

**Roundtable on “City Jews/ Country Jews”**  
**Biennial Scholars Conference on American Jewish History, Charleston, SC**  
**June 6, 2006**

This panel seeks to explore the broad similarities that exist between Jewish experiences in urban and rural settings—whether they be small towns, or commercial or industrial metropolises. In the cities, Jews participated in a greater diversity of occupations, and a substantial working class was employed in the textile industry, while those living in smaller towns worked as industrial workers and retail trade. Moreover, issues relating to kinship ties and feelings of attachment and adjustment were pivotal for both the rural Jews (who felt more connected) and the urban Jews (who may have felt a sort of social disconnect in the urban centers).

Thus, drawing on responses to the following orienting discussion questions and on data from the National Jewish Identity Survey and the National Jewish Population Survey, the five panelists (Leonard Rogoff, Lee Shai Weissbach, William Toll, Richard Gergel, and Jonathan Sarna) will grapple with the key distinctions in the urban/ rural split in American Jewish life.

**Definitional Questions**

Is country/ city the right dichotomy? Or, are we really talking about “high density Jewish communities” and “low density communities”? Is the dichotomy “city Jews, country Jews” too simple? For example, is the experience of truly rural Jews the same as that of small town Jews? Are New York Jews simply “city Jews” or is New York in an entirely different category, by itself?

An earlier generation (see M. Sklare) believed Jews primarily an urban people, and drew conclusions from this. Newer research suggests that in Europe, some Jews were not urban at all and preferred rural communities in America as well. What do we know about who settled where, when, and why? Were small-town Jews self selected, seeking to replicate their European experiences?

What are the key areas in which “city” Jewish communities differ from “country” communities? Demography? Occupational profiles? Congregational organization? Intra-communal dynamics?

Lee Shai Weissbach notes that small-town life is often taken to be more authentically American, an experience that more deeply expresses our national values. If so, does the experience of country Jews offer a more penetrating insight into the situation of American Jews than that of urban Jews?

## **How Do We Know What We Know?/ American Jewish Demography**

What do we know about country Jews? Ewa Moraswska writes that 20-25 percent of East European immigrants settled in towns outside metropolitan areas while Lee Shai Weissbach's estimates suggest something less than 10 percent. Is it based on the number of Jews in a community or on the city's overall population? Where they live? Their proximity to metropolitan areas?

Do we have reliable data to allow us to generalize about differences between city and country Jews? What are those sources? If so, how do city/ country demographics compare in terms of intermarriage, synagogue affiliation, and home ceremonials? What do we know? Even for country Jews, what role does population density play? What are the differing experiences for communities of three families as opposed to a dozen or to fifty?

Given the population mobility found in small towns, and the links that they maintained to urban communities, are these communities truly autonomous in their development? Were immigrant pioneers able to hold to their traditional Judaism? Did Reform move more or less slowly through these communities?

What were the occupational differences between city Jews and country Jews? How did these differences shape community development? Civic integration? Was there upward mobility typical of American Jews?

### **Regionalism**

What is the influence of regionalism?

How does the variable of region intersect with that of communal size and location? In other words, is the experience of big city Jews in the Northeast appreciably different from that of big city Jews in the South, or the Midwest or the West? Is the experience of small-town Jews in one region appreciably different from that of small town Jews in other regions?

Is it possible to find the most important variable for explaining differences in thought and behavior between city and country Jews, if such a thing exists?

What do we mean by "culture of place" and how does this play out? What is the role of local environment? The South, for example, includes coal towns with Slavic immigrant populations as well as mill and market towns which tend to be Protestant with large black populations. In some communities Jews were pioneers and in others they were latecomers? What local variables are most critical in shaping the Jewish experience?

### **Chronology/ Temporality**

How about the variable of time? Has the distinction between “city Jews” and “country Jews” become more pronounced or less pronounced during different epochs of Jewish settlement?

Was there a “classic” small town epoch in American Jewish history? At what times was it salient?

How does the degree of regional networking affect the timing of arrival and of departure? What options change over generations? How do the situations differ between Jews arriving in the 1920s and those of the 1960s?

Is the country or small town Jewish experience at an end? If not, where is it a rising phenomenon? How does its demographic compare with that of previous generations?

