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A conversation with Leonard Rogoff

Author of *Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina*

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Q: What is the multi-media project “Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina” (<http://www.jhnc.org/>) and how does your book relate to it? Who is the project's sponsor?

A: The Jewish Heritage Foundation of North Carolina has created a multimedia project “Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina.” It consists of a documentary film, a school curriculum, a traveling museum exhibition, and, of course, a book. Although sharing a title and subject, the book stands independently. Each aspect complements the other. The book limns the history in rich detail and gathers the folklore and documentary record into a narrative.

Q: What is it about North Carolina that makes the Jewish experience and influence different here than in other parts of the country and in the south?

A: The Jewish experience parallels the larger North Carolina story of an agrarian state that has risen from poverty to Sunbelt prosperity. North Carolina has been the proverbial “vale of humility between two mountains of conceit.” Port towns were cosmopolitan places, and the frontier welcomed new peoples. Yeomen farmers, its representative citizens, disdained social hierarchy. As a religious people, North Carolinians saw Jews as People of the Book. Small towns set the character of the state. Jews were uncommonly welcome both for the commercial services they provided and for their civic spirit as citizens and neighbors.

Q: Many books on southern Jewish history choose to emphasize the antebellum and Civil War eras. Why did you choose to cover the entire span of Jewish history in North Carolina?

A: Although some nascent Jewish communities formed in North Carolina prior to the Civil War, the Jewish story, like that of the state itself, really focuses on the New South and Sunbelt. Most Jewish communities formed permanently in the postwar years as settlers arrived to service the mills and markets arising along expanding rail lines. The peddlers laid down their packs.

Q: What kinds of sources did you draw from in your research?

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A: *Down Home* blends folklore and documentary research. Some 100 oral histories—some found in archives and others conducted especially for *Down Home*—bring the Jewish experience to life. These authentic voices vividly evoke how it felt to live as a Jew. Letters, memoirs, and records were tracked not only in state and national archives, but also in homes and synagogues. As word spread, elderly community members and former residents in other states contacted us with diaries and photographs. Research in this book incorporates holdings held at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati as well as the Iredell County Public Library, the American Jewish Historical Society in New York as well as Temple Israel in Kinston. *Down Home* is built around a spine of historical narrative, but appended to it are illustrations and first-person narratives.

Q: How would you characterize the first Jewish settlers in the New World and in the Carolinas? What prompted them to leave Europe? Were they representative of Jewish settlers for many years to come?

A: The first settler who arrived in 1585 was a European-born scientist, a professional, sent to search for precious metals. He set a pattern for the next half century in his mobility, his cosmopolitan origins, and his isolation as a Jew. Jewish immigrants were pushed from Europe by poverty and persecution and pulled to North Carolina by liberty and opportunity. That was the pattern of the Germans who came starting in the antebellum years as well as the East Europeans who began arriving in the late nineteenth century. Just as the New South made room for Jewish peddlers, storekeepers and industrialists, so has the Sunbelt welcomed Jewish doctors, scientists, professors, and entrepreneurs.

Q: North Carolina was not generally a point of arrival for Jews coming to America. Why did they eventually choose to move south and especially to North Carolina?

A: North Carolina's early communities were colonies of larger commercial centers outside its borders, most notably Baltimore. If you want to see where Jews settled, follow the railroad. The growth of mill and market towns created new opportunities. Urban ghettos were crowded, unhealthy places, and those who had fled the small towns of Europe found the North Carolina countryside more to their liking. The promise of the South was that a person could be self-made, not locked in a sweatshop as they were in large cities.

Q: How did the absence of Jewish congregations in the early nineteenth century affect North Carolina Jews?

A: Just as Jews maintained networks of credit and commerce with large cities, so too did they maintain family, cultural, and religious ties to those places. In the eighteenth century, a Rhode Island Jewish merchant included kosher beef in his coastal trade. Circuit riding rabbis from Charleston, Richmond, and Baltimore performed weddings, and Jews traveled to those communities for holidays. Even their dead were buried there. We have a record book of a peddler who performed ritual circumcisions in the

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antebellum years. Typically, benevolence societies—which took responsibility for worship, community welfare, and ritual burial of the dead—organized before congregations. Without congregations, Jews gathered in homes for prayer, and, as the community grew, rented rooms or social halls.

Q: What is special about the ways that Jews have assimilated into American and North Carolina culture?

