conceived of becoming professors of American Jewish history. Perhaps, we might even have had to explain to the general public—much like Jenna Weisman Joselit suggests humorously and insightfully—what a historian actually does! But it is very unlikely that most would have told interlocutors that we aspired to teach American Jewish history on the college level. In due course of our education we would read the works of, and eventually, communicate with our intrepid and often frustrated predecessors, who had struggled to gain a foothold in colleges. But as graduate students, only a few of us either perceived them as role models or were privileged to have them as mentors. In so many other fields, it is a given that those eager to enter the profession would seek out the renowned senior practitioners to advise them, if only they would be admitted to their programs. Such was not the case with our generation of fledgling academics.

In fact, only Gary Phillip Zola explicitly and consistently tied himself to an eminence; in his case none other than Jacob Rader Marcus, with whom he would earn his doctorate after receiving ordination from the Cincinnati school of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. As a true disciple of his master, Zola has remained true to the principles of research that Marcus articulated. Zola's career path, of course, had led him to head up the Marcus Center that his mentor conceived and developed.

Shuly Rubin Schwartz benefitted from a close academic relationship with Naomi W. Cohen as a role model and intellectual sounding board from the time Cohen visited at Columbia University. But rather than Schwartz going over to Hunter College for her doctoral training—apart from auditing a course with Cohen at the City University Graduate Center—Schwartz earned her degree at

the Jewish Theological Seminary under the mentoring of Ismar Schorsch, the distinguished professor of modern European Jewish history. While he never taught about American Jewry and rarely focused his writings on this specialty, Schorsch, a true Baronian, always saw American Jewish history as an integral part of the sweep of that people's history. While in the program, Schwartz also felt fortunate that her school invited Henry Feingold, another older and worthy historian of American Jews, to teach and advise students. Upon completing her most advanced degree, with a thesis topic that Cohen suggested, Schwartz, long a part of the JTSA family, would teach her specialty there.

For what it is worth—and it surely was meaningful to me—I did not know of Naomi Cohen's importance in the field when I approached graduate work. I became Cohen's student *after* I became somewhat aware of who's who in American Jewish studies. As fate would have it, I would succeed Grinstein at Yeshiva, the third Jewish school, where my area of academic interest was long countenanced. And while I read Grinstein's massive work on Colonial New York Jewry, as a student, I had no contact with him.

Meanwhile, just a few years after I began to find my way, Pamela S. Nadell, who also "did not set off on the road to becoming an American Jewish historian," "unexpectedly stumbled," as it were, into the field, when she came under the tutelage of Professor Marc Lee Raphael. Through his mentorship, however, she implicitly connected to Marcus and Moses Rischin, who were among Raphael's own erstwhile advisors.

While Nadell came to the Ohio State University with the objective of studying and eventually teaching the full scope of Jewish studies and ended up focusing on American Jewish history with a particular interest in women's history—her passion all along—Eli Lederhendler was fully trained as a historian of East European Jewry and was already emerging as a recognized scholar in that field before he turned his talents to the study of Jews in the United States, in particular, the East European and transnational experience of this diaspora community. Arguably, however, there is a spiritual and intellectual linkage between him and Moshe Davis whom he followed as head of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the

Hebrew University, even if he never studied with him. Much like his predecessor, as a migrant from the U.S. to Israel, Lederhendler has wanted to "convey to my Israeli students as much as I could" about the largest diaspora community in the Jewish world. For him, it was in his "post-doctoral phase as a young scholar" that in "Israel I really discovered America."

Of all of our colleagues, Jonathan D. Sarna was the most determined from his earliest days to spend his life in the academy and was certain that American Jewish history would be his field. Sarna came to these decisions both honestly and genealogically. Scholarship and university teaching, in his own words, was "in many ways the family business"; his father was a renowned biblical scholar. Sarna alone among contributors to this volume has proudly carried the pedigree of a second-generation scholar of Judaica. Not only that, but as a teenager, he worked in the archive of the AJHS-where his mother was a librarian—and acquainted himself with the wealth of materials in that repository. When he applied to graduate school, Sarna also had an uncommon sense of what he needed to know in order to progress in the field and with whom he wished to study. He turned to Yale University's program, reasoning that there he could integrate modern Jewish history, American history and American religious history with his specific educational pursuit. Still, even though his objectives were clear, Sarna also realized the problems a budding scholar of American Jewish history would face—even with an Ivy League degree in hand. If all failed, Sarna considered the law as an alternate career goal.

