

Review: 'Beyond the Swastika and Jim Crow' at Philadelphia's Jewish Museum

[Exhibit Review](#) | January 31, 2013 | By: [Adam Zolkover](#)



Image from Philadelphia's National Museum of American Jewish History's exhibit, "Beyond the Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges," which runs through June 2, 2013 Credits: Adam D. Zolkover

Upon entering the fifth floor exhibition hall, one's first sight of "Beyond the Swastika and Jim Crow" at Philadelphia's [National Museum of American Jewish History](#) is of a striking double image: to one's left, nascent violence, the Third Reich of the early 1930s, racist and unwelcoming, but not yet the perpetrators of the Final Solution; to one's right, manifest violence, the starched white raiment of the Ku Klux Klan.

This pairing introduces and guides the exhibit. This pairing is its point.

Coming originally out of New York's [Museum of Jewish Heritage](#), "Beyond the Swastika and Jim Crow" tells the story of a shared history of collaboration between Jewish and African American communities, of advocacy and civil rights beyond the strictures of the Civil Rights Movement. It tells the story of Jewish scholars, refugees from Austria and Germany, finding new homes in the American South, as professors at [historically black colleges](#) and universities. And it tells the story of the relationships that they built with those places, and with their students.

From those twin rooms -- the rise of the Nazis on one hand, and the systematic threat faced by African-American would-be students on the other -- visitors walk through a maze of everyday life at black colleges in the decades before Civil Rights. Visitors see the budding relationships between teachers and students; they see the limits of freedom for students at institutions like Talladega and Tougaloo, considered cancers on the landscape by the largely white denizens of their surrounding communities; they see the ways, dramatic and mundane, that scholars defied the racial hierarchy and racial hatred that permeated the 1930s South; and they see, in text and taped interviews, student outcomes -- the positive results of the mentorship and inspiration that these professors provided.

But as the museum's chief curator Josh Perelman says, mentorship in this situation was hardly a one-way street. While Jewish refugee scholars lent the wisdom of age to black students seeking a path through the wilderness, the students, too, served as guides. They taught their elders about their newly adopted homes. They offered new purpose to professors previously defrocked. They inspired their professors in some cases to march for justice, and in others, to simply share a meal.

Perhaps the most compelling artifacts in the exhibit, the clearest testaments to the disruptive power of these Jewish scholars, are an unassuming pair of receipts. Belonging to professors Lore and Donald Rasmussen, they certify that each paid \$28 in fines for "incitement to riot," for eating lunch with an African American colleague at a blacks-only cafe in Birmingham, Alabama. Their presence shines a stark light on the stifling wall of segregation erected by Jim Crow. And their presence represents the quiet persistence with which these professors worked to tear it down.

"Beyond the Swastika and Jim Crow," as an exhibit, is certainly not without its flaws. The history it recounts is not one that lends itself readily to material artifacts, and so the exhibit is filled largely with professors' letters and students' bluebooks, accompanied by outsized reproductions of photographs, and considerable swaths of text on cards.

But the cards are not boring. And the artifacts more than do their job.

As Perelman says, this history of shared alienation, of shared violence and shared knowledge, is not one that is widely known. During the 1930s, over fifty Jewish refugees came to teach at black colleges and universities. But even for those colleges' attendees, the connection to the rise of European fascism was not necessarily obvious. This is a history that was retold in a 1993 book by Simon Edgcomb, and it was a history featured again in a PBS documentary. But for most, it remains obscure.

The purpose of the exhibit is to remedy that. In a city with larger than average Jewish and African American populations, "Beyond the Swastika and Jim Crow" is a project about raising awareness. With compelling presentation, it draws a clear line from the rise of European violence to the fight against American oppression. And for that reason alone, the exhibit should be well worth your time.

"Beyond the Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges" runs at the [National Museum of American Jewish History](#) until June 2, 2013. Tickets are available [online](#) or at the museum for \$12.

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