A: The North Carolina Jewish story very much fits the larger American narrative of immigrant acculturation. Given the unprecedented freedom and prosperity that Jews found here, they created a distinctly American Judaism that blended democratic values into their traditional beliefs and practices. Evangelical southerners saw Jews as the very blood of their Savior and greeted Jews as living matriarchs and patriarchs. The small-town ethos of North Carolina was especially welcoming. Although they may be distrustful of strangers, including New York Jews, southerners held to codes of hospitality. The synagogue was the Jewish church, and the Jews were appreciated as a religious, family-oriented people. The storekeeper depended on goodwill and built relationships of trust with his customers. Contrary to stereotypes, surveys indicate that anti-Semitism has historically been less prevalent in small towns and in the South, a profile that fits North Carolina.

Q: What difficulties have Jews throughout North Carolina’s history had to face in terms of anti-Semitism and stereotyping?

A: Southerners, like other Americans, held European prejudices that viewed Jews as both Shylocks and Christkillers. Occasionally, Jews were subject to violence, including several murders and a mob mutilation. Social prejudice closed elite clubs, quotas limited university enrollment, and occupational discrimination shut doors of opportunity, especially in the professions. The 1776 state constitution limited public office to Protestants, and North Carolina did not remove the religious test until 1868, among the last states to do so.

Q: How did urbanization and the industrial revolution affect Jewish communities in North Carolina?

A: Jews are an urban people. In New York, immigrants found work in factories, but in the small-town South they came to serve an industrial society as mercantilists. The expansion of railroads led to the growth of mill and market towns, which offered opportunities for Jews to open stores, where they sold to workers, both black and white. Their busiest, most prosperous trade was done on market days, when farmers came to town. Other Jews, most notably the Cones of Greensboro, rose from the merchant class to become industrialists, building the South’s largest textile mills. Jewish-owned factories spread across the region. Robbins is named for one such Jewish mill owner, who was a town benefactor, as well as the communities of Rosman and Erlanger.

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Q: In your book, you include portraits of many interesting North Carolina Jews. Who was Leon Levine and what is his legacy in North Carolina?

A: Leon Levine's origins were quite typical. His parents were East European immigrants who opened a dry-goods store in the mill town of Rockingham. His aspirations led him to the growing city of Charlotte, where he opened his first Family Dollar Store, which expanded into a national chain with over 6,000 stores. Like many successful North Carolina Jews—the Brodys of Greenville, the Cones of Greensboro, the Blumenthals of Charlotte, the Kaplans of High Point, the Brenners of Winston-Salem—Leon and Sandra Levine felt gratitude toward the place which had given them such opportunity. Their philanthropies have endowed hospitals, museums, senior centers, university research buildings, community colleges, and Jewish community centers.

Q: And who is the Jewish woman that you dedicate the book to, Anna Lou Doctor Cassell?

A: Anna Lou Doctor Cassell was a matriarch of the Greensboro Jewish community. Her family origins in North Carolina trace more than a century ago to East European immigrants who arrived to peddle and open stores in High Point. They were pillars of their communities. Anna Lou Cassell was a force behind the Eastern Music Festival. Early on, she recognized *Down Home's* importance and was among the first to bring the community together to support the book. Her phrase, "commitment to community," has been the byword of our effort. We had wanted to interview her for *Down Home*, but had difficulty finding time in her busy social and philanthropic schedule. On the morning scheduled, she was hospitalized for an illness that proved fatal.

Q: How large is the population of Latino Jews in North Carolina? Do these individuals tend to identify themselves more with the Hispanic or Jewish communities?

A: Jews from Latin America trace the evolving politics of the region. They fled Cuba after Castro, and others have arrived from Peru, Chile, Brazil, and, more especially, Argentina. In Charlotte is a sub-community of several dozen Cuban Jews. They were drawn there by ties to the textile industry. Latino Jews are scattered and have very much integrated into the larger Jewish community although they retain a sense of their cultural difference. Writer Ariel Dorfman of Duke very much identifies with his native Chile, and others have been involved with cultural and social justice programs focused on the Latino community.

Q: What changes are occurring in the Jewish community today and what do you predict for the future of Jews in North Carolina?

A: Ten years ago, I counted 28 Jewish congregations in the state. Today there are 41, and they are arising in unexpected places like coastal Kitty Hawk and mountain Franklin. In this time, too, smaller communities in places like Weldon, Tarboro, and Lumberton expired. Towns tied to textiles and tobacco are struggling while the Sunbelt retirement,

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financial, high-tech, and academic centers are growing. These trends reflect the economic landscape of North Carolina. While synagogues are shuttering in century-old communities, North Carolina has become home to global Jewish phenomena like Shalom Park or the American Hebrew Academy in Greensboro. New day schools, Jewish studies programs, synagogue campuses, and organizations like the Jewish Heritage Society reflect the growing numbers of Jews for whom North Carolina is down home.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: A conversation with Leonard Rogoff, author of *Down Home: Jewish Life in the Old South* (University of North Carolina Press, (Spring 2010). The text of this interview is available at www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/rogoff/.

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