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Community Oral History to widen the path: The Jewish Mobile Oral History Project

Cover Page Footnote

With gratitude to my colleagues who commented on early drafts of this project, Kathy Cooke, Ryan Morini and Marek Steedman. Any remaining deficiencies are entirely my own.

COMMUNITY ORAL HISTORY TO WIDEN THE PATH: THE JEWISH MOBILE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The acculturation and assimilation of American Jews is the story of the last half century, and no less so in Mobile, Alabama. Understanding the Jewish community in Mobile today requires understanding a web of interconnections. The project that is the subject of this article, the Jewish Mobile Oral History Project (JMOHP), seeks to understand the present landscape of Jewish life in Mobile, which at the time of the project's inception, felt to some oddly singular and precarious. Shrinking numbers, changing (and to some degree declining) religious observance, and a rising threat of white supremacy and its ugly twin of antisemitism; these are all factors that made the last few years feel like a narrow bridge.¹

The Jewish Mobile Oral History Project is a project of the McCall Library at the University of South Alabama and was developed with funding from the Alabama Humanities Alliance to record interviews capturing the history, communal development, and present-day experience of Mobile's Jewish residents. The project was conceived at a moment of political turmoil following the tumultuous first years of the Trump presidency. An alarming rise in antisemitic hate speech and violence had begun across the country. After the 2018 massacre of eleven worshippers at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, leaders from Mobile's law enforcement, city government, local churches, and mosques gathered for a hastily arranged vigil at Ahavas Chesed Synagogue to express support for Mobile's Jews. This expression of solidarity was profound, but the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty persisted.

Through a series of oral history interviews exploring the contours of the community, the McCall Library is actualizing its mission of collecting and preserving resources that document the history of Mobile, Alabama, with particular intention to highlight minority voices. We have sought to learn more about Jewish Mobile's self-understandings past and present, and to examine the ways that Jewish experiences of the Deep South may or may not be unique and how these have changed over time.

The JMOHP was designed with three primary aims: to record and preserve early memories of community elders; to document the present-day experiences of new arrivals and younger people; and to share these stories broadly with the goal of encouraging intercommunal dialogue. Public engagement was a critical goal of the project, with a view toward combating ignorance around Jews and Jewishness and with the aim of increasing safety. Further, this goal resonates with the work of Punzalan and Caswell (2016), who explore themes in archives research that relate to social justice.² The JMOHP gathers together two of these threads, namely work seeking to expand inclusion of underrepresented or marginalized sectors of society, and work to develop community archives. The JMOHP came out of the desire to understand the present-day experience of the Jewish community in Mobile during the period of the Trump years, when acts of antisemitic

¹ This is a reference to a well-known teaching of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810) that although life is precarious, a person should resist being hindered by fear. The teaching has been adapted into a popular song, "The whole world is like a very narrow bridge, the main lesson is not to fear at all."

² Punzalan and Caswell, "Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice."

violence and harassment were increasing rapidly. According to ADL statistics the year 2017 saw the sharpest rise in antisemitic hate crimes in recent history, and levels have continued to rise.³

This case study will engage approaches from the disciplines of history and archival theory. I write from an insider's perspective as both an oral historian and archivist who conceived the project, and as a Jewish community member and leader. This position offers some unique opportunities to know and speak the cultural language of the community (to the extent that there is a unified example). It also offers the opportunity to look at a world that I know intimately from a scholarly perspective, examining the literature and situating the project in discussions and critiques of archival mediation. It also complicates the question of whether the project emerged to satisfy institutional or community needs. My positionality requires that the answer be that both perspectives were employed in the decision making surrounding the project.

