

To Our Readers . . .

As the twenty-first century experience continues to dawn, the twentieth century's orb—which cast soothing light as well as destructive heat on humankind—slowly sets into the horizon of ages past. This phenomenon provides contemporary historians with an effectual tool to assist them in the work of reconstructing the past: perspective. This inevitable process will spawn new research and innovative analyses that seek to deepen and clarify our understanding of that eventful span of time.

This particular issue of our journal sheds light on the historical development of American Jewish culture during the twentieth century. In an important and pioneering volume on this subject, the historian Stephen J. Whitfield observed that while there are countless examples of how Jews labored to “reconcile the right to be equal with the option to be different” in twentieth century America, “there is no essential American Jewish culture.”¹ This volume's articles by Daniel Greene and Nathan Abrams offer readers two new lenses through which the struggle to mediate Jewishness and Americanism during the twentieth century can be examined.

Greene and Abrams analyze the work of Elliott Cohen (1899–1959), the founding editor of *Commentary* magazine. Prior to *Commentary*, Cohen served for a time as managing editor of the *Menorah Journal*, where his “Notes for a Modern History of the Jews,” were often controversial. There can be little doubt that when a history of the American Jewish press is one day written, Elliott Cohen's work will play a significant role in the story of American Jewish intellectual life in the twentieth century. According to Howard M. Sacher, under Cohen's leadership *Commentary* magazine explored practically every issue of significance affecting the lives of American Jews in the immediate aftermath of World War II.² Cohen and the remarkable list of colorful authors who contributed to *Commentary* during those years explored a wide array of intellectual topics, including politics, sociology, and literature. In doing so, these writers gave tangible expression to the ways in which a generation of secularized American Jews negotiated their contending personal identities as both American intellectuals and American Jews. It is in the very suspension of these two ideals that we discover the complex character of twentieth century American Jewish culture.

Documents constitute the heart of The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives. Our institutional efflorescence is an outgrowth of the AJA's rich and fertile collection of records and documents on North American Jewry. The discovery of new documents that shed light on significant historical events is particularly gratifying, and this journal continues to fulfill the promise of the founding director of the American Jewish Archives, Jacob Rader Marcus (1896–1995): "We seek to ascertain the facts as the actually are; and we desire to promote the study of those materials which will further a knowledge of the American Jew."³ In its "Documents" section, this journal demonstrates its commitment to providing our readers with access to previously unpublished records of consequence. In some instances, the documents we publish exemplify a particularly rich genre of historical data that await students and researchers who visit the AJA (and, to be sure, other archival repositories). Other times, the "Documents" section of our journal contains material that enriches or even revises our understanding of various historical events and episodes, as is the case with the documents published in this issue.

Professor Michael Beizer of Hebrew University brings us back to the heinous murders of Professor Israel Friedlaender and Rabbi Bernard Cantor on July 5, 1920. These two men were the first American Jews to be killed while on an official mission to Poland and Russia, which was sponsored by the Joint Distribution Committee. In an impassioned memorial address for the two slain leaders, the renowned Yiddish orator, Zvi Hirsch Masliansky, lamented: "*Yisroel, vu-bistu, vu- bistu, akhinu Yisroel?*" (Where are you, Israel, our brother, where are you?). For more than eighty years, many historians assumed that Friedlaender's biographer was correct in assuming that "clearer details about Friedlaender's death will, in all probability, never be obtained."⁴ Beizer's documentary analysis revisits this assumption by providing fascinating details about the grisly crimes that offer an explanation as to why the facts about these murders may have been deliberately obfuscated in the tragedy's aftermath.

Finally, we draw attention to Kevin Proffitt's memorial tribute to Ms. Fannie Zelcer, the late Chief Archivist of the American Jewish Archives. Ms. Zelcer served the AJA for thirty-two years, and it is impossible to summarize her professional contributions adequately. During the time of her employment, the AJA literally grew from a

relatively small archival holding into the largest catalogued collection of documentary evidence on the history of North American Jewry in the world. Fannie Zelcer's job description sounds deceptively simple: she was responsible for preserving the AJA's holdings, organizing them, and making them readily accessible to all those who wanted to use them. The AJA's archival infrastructure, as it currently exists, was put in place by Fannie (she preferred to be called by her first name). "If it's here," she would intone, "I'll find it." And she did so time and again.

Yet Fannie's most memorable contribution was her persona. She proffered succor and support to countless researchers and hundreds of rabbinic students who spent time at the AJA. Chances are those who used the AJA when Fannie Zelcer was the chief archivist left feeling as though they had made a friend for life.

In 1941, Jacob Rader Marcus urged the Jewish Publication Society of America to strive mightily to publish the volumes that "the scholars we have bred and the scholars we have sheltered" would soon be writing.⁵ Seven years later, with the inauguration of the AJA's semi-annual journal, Marcus gave birth to a new venue for promoting a knowledge of American Jewish history. As the 350th anniversary of Jewish communal settlement approaches, this journal anticipates making the work of a new generation of scholars accessible—in print and in electronic format—to all those who are seeking a deeper understanding of the American Jewish experience.

GPZ

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NOTES

1. Stephen J. Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Brandeis University Press, 1999): 247.

2. Howard M. Sacher, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992): 709.

3. Gary Phillip Zola (ed.), *The Dynamics of American Jewish History: Jacob Rader Marcus's Essay's on American Jewry* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Brandeis University Press, 2004): 115.

4. Baila Round Shargel, *Practical Dreamer: Israel Friedlaender and the Shaping of American Judaism* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1985): xxi, 35.

5. *Ibid.*, 105.