Once Deborah Dash Moore determined that American Jewish history would be her academic calling, she openly confronted another daunting reality that those in this Jewish field had to overcome. By the time Dash Moore was a graduate student in the 1970s, social history, African American history, urban and oral history and women's history were, in her own words, "reconfiguring historical studies in the United States." Dash Moore later advocated for the inclusion of the Jewish story in that narrative, but when she came to the field, she recognized the harsh truth that there was a "profound reluctance on the part of Jewish historians even to consider American Jews worthy of historical attention." For naysayers it was

"good journalism," nothing more, even if the renowned medieval Jewish historian Gerson D. Cohen—importantly for this account, Naomi W. Cohen's husband—encouraged her to enter this still minimally charted field. Dash Moore persevered in her scholarship and advocacy. Indeed, as late as 1995—even after a generation of forcefully pushing within Vassar College's Religious Studies Department for the integration of American and Jewish history—she still would be fighting the good fight for the "acceptance of American Jewish history—especially from Jewish historians."

Though not as outspoken as Dash Moore, Rubin Schwartz also received more than mixed messages about her academic choice. While Schorsch strongly countenanced her decision to switch, early on, from the ancient period in Jewish history, a different senior professor "good natured[ly]… cajoled" her to rethink her decision. Professor Max Kadushin would say to her: "My father was a peddler, your grandfather was a peddler. That's all there is to American Jewish history. Come study rabbinics," advised this scholar of Ethics and Rabbinic Thought.

For Jenna Weisman Joselit there was absolutely nothing amiable about comments made regarding her area of expertise when she emerged with a newly minted doctorate in American Jewish history from Columbia University. In her view as of the late 1970s, "gatekeepers of Jewish history dismissed Jewish American history out of hand" and "American historians actively doubted that close consideration of the nation's Jews might possibly bring anything to the table" even as "ethnic and immigration history were only just beginning to find their respective fields." To make matters worse for her, she chose as a dissertation topic a study of Jewish criminality in New York, which, to biased eyes, smacked of "journalism." Happily for her, Dash Moore, as an editor of a series on Modern Jewish history at Indiana University, saw the value of her study and published her first book. But Weisman Joselit remained bereft of a substantial academic post. However, as fate would have it, her worthy labors on criminality and her use of visual materials to tell an intriguing story attracted the attention of the museum world and she became a curator of an exhibit on her specialty. From there, having made much that was good out of a bad employment

situation, she would rise to become an important interpreter of the history of American material culture. Most significantly, for the expansion of the purview of her initial field of expertise, she would bring her sensitivities to the study of American Jewry and to other Jewish places. Ultimately, with her feet securely planted in both American Jewish studies and the history of material culture, she would direct a "pioneering graduate program in Jewish cultural arts, the only such enterprise in the country" at George Washington University.

By the time Beth S. Wenger decided to become an American Jewish historian, many of the profound professional difficulties that had plagued Weisman Joselit and worried Sarna, Dash Moore, and her other predecessors had declined significantly. Not only that, but this youngest of our contributors—who through her work and academic leadership is a bridge between generations of professionals—could turn to senior scholars for advice and encouragement. Thus, when she matriculated at Yale—Sarna's alma mater of almost 20 years earlier—she could study with a team of a Jewish historians on staff; most importantly, with Professor Paula Hyman; a distinguished European Jewish historian who also wrote and taught American Jewish history even as she pioneered the study of Jewish women. And when Wenger thought about what she would write on as a doctoral dissertation, she could benefit from Dash Moore's advice. Of course, like all budding academicians in so many fields she could worry about the limited stock of humanities positions within the American academy. But this consideration would not stymie her choice of study area. Yet, while she secured—soon after she finished her degree—a position in the history department of the University of Pennsylvania, she still recognized that "it was more difficult for an Americanist to find a position in Jewish history, and that American historians, even those committed to ethnic history, often have little interest in the study of American Jews." However, as an optimist, she allowed that "the tide is turning, albeit slowly. As the literature has expanded and transnational history has increasingly brought American Jewish experience into broader conversation with other fields the state of American Jewish history has expanded."

Scholars like these, who have witnessed the expansion of the study area to which they have been long dedicated, have been uncommonly hospitable to academics that, after training or making marks in other disciplines—or in mid-career—have turned to American Jewish studies. Perhaps, the marginality Americanists may have felt about the status of their professional interests has contributed to the existence of a community of interest and, notably, an absence of academic snobbery. Arguably, too, the presence in our cohort of so many senior women historians—who, undeniably, had to cope with a pernicious tradition of not inviting females into what was once a men's world—also played a role in aiding this sensitivity. As a result of this cordiality, those who started out as "outsiders" have become "insiders," and their purviews have fructified the enterprise of American Jewish history.