Initial Methodology

The original project design, completed in January 2020, included an advisory panel of community members whose role would be to guide the development of the collection by selecting themes to explore in interviews and suggesting key narrators. In addition, the original proposal included public workshops to teach oral history methods and to generate enthusiasm and participation, encouraging community members to interview each other. These two features were intended to embed the needs and perspectives of the community in the fabric of the project and to create positive outcomes specifically for community members, an important feature of community-engaged scholarship.⁴

The community engagement goals of this project encompass not only working with members of the Jewish community in Mobile but working to develop dissemination modes for the final products across community boundaries. This was the “social good” at the heart of the project, demystifying, educating, creating opportunities to interact with and hopefully understand better experiences different from one's own. The goal resonates with a feminist ethical view that interwoven relationships are the ignition points of social justice action. “An ethics of care...stresses the ways in which people are linked to each other and larger communities through webs of responsibilities.”⁵

³ Anti-Defamation League, “2021 Audit of Antisemitic Incidents”; Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry, *Antisemitism Worldwide 2021*.

⁴ Bringle and Hatcher, “Campus–Community Partnerships”; Wade and Demb, “A Conceptual Model to Explore Faculty Community Engagement”; Caswell, “Seeing Yourself in History”; Caswell, Migoni, Geraci, and Cifor, “To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise”; Cook, “We Are What We Keep.”

⁵ Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics,” 27–28; Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*; Drake, “Liberatory Archives (Part 1)”; Drake, “Liberatory Archives (Part 2)”; Roeschley and Kim, “Something That Feels Like a Community”; Vukliš and Gilliland, “Archival Activism.”

Theoretical Foundations

The emergence of social justice as a central archival consideration is a feature of the numerous recent studies (Harris 2002; Jimerson 2007; Wallace 2010; Duff et al. 2013; Punzalan and Caswell 2016) that struggle to inform the “construction and reconstruction of professional ethics” within the archives.⁶

The concept of participatory archives emerges from an understanding that archival mediation is not neutral in effect.⁷ Howard Zinn, in his provocative 1970 address to the Society of American Archivists, challenged archivists to embrace their power to shape the raw material of history through intentional action, “humanizing an inevitably political craft.”⁸ By encouraging archivists to shake off the view that the records that matter are those of the powerful in society, Zinn proposed a radical reframing of the role of archives in relation to power. Zinn’s challenge broadens the view of archives to collect and preserve records of all strata of society, privileging none and engaging both record keepers and record subjects as active record co-creators. Anthony Dunbar contributes to a useful framework for thinking about social justice in the context of archival endeavors, drawing on the work of Lee Anne Bell (1997). In this context and most relevant to this project, social justice in the archives “seek[s] vehicles for actors to express their own agency, reality or representation, to develop strategies that broker dialogue between communities with unparallel cultural viewpoints and to create frameworks to clearly identify, define, and analyze oppression and how it operates at various individual, cultural, and institutional levels.”⁹

The welcome trend toward democratization of archives and active pursuit of representative archives, what has recently been termed by Hughes-Watkins a “reparative archive,” brings to light important ways that archivists, through intentional selection, engagement with community stakeholders, and awareness of downstream consequences of their interventions, have a role to play in larger social justice claims. In Hughes-Watkins’ words, “Social justice through archival repair is a change in the traditional praxis of the archival profession; it is a conscientious effort to begin one’s work with the philosophy of inclusion from the margins.”¹⁰

Also relevant to this analysis are ideas related to affect theory, as the work of Marika Cifor and Ann Cvetkovich suggests, that affective value be applied as an appraisal criterion in archives.¹¹ Both of these perspectives emerge from an explicitly feminist approach to archival ethics that spotlights radical empathy as the defining attitude vis à vis record keepers, record users, and record subjects.¹²

Participatory archival strategies are one approach toward reparation. Benoit and Roeschley offer a definition of participatory archives by drawing on Flinn’s work locating the defining features as

⁶ Wallace, “Locating Agency Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Professional Ethics and Archival Morality.”

⁷ Blouin, “Archivists, Mediation, and Constructs of Social Memory.”

⁸ Zinn, “Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest,” 20.

⁹ Dunbar, “Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse,” 117.

¹⁰ Hughes-Watkins, “Moving Toward a Reparative Archive,” 5.

¹¹ Cifor, “Affecting Relations.”

