

# Exhibit explores little-known bond between Southern blacks and refugee Jews

Exhibit examines how Holocaust inspired alliances among Jewish professors, black students in South

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The National Museum of American Jewish History's exhibit, *Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges* tells the story of Jewish academics from Germany and Austria who came to the U.S. after being dismissed from their teaching positions in the 1930s. / Douglas Bovitt/Courier-Post

Written by Sally Friedman | For the Courier-Post

It's a little known chapter of American history, one that is finally getting attention at a Philadelphia museum.

As the tempest involving the eradication of Jews and other “undesirables” swirled around pre-World War II Europe, thousands of stunned, highly educated European Jewish scholars, including college professors, were facing an uncertain, dark future.

Among those who fled after the menacing decrees of 1933 began, a few found sanctuary in the black colleges of the South, where they were welcomed as faculty members in what seemed an unlikely — but beneficial — alliance on both sides.



The National Museum of American Jewish History. / Douglas Bovitt/Courier-Post

A chronicle of that time — and experience — is now the subject of an exhibition at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, “Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges.” Curated by New York City’s Museum of Jewish Heritage, the exhibition, which includes a number of related seminars and events, will remain in Philadelphia through June 2.

“This is one of those compelling stories that nobody knows,” says Ivy Barsky, now executive director of the Philadelphia museum, and formerly associated with the New York museum that created and curated the exhibit. “The local region is an ideal place for dialogue because of the significant presence of African Americans and Jews, so we look forward to a very interested public.”

### **Bonds developed**

The clear message, suggests Barsky, is that meaningful, reciprocal relationships can be nurtured, and bonds developed, even out of adversity.

“The scholars left behind everything they knew and once trusted to come to the rural South where their lives were saved,” says the museum’s executive director. “The students benefited from brilliant professors who set rigorous academic standards — and the scholars found a safe haven for themselves and their families.”

Josh Perelman, chief curator of exhibitions and collections at the National Museum of American Jewish History, feels visitors will come to understand a hopeful and positive story. Relationships developed that would last a lifetime, as was the case, explains Perelman, with Professor Ernst Borinski at Tougaloo College in Mississippi.

Borinski, a refugee judge who taught sociology once he was settled in the United States, was so revered by the students at Tougaloo that after Borinski died, a grave marker was erected on campus in memory of his inspiration.

Curator Perelman also noted that the academicians who came from enlightened communities in Europe faced a culture shock in the racist South, where their reaching out in friendship to their students was looked upon with anger in the Jim Crow era.

“The professors often urged the students to stand up for their rights, knowing in a deeply personal way what happens when rights are eroded,” says Perelman.

## **Students understand**

For museum docent Lori Engel, of Moorestown, one of the first group of docents who went through stringent training at the NMAJH, guiding visitors, especially students, through this exhibit has been a significant experience.

“I recently had a group of eighth graders from the Penn Valley Middle School in the Philadelphia suburbs who came extremely well prepared for their visit. Their core study has been social injustice, and they truly understood how two mistreated groups could be so marginalized through no fault of their own.”

Suggests Engel, “As they looked around at the artifacts and saw how dangerously rights can be eroded, they really got it.”

Engel hopes others, too, will see the felicitous two-way street that ennobled both groups and that the most terrible thing is to be silent when rights are threatened.

## **Exhibit highlights**

Highlights of the “Swastika/ Jim Crow” exhibit include the sobering sight of a KKK vestment at the entrance to the exhibit, a reminder of the mood of the South through decades.

A hood is displayed in another area.

There are also receipts issued after the payment of fines. A court in Alabama fined Lore Rasmussen, a brilliant mathematician from Germany and her American husband, Donald, for interracial mingling and incitement to riot because of a lunch with a black civil rights advocate. The total: \$28.

The exhibit includes a simple autograph from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., among SNCC (Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee) buttons.

One of the most poignant and dramatic items in the exhibit is a painting by Professor Viktor Lowenfeld simply called “The Negro’s Burden.”

It depicts a black man staggering under the weight of a real — and obviously symbolic — load on his back.

According to Josh Perelman, the painting reveals Lowenfeld's painful recognition of the injustices all around him in the South.

The Hampton University professor carried on a long and fruitful relationship with John Biggers, a black student who would go on to become a celebrated artist himself.

"The best message that people can carry away from this exhibition is that there is hope," says Engel.

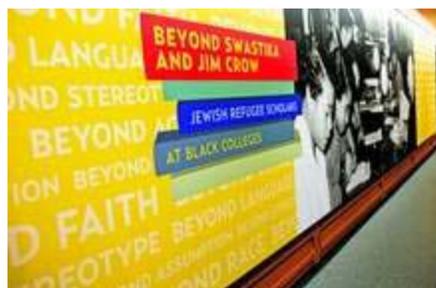
"There can be connection, and there can be understanding between oppressed people. And we need to speak out when we see it."

### *If you go*

■ *'Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges,' continues at the National Museum of American Jewish History, Fifth and Market streets, Philadelphia, through June 2. Call (215) 923-3811 or [nmajh.org](http://nmajh.org)*

■ **Hours:** *Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission: Adults, \$12; seniors, 65 and over, \$11; youth 13-21, \$11; children 12 and under, free; active military with ID, free.*

■ *'Dialogues and Divergences: The Ongoing Evolution of Black-Jewish Relations in America,' Feb. 20 at 6:30 p.m. at the National Museum of American Jewish History. It is presented in cooperation with the African American Museum in Philadelphia and the Jewish Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania. Call (215) 923-3811.*



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