



NATIONAL MUSEUM OF
AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

NEWS RELEASE

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NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY ANNOUNCES IMPORTANT
EXHIBITION

**BEYOND SWASTIKA AND JIM CROW:
JEWISH REFUGEE SCHOLARS AT BLACK COLLEGES**
January 15, 2013 – June 2, 2013

Philadelphia, PA – Nov. 27, 2012 – America’s Jewish and African-American communities have a shared history of collaboration around civil rights and advocacy on behalf of minority groups, but little is known about the remarkable story of inter-racial cooperation that took place in the 1930s at historically black colleges. This story of empathy is explored in the National Museum of American Jewish History’s upcoming exhibition, **Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars At Black Colleges**. The exhibition shows how Jewish refugees and African-American students navigated the challenges of life in the segregated south and supported one another as they searched for freedom and opportunity, efforts that informed and inspired the early years of the Civil Rights movement.

Slated to open on January 15 in time to celebrate both Martin Luther King Day and African-American History Month, **Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow** illustrates a little-known story of hope, struggle, and affirmation that many Americans may not be familiar with, a story that had a major impact on small Southern communities. “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,” says Ivy L. Barsky, Museum Director and CEO. “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.”

“It also provides a wonderful opportunity to collaborate on a project that touches deeply the hearts of both communities,” said Romona Briscoe, Executive Director of the African-American History Museum of Philadelphia.

Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow tells the story of Jewish academics from Germany and Austria who were dismissed from their teaching positions in the 1930s. In early 1933, before the Nazis began dismissing Jews from their posts, more than 12 percent of faculty members at German universities were Jewish. While top academics like Albert Einstein were in demand at prestigious 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 unemployment, xenophobia, and antisemitism were 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. “This exhibition greatly expands our understanding of the relationship between American Jews and African-Americans” states Josh Perelman, NMAJH’s Chief Curator and Director of Exhibitions and Collections. “It illustrates the continually evolving struggle for freedom on a very human and very touching level.”

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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.” Educator, author, and civil rights veteran, Dr. Joyce Ladner, said of Professor Borinski (whom the students affectionately called Bobo) that he had “an affinity with blacks because they experienced a similar persecution.”

The mutual respect the students and professors felt for each other later resulted, in some cases, in the refugee professors getting involved in the Civil Rights movement officially or unofficially. For instance, Prof. Borinski was identified as a “race agitator” for promoting integration both on and off campus. He wanted to be a “facilitator,” to “bridge communities,” as he felt his contribution to the Civil Rights movement was to get both black and white people into a room together to share ideas. 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. The Mississippi branch of the ACLU gives out an annual award in Prof. 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 mostly private institutions funded by philanthropists and missionary groups that focused on liberal arts primarily 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 student at Talladega College, who is now a retired attorney. “They exposed us to new music, art, and academic programs.” Jocelyn Elders was also grateful for her education and understood the importance of it, “Grandma Minnie was constantly at me. ‘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?’ ” said Dr. Elders.

Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow explores in depth what it meant to the students to have these new faculty members as part of their community, how the students were affected by their presence, and what life was like for white, European Jews teaching in predominantly black communities. The exhibit is inspired by Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb’s landmark book *From Swastika to Jim Crow: Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges* (Krieger Publishing Company, 1993) and the subsequent PBS documentary by Joel Sucher and Steven Fischler of Pacific Street Films. The exhibition includes more than 70 evocative artifacts and documents, photographs, and two new films, by Sucher and Fischler, featuring both the professors and the students.

Exhibition highlights include:

- Receipts for the \$28 in fines Professors Lore and Donald Rasmussen paid for having lunch with a black civil rights colleague at a black café in Birmingham. Eating in a public place with someone of the other race without a seven foot high separation wall was considered “incitement to riot.” Prof. Lore Rasmussen and her husband were arrested. When Prof. Lore Rasmussen was free to go, she was not allowed to ride home alone with her black student, so she stayed in jail with her husband until bail was posted for them by a black dentist.

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- Paintings by Prof. Viktor Lowenfeld and his student John Biggers show their influence on each other's work. Biggers went on to get his Ph.D. from Viktor Lowenfeld at Penn State University, and then chaired the art department at Texas State University (later Texas Southern University), where he stayed until his retirement in 1983. His work is in the permanent collections of the MoMA and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, among other institutions.
- Menorah and spice box brought from Germany by Professor George Iggers to the United States. He taught at Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas. Prof. 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. Prof. Iggers was one of the first white members of the black fraternity Phi Beta Sigma.

Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges was created and is circulated by the Museum of Jewish Heritage — A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York City.

This exhibition was made possible through major funding from the Leon Levy Foundation. Additional support provided by the Helen Bader Foundation; The Lupin Foundation; The Blanche and Irving Laurie Foundation; public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency; the Alpern Family Foundation; and the Charles and Mildred Schnurmacher Foundation.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

This incredible exhibition presents a series of opportunities to extend the dialogue through educational programs that further explore themes such as mentorship, leadership, identity, and cross cultural understanding.

Some of the exhibition related programs include:

Monday, January 21 – **MLK Day**, FREE and OPEN to the public

Wednesdays, February 6 and 13 – **Beyond Color: The Films of Joel Katz**

Thursday, March. 28 – **Freedom Seder Revisited** (Part of Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts)

For additional programs visit www.nmajh.org/publicprograms

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The National Museum of American Jewish History, located on historic Independence Mall in Philadelphia, brings to life the 350-year history of Jews in America. Tracing the stories of how Jewish immigrants became Jewish Americans, the Museum invites visitors of all heritages to share their own stories and reflect on how their histories and identities shape and are shaped by the American experience. An open door for all, NMAJH honors the past and contributes to a better future by sharing the power of imagination and ideas, culture and community, leadership and service, in ways that turn inspiration into action.

For more information about the upcoming **Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars At Black Colleges**, set to open next January, or to set up interviews and media tours, please Ilana Blumenthal at 215.391.4662 or iblumenthal@nmajh.org. For details about the Museum please visit www.nmajh.org.