¹² Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics.”

being community-centered and self-defined.¹³ The aspect that they further examine is the degree of mediation or professional/institutional intervention in the management and distribution of information. Flinn and Sexton problematize the descriptor “‘community’ archives” as necessarily relying on reductive categorizations and propound Drake’s claim that community archival undertaking is necessarily political and deserves more precise articulation of motive.¹⁴ Drake exhorts us to “name the stakes of our work more candidly and clearly by transitioning to a language of precise political claims and a liberatory lens to accompany it.”¹⁵

The Jewish Mobile Oral History Project of the University of South Alabama attempts to serve as a vehicle for expression of agency and self-understanding of its narrators, while also “brokering dialogue” among wider audiences. Oral history is a powerful methodology when deployed to engage with community members whose minority identity is at times elided, underrepresented, or misinterpreted in the context of the specific institutional archive. In this sense, one motivation of this project is clearly political and resonates with Dunbar’s observation—to allow Jews in Mobile to speak about their experience as Jews, who still face religious and cultural prejudice and dehumanization, though many structural barriers to social mobility have largely faded over the last several decades in contrast to those routinely faced by Black, Indigenous, and other peoples of color.¹⁶

First Steps in Developing the JMOHP

In early discussions with the project advisory panel, members expressed excitement about a community project and felt most strongly motivated by the desire to preserve the memories of community elders who were nearing the end of their lives. They felt an anxiety about loss of memory and legacy, which emerged as a critical theme in some of the interviews. By attending to this the project set out to follow the lead of community members in their affective needs. The disjunction between my initial goals and those expressed by the advisory prompted me to reflect on the assumptions that lay behind these differences and what emerged was my concern for representing the margins of the marginalized community.

The strategy we then embraced was to cast a wide net, being certain to seek out the stories of elders as well as more marginal voices within the community, newcomers, converts, Jews of color, LGBTQ Jews. As a member of the community myself, I note again my privileged position. I was able to benefit from an insider’s understanding of the dynamics and needs of the community as well as the external considerations, the mediation, of working as a university representative motivated by the goals of reparative archives and curating a more complete picture of the history of Mobile for my institution. In this sense, I was able to reduce the impact of the “institutional

¹³ Benoit and Roeschley, “Degrees of Mediation”; Rolan, “Agency in the Archive.”

¹⁴ Flinn and Sexton, “Activist Participatory Communities in Archival Contexts.”

¹⁵ Drake, “Seismic Shifts.”

¹⁶ The McCall Library is presently engaging in other community oral history work grounded in this same approach. The ‘Down the Bay’ Oral History Project, for example, is exploring memories of this historically Black neighborhood that was heavily impacted by Mobile’s “Urban Renewal” projects and the building of the interstate highway. Gurt, “Speaking of Africatown.”

gaze,” per the work of Flinn and Sexton, through my position, equally comfortable, at either end of the scope.¹⁷

Community Context

Mobile’s Jewish community numbers roughly 1,000 individuals and is divided among 2 established congregations (established in 1844 and 1894 respectively), with significant numbers of transient or unaffiliated individuals who are occasional participants in the offerings of communal life.¹⁸ In addition to these physical houses of worship, there are other specifically Jewish organizations in the city, including Chabad, which sponsors events and learning, and Jewish Family Services, a charitable organization that raises funds to assist local families in need and contributes to philanthropic work at national and international levels.

In Mobile, converts to Judaism constitute a significant element of the population. This group includes personal religious seekers and family members or spouses of Jews-by-birth. These voices enrich and inevitably change a community, bringing different life experiences and perspectives to the table.

Interview Themes

Viewed in sum, the JMOHP interviews reflect a population in transition, holding on to certain vestiges of the past, casting off others, and wrestling to develop a new and different sense of itself and its place in the twenty-first-century American landscape.¹⁹ To date, thirty interviews have been completed, and additional interviews will be added in the future. Interviewees include members of Mobile’s Reform congregation, Springhill Avenue Temple; the Conservative synagogue, Ahavas Chesed; and a few unaffiliated Jews as well as non-Jewish but deeply engaged friends of the community.