### **Gender**

What kind of men and women end up in particular places? Was the country settlement a family migration or was it the province of young, entrepreneurial men, peddlers and storekeepers?

Given the smaller numbers, did women take more active roles in community life? Did they maintain kashruth and home ceremonials? Did they have more responsibility for the sustenance of the synagogue and communal charity?

What role did national organizations—Hadassah, National Council of Jewish Women—play in women’s lives?

### **Social Integration**

Was Jewish civic acceptance greater in communities of lower Jewish density? Did country Jews experience more or less prejudice than city Jews? Did they win public office or acceptance into elite clubs and societies earlier or more frequently than city Jews? Did they encounter more or less anti-Semitism?

What role did organizations like B’nai B’rith play in creating civic leadership?

Were race relations different in a small town? What about ethnic relations with other immigrant groups?

## Religious Profiles

What are the links between small and large communities? How did they change over time? What role did urban temples and rabbis have on the pious or ceremonial side of Jewish country communities? Did religious developments follow similar trends and patterns in city and country?

The generalization is that small-town Jews often had richer Jewish experiences since less was taken for granted and the individual was more responsible for community survival. Yet nineteenth-century Jewish “messengers” often noted that country Jews were unobservant, cut off from the House of Israel. Rabbi Edward Calisch, secretary and later chairman of the UAHC Circuit Preaching Committee, wrote in 1900, “the country Jew [is] a religious derelict, rolling aimlessly on the sea of religious life.” Do these statements generalize across history?

How did religious culture and ideology flow from city to country? Did the local environment shape these communities more than urban or global Jewish trends? Were they able to sustain Yiddishkeit? How?

What links did country Jews maintain with the global Jewish community? What specific organizations—B’nai B’rith, Hadassah, NCJW—were typically found in small towns? How did Zionism play out in smaller communities?

## American Jewish Narrative

Is there a small town, American-Jewish narrative, and, if so, how does it compare to the American Jewish narrative? As several families in “Delta Jews” suggest, is there a closer integration with small-town, white Protestant values and styles among country Jews?

Are country Jews an exception to the American Jewish narrative? If so, in what ways? Did their religious modernizing follow national trends? Was there upward mobility typical of American Jews?

Panelists:

**Richard Mark Gergel**, a native of Columbia, South Carolina, is a senior partner in Gergel, Nickels, and Solomon Law Firm, and co-author (with his wife Dr. Belinda F. Gergel) of *In Pursuit of the Tree of Life: A History of the Early Jews of Columbia and the Tree of Life Congregation*.

**Dr. Leonard Rogoff** is the research historian at the Jewish Heritage Foundation of North Carolina. He has written and lectured extensively on the Jewish South, and has published articles in such venues as *American Jewish History* and *Southern Jewish History* (among

others), and is the author of *Homelands: Southern-Jewish Identity in Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina*. He is presently directing a multimedia project entitled, “Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina.”

**Dr. Jonathan D. Sarna** is Joseph H. and Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University. He is the author of numerous articles and books including, *American Judaism: A History* – winner of the Everett Family Foundation “Jewish Book of the Year.” Dr. Sarna is also the recipient of the American Jewish Committee Akiba Award for “exceptional contributions to the enrichment of Jewish intellectual, cultural, and communal life.”

**Dr. William Toll** is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of American Minority History at the University of Oregon. The author of three books including *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class: Portland Jewry over Four Generations*, his primary areas of teaching interest include American Jewish history, American urban history, and African American history. He is presently working on a book manuscript on the history of Jews in the American West (University of Washington Press).

**Dr. Lee Shai Weissbach** is Professor of History at the University of Louisville. A specialist in social history, Dr. Weissbach’s recent research focuses on the small town Jewish experience in the United States. His most recent publications include *Jewish Life in Small Town America* (2005: Yale University Press), “Rabbinic Leadership in Small Town America, 1880-1940,” and “The Jewish History of Small Town America.”

Moderator:

**Dr. Dana Greene** is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Appalachian State University. Her doctoral dissertation focused on Holocaust symbolization in American Jewish fiction and the implications for themes contained in that literature for Jewish American identity formation. She is presently working on a study that examines identity formation among Jews in the American South.