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A tale of mutual empathy: Jewish refugee scholars at historically black colleges

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Click photo to download. Caption: Professor Ernst Borinski teaching in the Social Science Lab, Tougaloo College, MS, ca. 1960. Prof. Borinski, a refugee from Germany, was part of the Tougaloo community for 36 years. In the Social Science Lab, students were encouraged to think critically and question social attitudes, prejudices, and race relations. Credit: Courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archives and History. In Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, an exhibition aptly opening on Martin Luther King Day will highlight a historical moment of mutual respect and cooperation between the African American and Jewish communities.

Although their relationship has often been tense, especially after the rise of the black power movement and its expressions of anti-Semitism, the hiring of Jewish refugee scholars in the 1930s by historically black colleges stands as a beacon to the potential for common ground between the two groups.

Ivy Barsky, executive director of the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH), explains the museum's goals in mounting the "Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow" traveling exhibit created by the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust. "We wanted through this exhibition to really look at what happens when groups or individuals live together, understand each other and their histories, and come from a history of shared empathy and understanding—what happens when those relationships are shared and deep, real and authentic."

In producing this exhibit and its attendant programs, Barsky and her staff collaborated closely with the African American Museum in Philadelphia. Patricia Wilson Aden, its interim president and CEO, notes that the subject matter—the little-known history of Jewish refugee academics from Germany and Austria who were given livelihood and dignity by the historically black colleges—"provides an opportunity to delve into our mutual history."

The exhibit grew out of a film that itself was motivated by Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb's book, *From Swastika to Jim Crow: Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges*. Filmmaker Steve Fischler learned of the book in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* by refugee scholar John Herz, who referred to it during a period of overt discord between Jews and blacks. The film that Fischler produced with his partner Joel Sucher was first aired by PBS in 2000. The two men actively helped to develop the exhibit.



Click photo to download. Caption: Prof. Ernst Borinski's menorah.

Borinski—a refugee from Germany who was part of the Tougaloo College (Mississippi) community for 36 years—kept his personal life and identity private, "for his own mental health," but towards the end of his life "he drew closer to the Jewish community." Courtesy: Collection of Frances and Lee Coker. During the interviewing process for the film, Fischler was particularly impressed with the mutual recognition by scholars and their students of their shared experiences of oppression. "You will see some of the students talking about how, when they learned about this history of their teachers, they felt sympathetic in some ways. Having themselves been victims of racism, they saw the scholars being subjected to anti-Semitism and worse in Europe. They felt they were two exploited groups that did have something in common, and that bonded them together."

These shared experiences contributed to strong connections between the Jewish refugee scholars and their college communities, but the reciprocal nature of their relationship was also noteworthy. "It was not one-sided," says Barsky. "The colleges give these professors homes and communities, and the professors bring their talents, content knowledge, and incredible teaching skills."

In contrast to relationships during the civil rights era, the black colleges in this case were the philanthropists, as it were, offering the highest form of tzedakah, a livelihood, to the refugee scholars. "They are the ones doing the helping," says Barsky, "and in a very real way these lives were saved."

As young academics, the refugee scholars did not have the international reputations of an Einstein or an Arendt, and they could not get jobs in the white institutions of the Northeast. "They were here during the Depression, on tourist visas, afraid that if they didn't get jobs they would get sent back," says Fischler.



Click photo to download. Caption: Donald Cunnigen's Alpha Phi Alpha

Fraternity sweater from Tougaloo College, ca. 1970–1974. Cunnigen was a member of a black fraternity during his time at Tougaloo College in Mississippi. Social life at a black college was similar to student life at white colleges and universities. Credit: Collection of Dr. Donald Cunnigen The scholars' gratitude to these colleges was so strong that in some cases they never left, even in the face of offers from prestigious institutions. Fischler recalls interviewing Plato expert Ernst Manasse three months before he died. He asked Manasse why he did not accept a job offer from Princeton University while teaching at North Carolina College for Negroes (which later became North Carolina Central University). His response?

"I could never do that. I could never leave."

The exhibit's artifacts reflect both the activism of some scholars in the civil rights movement as well as their strong empathy for the black experience.

Included in the exhibit is a receipt for a fine that Donald and Lore Rasmussen had to pay for having lunch with a black student in a coffee shop. "This is not a great act of resistance; this is them living their daily lives as they want to live it," says Barsky.

Another set of artifacts includes paintings by Victor Lowenfeld and his student John Biggers, who went on to become by far the greater artist of the two. Barsky paraphrases what Biggers shared in the film about his first experience creating art, in Lowenfeld's class. "The professor told us that we had a lot to communicate, that we were living in the segregated South with incredible persecution and violence, and we had a lot of anger and a lot to say; and Lowenfeld encouraged us to say it through artwork."

The symbiotic relationship between the professors and their students exemplifies the value of strong mentoring, another take-home from this exhibit. Fischler illustrates this with an anecdote by Calvin Hernton, who eventually became a dean at Oberlin College. His professor Fritz Pappenheim encouraged him to apply for a Fulbright, which Hernton thought was "the most ridiculous thing in the world." But to satisfy Pappenheim, he filled out the application, and as a result he received the Fulbright that launched his career.

The programming around this exhibit is also opening up possibilities for revisiting the current relationship between the Jewish and African American communities, through music, film, speakers, and cultural programming. "People are absolutely hungry for this type of programming," says Barsky, citing a conversation with Robert Jennings, president of Lincoln University, one of two Philadelphia-area historic black colleges: "He says his students don't know Jews and what they perceive about Jews is not good, and our community desperately needs to have this conversation."

The exhibit is an opportunity to create new dialogues and advance those that are already happening in small grassroots groups in Philadelphia.

"We might come at the exhibit from a different perspective, but there is common ground there that I think we all want to explore and will all be richer for doing so," Aden says. "What we are hoping is that we will model the cooperation, collaboration, and mutual respect that our communities have had and should have in the future."

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