Mobile has an unusual array of cooperative organizations that bridge religious divides, notably the Mobile Christian-Jewish Dialogue and the Gulf Coast Center for Holocaust and Human Rights Education. Taking to heart Linda Shopes’s advice to “define the universe of narrators broadly,” we included these “Jewish-adjacent” voices as a deliberate choice, since the named organizations and individuals loom large in the local context and contribute meaningfully to the life of the community through work collaborations, advocacy, and personal friendships.²⁰

Several important themes emerged from the interviews, both among interviewees with long history in Mobile and among newcomers and younger narrators: Jewish community cohesion (or division); themes related to the liminal status of Jews in relation to the legally imposed racial

¹⁷ Flinn and Sexton, “Activist Participatory Communities in Archival Contexts.”

¹⁸ Here I am including the organization Chabad Mobile, which does not use a membership model but attracts a cross-section of the community and significant number of otherwise unaffiliated Jews to its events and programs. Korn, *The Jews of Mobile*.

¹⁹ Portions of this paper were previously published in the *Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina* magazine (Fall 2021): Deborah Gurt, “Jewish Mobile’s Narrow Bridge,” https://jagworks.southalabama.edu/usa_faculty_staff_pubs/9

²⁰ Shopes, “Oral History and the Study of Communities.”

dichotomy under Jim Crow and its contemporary manifestations of white supremacy; complex relations to the African American community; changing patterns of residence that coincided with the rise of the shopping mall and “white flight” from the urban center. More contemporary themes include attending to diversity within the Jewish community; examining the complex relationship between white supremacy and antisemitism; and continued intra-communal cleavages.

Reflecting on the recollections of an aging population, some themes emerge around loss of internal cohesiveness. Jews have been in Mobile for centuries, and in organized congregations since 1844 when the congregation Sha’arai Shomayim (Gates of Heaven) was founded. By 1873 they had embraced Reform Judaism. In 1894 a second synagogue, Ahavas Chesed (Love of Kindness), was established that, in its early years, followed more traditional Orthodox practice until a 1952 shift toward the Conservative stream of Judaism. Many of today’s older generation have memories of defining events within communal life and the life of the city. Quite simply, these are memories of a way of life that has faded with changing patterns of employment, shifting areas of residence, and modulation in social acceptance of Jews by the larger community.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Mobile had a lively central business district full of small businesses. Many of these small business owners were Jews and other immigrants, including Greek and Lebanese. This shared experience and physical concentration strengthened the Jewish community, still a tiny minority in the city of Mobile. Here, Mark Berkin describes his parents’ arrival in Mobile from Connecticut in 1939.

Gurt:

So what, what did they find when they moved to Mobile? Do you know stories from the very early days?

Berkin:

They found a very welcoming Jewish community. They immediately joined the Cons[ervative]—actually the Orthodox congregation, which is now the congregation Ahavas Chesed, and were welcomed by many people at the time. This was back in 1939 before the war, Second World War. Dauphin Street was the hub of the retail business area in Mobile and many, many members of Congregation Ahavas Chesed, which at that time was located in its first building on the corner of Conti and Warren Street, which is in downtown Mobile. Most—many, not most, many of the merchants on Dauphin Street were Jewish, whether it was a jewelry store, shoe store, a department store, a men’s store, a ladies’ store. So I think through his, my father’s association with business and the neighbors that he had on Dauphin Street they found that a very welcoming Jewish community as well as a welcoming city.²¹

These businesses anchored the community close to the urban center of Mobile, and Jewish communal organizations such as the synagogues and social clubs cemented that center. This proximity also contributed to regular day-to-day contact with members of Mobile’s Black community, an important feature of the Mobile experience. Donald Zivitz, whose father owned a store on what was then Davis Avenue, in the heart of African American Mobile, describes a warm

²¹ Berkin, interview by Deborah Gurt, JMOHP, 2020.