American studies specialist Stephen J. Whitfield who "counts [himself] as among the last of the plain Americanists who have ventured into Jewish history as a sideline, and who have turned a sort of hobby into an abiding fascination" can thus, write appreciatively about a "porous" and "inclusive" discipline which "failed to police its borders with any severity and thus welcomed historians who maintained an interest in other topics." A seasoned scholar, honored in other academic realms for his work in European intellectual history, Whitfield is now known in American Jewish scholarly circles for his signal contributions to cultural history and the saga of Southern Jewry.

In a similar spirit, Mark K. Bauman could likewise relate tellingly how, in the late 1970s, he "meandered into the field that has taken primacy in my research for forty years." For him, "serendipity" rather than "design" directed his academic "journey." But once engaged, his readily appreciated contributions to exploring the complexities of Southern Jewish history—a passion that even exceeds Whitfield's devotion—has forced rethinking of not only that region's story but that of communities of varying sizes and environments.

Presently, Hasia Diner can hardly be described as other than a noteworthy interpreter of the American Jewish experience and more recently of a significant aspect of global Jewish life.

However, she too, in her own words, "entered American Jewish history through the side door." From that aperture, she believes "having come to American Jewish history from the path of studying American Jewish history made me open to the reality that Jews hardly constituted a unique element in American life." And she has challenged colleagues—who may have focused more on the idiosyncratic nature of U. S. Jews—to think likewise.

In titling her memoir "Joining Historians as an Anthropologist at the Table of American Jewish Culture," Riv-Ellen Prell underscores more strongly this endemic and characteristic openness to different perspectives. However, for her, it is not only that historians can benefit from the academic perspectives that social scientists can bring to their work, but that people in her discipline, who wish to study contemporary Jews effectively, have to be grounded in important works of historians, especially those who are concerned with the lives of so-called ordinary people. Arguably, in its own way, Prell's sense of the value of the cross-fertilization of fields fulfills a portion of Cyrus Adler's vision of a century ago that social scientists would be included among the variegated contributors to a robust academic area.

Similarly, Joyce Antler, who avers that she "became a Jewish historian by accident," came to focus her research in this area with complementary missions in mind. Here, too, an academic saw the fruitful—if not necessary—value of two fields learning from each other. As a pioneer historian of U. S. women, she embraced the "obligation to bring the Jewish women's experience to the women's table." How, in her view, could a comprehensive narrative of women's lives in this country be told without the inclusion of their Jewish sisters? At the same time, she was pleased to join American Jewish historians of long standing in integrating female accounts into the sweep of that group's saga. Though it took some convincing to have a space provided for a chair at the women's table, Antler was seated immediately at the American Jewish counter.

So much in line with Antler's experience, what is certain is that so many of our memoirists, who eventually embraced American Jewish history, have identified colleagues whose encouragement and advice assisted them along the way. There is no better example

of this pervasive collegiality than Gerald Sorin's account of how after "nearly ten years " in the academy, having obtained a doctorate in American and European history, his interest in American Jewish studies changed from "an innocent flirtation" to a "passionate love affair." Early on in his graduate training, Sorin came to appreciate how American and European history were "integral parts of each other," but he "did not yet see that Jewish history would also be connective tissue in that same work, nor that Jewish studies would have such personal appeal." However, as a junior faculty member at SUNY-New Paltz, he found it worthy to introduce "Jewish materials" into a course on Western Ideas and Institutions, much like he was anxious to include African Americans, women and other otherwise overlooked groups in the narrative. Committed to learning more about American Jewish history, he turned to Dash Moore, who was teaching at that time at YIVO [The Yiddish Scientific Institute] in Manhattan. Under her tutelage, Sorin shifted the focus of his future scholarship to her field with a special interest in the exploring the influence of the Jewish left upon this country's politics and culture. Throughout this process of intellectual migration, Sorin would credit not only Dash Moore but also several of the other memoirists in this anthology for their "welcome… genuine encouragement and support."

For her first major work of scholarship, with her initial training in religious studies and other disciplines, Dianne Ashton chose to work on the life of Rebecca Gratz. Through the biography of this mid-nineteenth century Jewish woman, Ashton wanted to address, among other pressing concerns, the state of nineteenth-century American Judaism, the place of woman, organized communal and educational life, Victorian culture and gender, and American Jewish popular culture as it related to her subject, an ambitious enterprise. Her search for sources took her from Philadelphia where Gratz lived and Ashton studied at Temple University to a variety of renowned libraries and archives. But she would recall that it was at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati—where Marcus was still the eminence—that she found an uncommonly fruitful community of scholars; the young Sarna was particularly helpful. For her, "the place seemed a Jewish version of *Fahrenheit 451*, where