

# Exhibit: Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow

## Black colleges welcomed Jewish refugee scholars to America

By Lina Broydo *Created:* January 17, 2013 *Last Updated:* January 20, 2013



Professor Ernst Borinski teaching in the Social Science Lab, Tougaloo College, in Mississippi, circa 1960. Borinski was part of the Tougaloo community for 36 years. (Courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archives and History)

February is African-American History Month, and this year its annual celebration coincides with a very special exhibit: *Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges* at the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH) in Philadelphia.

Inspired by Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb's landmark book "*From Swastika to Jim Crow: Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges*" and the subsequent PBS documentary by Joel Sucher and Steven Fischler, the exhibit opened on Jan. 15 and continues through June 2.

It unveils the shared history of collaboration between America's Jewish and African-American communities with regard to civil rights and advocacy on behalf of minority groups.

The exhibit tells the story of Jewish academics from Germany and Austria who were dismissed from their teaching positions in the 1930s. Only months after Hitler seized power in 1933, Jewish intellectuals who had held prestigious positions in Germany's renowned universities (where more than 12 percent of faculty members were Jewish) were targeted for expulsion. Those who dared to oppose the edicts were met with brutal suppression.

RECEIPT FOR FINES AND FEES \$ 28<sup>00</sup>  
Recorder's Court—Birmingham

Docket No. 29610c  
Birmingham, Ala., 11-27 1942

Received of Donald Rasmussen  
Twenty Eight Dollars \_\_\_\_\_ Cents  
on account of Fines and Fees imposed by Recorder.

**N<sup>o</sup> 40577** \_\_\_\_\_ Clerk.

Receipts for fines, Birmingham, Ala., 1942. (Collection of Drs. Lore and Donald Rasmussen)

Often leaving with little more than the clothes on their backs, many of these scholars fled to America, hoping to continue their academic careers.

While top academics like Albert Einstein were in demand at prestigious American universities, lesser-known professors had a much more difficult time finding teaching positions in the United States. The country was still in a depression and anti-Semitism was prevalent.

As anti-Jewish actions in Germany escalated, several organizations, including the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars, worked to obtain positions for the exiled scholars. Of the several hundred refugee scholars who came to this country, more than 50 of them found positions at historically black colleges.

According to the PBS documentary, the refugees were surprised at being welcomed into a group of colleges that the vast majority of white American professors ignored.

For the black colleges—including Howard University, Hampton Institute, Tougaloo, and Talladega—the refugee professors added great talent to the faculties. For the professors, the arrangement provided a new home, a classroom of students eager to learn, and an insider's look at an America that few whites ever saw—life in the Jim Crow South.

The Jim Crow laws, enacted between 1876 and 1965, mandated racial segregation in all public facilities within the former Confederate states. African-Americans had “separate but equal” status that, in practice, led to systematized economic, educational, and social disadvantages.

## Partnership Born of Empathy

This historic exhibition illustrates a little-known and quite remarkable story of interracial cooperation. Together, Jewish refugees and African-American students navigated the challenges of the segregated South and supported one another as they searched for freedom and opportunity.

Their efforts informed and inspired the early years of the civil rights movement.



Civil rights pin belonging to Joyce Ladner, a student of Borinski. She was active in student civil rights organizations such as SNCC and CORE. Ladner went on to get her doctorate in sociology and became the first woman president of Howard University. (Collection of Dr. Joyce A. Ladner)

“I can’t imagine a more appropriate way to illustrate this uplifting example of the connection between the African-American and Jewish communities in this country,” said Ivy L. Barsky, NMAJH director and CEO, in a press release.

“And it’s a story that most have never heard. As a result, the exhibition is a wonderful opportunity to build bridges in the community and collaborate with Philadelphia’s African-American Museum and other colleague organizations, and tease out the stories of courage,

of leadership, and of the power of good mentoring relationships,” Barsky was quoted.

It is a story of hope and struggle, one that had a major impact on small Southern communities.

“This exhibition greatly expands our understanding of the relationship between American Jews and African-Americans. It illustrates the continually evolving struggle for freedom on a very human and very touching level,” said Josh Perelman, Ph.D., NMAJH’s chief curator and director of Exhibitions and Collections, in a phone conversation.

While most of these pairings between Jewish refugees and black colleges began as marriages of convenience, very often they blossomed into love matches that lasted a lifetime.