friendship that existed between his father, Marvin Zivitz, and a prominent African American religious leader, Bishop W.T. Phillips. Zivitz also describes a group called the Junior Pep Club that his father organized and led, getting neighborhood children involved in community projects and activities. Zivitz says, “He [Marvin] was a strong believer in giving something back to the community from which he made his living. And you have to remember, this was 1951 in Mobile, Alabama”—Zivitz’s implication being that actively investing in personal relationships across racial boundaries was unusual and may have involved some risk on his part.²²

Several narrators described complex relations with the Black neighbors, acquaintances, or friends in Mobile, a city that in the 1950s was strictly segregated by race. Despite the fact that Jews were explicitly barred from some white-only spaces on the basis of religion, Jews were mostly classed as white within the Black/white racial construct that defined life in the South.²³ Leon Maisel describes an interesting dynamic of his childhood experience—when on weekends he would play in the local park with friends, a city official named Mr. Lodge was tasked with preventing Black and white children from playing together. On Sundays, however, Lodge had the day off, and so that was the day when all the kids played basketball and football together.

Maisel also describes his mother’s unease with the racial status quo. The family owned a grocery store on Texas Street in a historically mixed, or “checkerboard,” neighborhood. “We had... I lived in a kind of a mixed white and Black neighborhood. A lot of my friends were Black kids growing up. And we were never to say the n-word, you know, I mean, my mother would slap me across the face if I even thought about it.”²⁴ Both of these examples suggest a basic discomfort with the imposed rules of social interaction that Jim Crow enforced. Jews occupied a liminal space fitting into neither narrow category. This becomes an even more complicated calculus today as more Jews of color join communal institutions and challenge narrow understandings of identity.

Within the community there were dividing lines as well. Tamara Fulford recounted,

Fulford:

And my parents, my mother, my mother’s family were Orthodox and belonged to what we called the shul, the synagogue, and my father’s family belonged to the Temple. So I was brought up in the Temple. But I, of course, attended my grandparents’ synagogue as well. I went to both, but my main place was the Temple.

Gurt:

So, that’s interesting. Was that a complicated calculus in your family or it was just accepted that...?

²² Zivitz, interview by Deborah Gurt, JMOHP, 2020.

²³ A 1942 letter from the Grand Hotel between the general manager Van Cadenhead and Leo Brown, a leader of the Springhill Avenue Temple, specifically references the resort’s policy not to serve Jewish guests, instead serving a Gentile-only clientele. Springhill Avenue Temple Archives, Mobile, AL.

²⁴ Maisel, interview by Deborah Gurt, JMOHP, 2020.

Fulford:

It was somewhat. In fact, I often said I felt I came from a mixed marriage not mixed religions, but sort of. My father's family were, well, my grandmother Reiss was born in Mobile and my mother's family were immigrants. So there was a little friction there where they, well, I don't know how else to express it except that my father's family were snobs. And I think my grandmother Prince, my mother's mother, said it best. The two, my grandmother Prince lived on Government Street and my grandmother Reiss lived on Dearborn and that was the next perpendicular street. So their backyards met. They were fenced, but their backyards came together and they both had geese in their yards. And my grandmother Prince, mother's mother, once said, "If Mrs. Reiss knew that her geese were talking to my geese she'd have a fit."²⁵

In a lighthearted way, Fulford describes some of the differences and tensions that existed between older established Jews of mainly German ancestry and newer immigrants from Eastern Europe who were viewed as less refined or cultured. In spite of these internal divisions, both faced the same external pressures of social exclusion. The shift out of the city center for the Ahavas Chesed synagogue ushered in other changes, namely the shift away from Orthodox Jewish observance toward affiliation with the Conservative movement in American Judaism. The Reform Temple remains in its building on Springhill Avenue, while Ahavas Chesed continued its westward move when the congregation had outgrown its space on Dauphin Street. In the 1980s plans were made to purchase land in West Mobile, despite the objections of some suburban residents, who successfully lobbied Mobile's Zoning Board to refuse the congregation's application and told synagogue leaders, "We don't want you here." The plan, however, was later narrowly approved, on the support of a single African American member of the City Council.²⁶

Many look back to the pre-1950s close-knit community, anchored in the urban center of the city and surrounded by a host of Jewish-owned mom-and-pop businesses as a high point in community cohesiveness and vitality. This cohesiveness is also reflective of the reality of the social exclusion of Jews (as well as African Americans) from clubs, social organizations, and in some cases accommodations. (Several narrators referenced a sign at a well-known local resort indicating that African Americans and Jews were not permitted.) Despite these instances of discriminatory policies and actions, many of the Jewish narrators describe themselves as never having experienced antisemitism.

Phyllis Feibelman in her interview describes the civic arena as one in which Jews were fully integrated.

Feibelman:

Members of the congregation were on boards all over the community in slots sort of reserved for them. The congregation [Sha'aray Shomayim] had a relationship with all the other downtown churches. Then after we moved to Springhill Avenue with others of the midtown churches. When I grew up a balanced podium was a Catholic, a Protestant, and a

²⁵ Fulford, interview by Deborah Gurt, JMOHP, 2020.

²⁶ Meisler, interview by Deborah Gurt, JMOHP, 2020.

Jew. All white and all men, but that was a balanced podium. If some civic something wanted to be inclusive, all white and all men, Catholic, Protestant, and Jew.²⁷

Gurt:

It's very interesting, Phyllis. It's a very interesting perspective. So you're describing to me a real integration into the civic life of Mobile.

Feibelman:

Yep.

Gurt:

I wonder, were there any situations in which Jews might have been excluded or that you felt you weren't welcome or dealt with antisemitism?

Feibelman:

Social things.

Gurt:

Okay.

Feibelman:

Civic, yes, social sometimes.

Gurt:

Any instances you can remember or stories?

Feibelman:

None I wanna tell.

Gurt:

Okay. That's fair.

Feibelman:

High school sororities and fraternities. Mardi Gras.... My experience. My mama told me before I was old enough to be asked to be in a sorority that I would not be. I just figured, okay, that's the way it is. I don't know how long you've been in Mobile, and I don't know what you've experienced of that, but that was that. Then Mardi Gras societies. We were not asked to belong, but friends asked us to be their guest at the balls.

The exclusion of Jews from social clubs, an important feature of Mobile social life, encouraged the formation of the Jewish Progressive Club. The JPC served the entire Jewish community from 1930 through the 1950s and to some extent bridged the cultural gap between the two congregations as a neutral ground where members of both congregations, especially youth, would mingle. It filled a need for the Jewish community to have a place to gather and socialize, for young people to

²⁷ Feibelman, interview by Deborah Gurt, JMOHP, 2020.

participate in recreation, and community events. It was also home to the Hebrew Athletic League basketball team that won several recreational titles.

The need for these particularly Jewish social spaces began to fade during the 1960s and '70s, and the successor organizations to the JPC, first the Highland Country Club and then the Jewish Community Center, closed their doors in 1991. Concurrent with the gradually increasing social acceptance of Jews in non-Jewish spaces was a declining population of the city of Mobile as a whole from the boom of the war years. The Jewish population shrank also as children went away to college and didn't return. Whether it was in search of greater career opportunities beyond the family business or more prospects for finding a Jewish partner, this drain of young people away from Mobile's community has resulted in an aging population and few younger community leaders to shape the future of Mobile's Jewish communal life.

As we examine the present in light of the past, we also asked about the experience in 2020 of living in Mobile, Alabama, as a religious/ethnic/cultural minority. We asked narrators how the political and social changes over the last four years had impacted community members. We asked also for reflections on the state of Black/Jewish community relations and issues of exclusion based in white supremacy.

“What's going on now has never been good for the Jews,” Mark Berkin said referring to the increasingly populist political climate of the Trump years. In September of 2020 a Mobile and Montgomery joint community religious service (convening over Zoom) was disrupted by a group of seven attackers who commandeered the audio and video of the meeting to spew racist and antisemitic insults and display Nazi imagery. One witness, a Mobile man in his seventies, expressed dismay and said he had never before directly experienced an antisemitic attack in real time.²⁸

Several narrators in the project are converts to Judaism who bring perspectives on communal life that reflect a genuine grappling with questions of identity more easily left unexamined by Jews-by-birth. In some instances, these narrators expressed great enthusiasm for Jewish life and practice that is notably missing in other interviews. Sadly, a general pessimism was evident among many of the older narrators.