The refugee scholars who found work at black colleges were often more comfortable in the black environment than their peers at white universities who faced prejudice at their jobs.

Some professors, such as Ernst Borinski and Ernst Manasse, felt a deep connection to black students and spent the rest of their careers at the historically black colleges. Borinski was even buried on the campus of Tougaloo. His tombstone reads, “Ernst Borinski, Inspiring Teacher.”

Joyce A. Ladner, one of Ernst Borinski’s students and distinguished graduates, joined the faculty at Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Miss. She said that Borinski (whom the students affectionately called Bobo) “had an affinity with blacks because they experienced a similar persecution,” the museum’s press release states.

Ladner, a former civil rights activist, author, teaching and research professor, sociologist, and a key commentator on major television networks, was appointed in 1995 by President Clinton to oversee the financial restructuring of the D.C. public school system.

On her return to college as a commencement speaker, Ladner visited Borinski’s gravesite in Tougaloo. “I was not sad anymore, just sort of thoughtful about how strange it was that this man came to a place like this in Mississippi and certainly had such a profound impact on my life and the lives of so many of my friends and classmates,” according to the press release.

The mutual respect the students and professors felt for each other resulted, in some cases, in the refugee professors getting involved in the civil rights movement officially or unofficially.

For instance, Borinski was identified as a “race agitator” for promoting integration both on and off campus. But he wanted to be a facilitator to “bridge communities” and felt his contribution to the civil rights movement was to get both black and white people into a room together to share ideas, according the press release.

He created the Social Science Forums, which hosted lectures and discussions for the community with top thinkers of the time. He would have his students from Tougaloo arrive early and scatter themselves in the room so the white participants would have to sit among the black students. In many cases, it was the first time they had had a substantive conversation or dined with someone of another ethnicity.



Donald Cunnigen’s Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity sweater from Tougaloo College, circa 1970–1974. Dr. Cunnigen followed in Borinski’s footsteps and became a sociologist. (Collection of Dr. Donald Cunnigen)

The Mississippi branch of the American Civil Liberties Union gives out an annual award in Borinski's name.

In addition to getting involved in campus life and the political landscape, the professors, who came from a formal and rigorous academic background, did their best to instill high standards of learning.

The historically black colleges, mostly founded between the late 1860s and the 1880s, were predominately private institutions funded by philanthropists and missionary groups. Some focused on liberal arts, while a few others were public schools that offered both vocational training in agriculture, trades, and service and the liberal arts. In both scenarios, the refugee scholars expected academic excellence from their students.

“The German Jewish professors had a tremendous impact on young blacks in the South,” said Jim McWilliams, a former student at Talladega College who is now a retired attorney. “They exposed us to new music, art, and academic programs,” according to the press release.

Jocelyn Elders was also grateful for her education and understood the importance of it: “Grandma Minnie was constantly at me,” the press release states. “‘You’ve got to get an education.’ That was her refrain, like a drumbeat. ‘You want to pick cotton and live in all these mosquitoes the rest of your life?’” Elders said.

*The National Museum of American Jewish History is located on historic Independence Mall in Philadelphia. For more information about Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars At Black Colleges, please visit [mjhnyc.org](http://mjhnyc.org).*

*After the presentation of this exhibit in Philadelphia, it will be presented in Farmington Hills, Mich., and then Chicago.*

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### **Exhibition Highlights**

A receipt for the \$28 in fines professors Lore and Donald Rasmussen of Talladega College in Alabama paid for having lunch with a black civil rights colleague at a black cafe in Birmingham. Eating in public with someone of another race without a 7-foot-high separation wall was considered “incitement to riot.” Lore Rasmussen and her husband were arrested.

Paintings by Viktor Lowenfeld of Hampton Institute in Virginia and his student John Biggers show their influence on each other's work. Biggers went on to get his doctorate degree from Viktor Lowenfeld at Penn State University and then chaired the art department at Texas State University. His work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, among other institutions.

Menorah and spice box brought from Germany by George Iggers to the United States. He taught at Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Ark. Iggers and his wife, Wilma, were involved in the civil rights movement and spearheaded a challenge to the Little Rock Board of Education in the 1950s.

<http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/arts-entertainment/exhibit-beyond-swastika-and-jim-crow-336990.html>