Patrick Crabtree, who self-identifies as a gay man, referred repeatedly to his “home” synagogue, Bet Haverim in Atlanta, which was founded by and for LGBTQ Jews. He discussed the activism of Rabbi Joshua Lesser as something that encouraged him to see new possibilities for bringing Jewish values and social justice work into alignment. Now residing in Mobile, Crabtree channels that passion into work with the NAACP and the Alabama Education Association.²⁹

Other narrators describe the expansion of pro-Israel Evangelical Christian overtures toward the Jewish community that are welcomed in some quarters and viewed warily in others. For a community newly awakened to the threat of revitalized antisemitism, the hand offered in support

²⁸ Lawrence B. Voit, conversation with author, September 13, 2020.

²⁹ Crabtree, interview by Deborah Gurt, JMOHP, 2021.

of Jews and the Jewish state is comforting, even if the areas of actual policy or ideological agreement are very narrow.

Bringing Mobile Communities Together

We held a public event at the University of South Alabama Marx Library, conceived as one primary dissemination mode for the JMOHP. We embedded in the event layered opportunities for engagement. The event itself was advertised as the “launch” of the collection. Posters and fliers were distributed across campus, to partner organizations, and through social media event pages. A keynote speaker, Dr. Josh Parshall of the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, was invited to talk about his work, which also employs oral history methods to learn and teach about Jewish communities across the South. In addition to the talk, the event featured exhibit panels displaying interview excerpts, which could be read or listened to (via QR codes), organized around themes that emerged from the collection. These themes included Philanthropy, Community Elders, Mobile City Center, Foods, Social Activities, and Coming of Age. With each panel we recruited a student from the university’s Honors College to prepare in advance and act as a conversation facilitator for guests around the topic of the panel, allowing them to connect the Jewish perspective from the examples to their own experience. Through this action, we were cultivating the ground where radical empathy could potentially emerge.

A third feature of the event design that was meant to facilitate connection was the refreshments, which were provided and served by volunteers from the Jewish community. These items were displayed with explanatory table tents with the name and origin of the item. Examples included babka, a yeasted cake with swirls of cinnamon or chocolate, of Eastern European Jewish origin, and sesame tahini cookies, of Near Eastern origin. These provided another focal point for conversation but also for encountering the unfamiliar.

Taken together, the public event was a great success, attended by approximately 35 people, including students, faculty, and staff, as well as some members of the broader public and the Jewish community. It is likely that COVID depressed audience size, but feedback on the event was very positive, and guests engaged enthusiastically with the student facilitators, and each other.

One of the project’s central goals was to document and make accessible the stories of members of Mobile’s Jewish community. Our intern, who spent months proofreading interview transcripts, noted that she had almost no familiarity with many of the concepts that are central to the experience of Jewish life in America. To help her understand the interviews she was reading, we created a glossary of non-English language terms that are part of the everyday parlance of Jews. Most of these words are derived from Hebrew or Yiddish for this community of primarily Ashkenazic (European diasporic) origin. For example, the synagogue Ahavas Chesed is commonly referred to by its members as the *shul*, a Yiddish word meaning school. That word choice hints at an important concept in Jewish culture, namely that learning and study are understood as primary forms of worship.

A second example from the glossary is the different English words used to describe Jewish congregations and their houses of worship. The Reform movement in American Judaism embraces the word temple to describe its building, while Conservative and Orthodox streams resist this

usage, reserving the word temple to refer only to the Solomonic (957–586 BCE) and Second Temples (516 BCE–70 CE) in Jerusalem. In English, Conservative congregations generally use the word synagogue, which derives from the Greek, meaning place of meeting. The barrier to understanding posed by these expressions is one example of the acute need to promote inter-group dialogue and learning.

Adapting and Moving Forward

Despite the initial plans for extensive community partnership, as COVID emerged in spring 2020 the project was forced to reevaluate methods and recalibrate expectations. In March, we scrambled to find remote modes of interviewing that would approximate the personal rapport of face-to-face. We sought to create archival quality recordings and yet be easy enough to navigate for elders with less technical facility. The first few remote interviews were unfortunately impacted by technological issues that led to low-quality recordings and awkward moments. Many later interviews were recorded using a podcasting platform, Zencastr, which allowed for the creation of archival-quality WAV files and supported in-app mixing and editing. Our student intern, rather than participating in face-to-face communal activities, found herself editing machine-generated interview transcripts and joining Zoom events and religious services. A great deal of adaptation, and embrace of unfamiliar technologies, was required to achieve the project goals in a drastically altered landscape of possibility.

Interview collection took place for roughly a year in fits and starts, and we struggled to generate widespread interest. Since groups were not meeting in person, sharing information about the project relied on digital modes of communication that were new and not easily adopted by some community members, especially elders.

Finally, in the summer of 2021, with the help of a community volunteer who personally telephoned individuals, we were able to schedule a two-week sprint, packing in ten new interviews and generating additional community awareness. The culminating public event was planned for November and, right up to the last minute, the decision as to whether it could take place in person was an open one. We were delighted though, on November 18, 2021, to gather in person in a large open gallery space for the event.

The successful launch event was followed with the dissemination of a collection brochure to libraries and archives region-wide, as well as placement in local Jewish community spaces to bring further public awareness to the project. Additional interviews are still being recorded, and the collection remains open to these additions.

Conclusions

Though Drake's work directly challenges the notions of both *participatory* and *community-based* as qualifiers for archival endeavors, the insight that Drake articulates is to view "the political projects of archives...as connections more than places."³⁰ This assertion amplifies both the affective and relational aspects of archives. The Jewish Mobile Oral History Project underlines

³⁰ Drake, "Seismic Shifts."

this point by unearthing some of those connections and naming them. Jewish Mobilians sometimes feel an embrace from the wider community with one arm while being held at a distance by the other. The interviews of the JMOHP explore such connections: between Jews and African Americans who share an experience of exclusion, among religious groups seeking to engender mutual understanding, and between educators striving to improve the teaching around the Holocaust and other genocides.

Quite apart from occasional episodes like the Zoom attack described above, recent relations between Jews and non-Jews in Mobile have been largely neutral or positive. Though the intense internal focus on addressing the security of Jewish institutions remains a very real concern that often goes unrecognized by community outsiders.

In contrast to this concern, a network of interfaith organizations, encompassing Black churches, mosques, and predominantly white churches, has developed in Mobile that actively works to engage Jews and non-Jews in open dialogue about each other's beliefs and cultures. There is also the nonprofit organization noted above, the Gulf Coast Center for Holocaust and Human Rights Education, whose mission is to educate local teachers and K–12 students about the dangers of xenophobia and intolerance. These groups sponsor regular educational events as well as ongoing gatherings to promote interaction and dialogue. When in 2019 the attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh took place including the murder of eleven worshippers, the city of Mobile responded by packing the sanctuary at Ahavas Chesed to capacity to attend a prayer vigil and lend moral support to a shocked and frightened Jewish community. This violent attack and the response of Mobilians to it sparked the idea to further the engagement of one community with the other, and was ultimately the catalyst for the JMOHP proposal: to reflect on the changes in internal Jewish community cohesiveness and the related external dynamics of inclusion (or not) and to gather stories of Jewish life in community and share them—encouraging Mobilians to speak and to listen to each other. Recent events have changed what it feels like to be Jewish in America, and this affective feature comes through in the archive of the JMOHP.

The Jewish community in Mobile can't be understood in isolation: it is precisely the relationships, both internal and external, that make the context intelligible. The Jewish Mobile Oral History Project stakes the claim that by recording, sharing, and engaging with these complex stories, archives can and should create social impacts to widen the path.

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