Cultural History of Jews in California

Published by Purdue University Press

Cultural History of Jews in California: The Jewish Role in American Life.
Purdue University Press, 2009.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/103252.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/103252

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3255150
Beginning with our previous volume of the Casden Annual Review (Volume 6), the annual publication of the Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life, the editors decided to focus on a single topic and to present articles that largely consider aspects of that topic alone. That volume, subtitled, The Impact of the Holocaust in America, was very well received and gave us the opportunity to explore an area of Shoah-studies that had not been well emphasized previously. With this volume (Volume 7), we continue this policy of focusing on a single topic, but in this case the topic we have turned to is, quite literally, closer to home: the Jewish role in California life.

There are two aspects of this volume that merit special notice. First, the aim of the collection of essays and studies in this volume is intended to stress the cultural aspects of the Jewish experience of coming to and living in the Golden State. We cannot hope to present in this limited venue a comprehensive and detailed history of how Jews came to live in California, per se. Rather, it is our more limited goal to consider a number of insightful perspectives on how the Jews, who settled in California, helped shape the Golden State's culture and were, in turn, themselves molded by cultural influences that were uniquely Californian. Second, while this volume looks at the Jewish experience in California in general—nonetheless, particular emphasis is placed on Southern California. Both these concerns, of course, are natural ones for the Casden Institute to consider. First of all, the focus on California simply follows—although in more geographical detail—the overall mandate of the Casden Institute, to consider the special part that Jews have played in the culture of their adopted homeland. Moreover, it seems entirely appropriate that an institute that resides at the University of Southern California should look out at the Jewish role in this special state as seen from the perspective of this even more special, local neighborhood. After all, Jews played (and continue to play) a notable role in building and defining what Southern California is and, beyond this, what we imagine it to be. We firmly believe that there is something special about the Jewish role in California and even more so in Southern California—that here on the lower left-coast Jews have had an Americanization experience that is significantly different from that which Jews have experienced elsewhere.
in the USA. Conversely, Southern California would be quite a different place without the Jews who made it their home.

We begin our cultural history at a crucial moment in California history, the mid-nineteenth century in the after-glow of the California Gold Rush, where we encounter a European Jewish emigrant, fresh off the boat, who could (and did) get a chance to make a fortune in the pueblo of Los Angeles and, in doing so, helped define what California is. We conclude it with a personal meditation from one of the latest group of refugees to come to the west, the Iranian Jews who were forced out of their ancient homeland some thirty years ago and who found in Southern California a particularly hospitable (yet no less difficult) place to transplant their cultural roots. In between, we are treated to a few choice snapshots of how life developed and changed for Jews in California as California itself evolved and grew. But if this volume proves one thing for sure, it is this: that we have only just begun to scratch the surface of a rich but largely unknown cultural resource. At best, this volume can only give us a hint of what we have yet to learn.

The impetus for this Annual Review came in no small part from a grant that the Casden Institute gave to my professorial colleagues at USC, William Deverell and Marsha Kinder, who needed a little funding to facilitate their bringing together in an orderly and academic fashion some of the primary source material on the Jews who settled in California and especially the southern part of the state. One product of this highly successful research effort was a desire on their part to pull this volume together to serve as a showcase of what they and their colleagues have learned and what research opportunities they continue to pursue. Prof. Kinder, in an article at the conclusion of this volume, in particular, outlines an ambitious plan to develop a Jewish “homegrown history” that begins in California but intends to span the entire country. Prof. Deverell has taken on the special responsibilities of serving as guest editor for this volume, and he has managed this important task with great professionalism. I am particularly grateful to him for all the many hours of effort he has invested in making this volume something we are all quite proud of. I also wish to thank Associate Director of the Casden Institute, Lisa Ansell who, as Associate Editor of this volume, has done so many little things (and quite a few big things too!) to make this volume better and the Casden Institute better. My longtime associate Marilyn J. Lundberg, production editor for this volume, has brought everything together with her usual, awesome efficiency. Both Lisa and Marilyn not only made this volume possible, but each of them has invested considerable effort into keeping my life from becoming impossible.
Special thanks also goes to Howard Gillman, the Dean of the College of Letters Arts & Sciences and C. L. Max Nikias, Provost, for their continuing vision for the Casden Institute as an integral and vibrant part of USC. Susan Wilcox, Associate Dean for College Advancement continues to be my wisest of wise counselors. As of this writing, we have just learned that the longtime President of USC, Steven B. Sample, will be retiring in 2010. President Sample’s support and enthusiasm for all aspects of research relevant to Jewish studies on our campus—from ancient times to modern times—has been a key factor to the advancement of the field at our university. As is the case for so many academic elements that make USC the great center of learning that it is ever becoming, the Casden Institute owes an enduring debt of gratitude to President Sample.

I reserve a final word for a few special people, who in many ways are the embodiment of what this volume of the Casden Annual Review is all about: Ruth Ziegler, Carmen Warschaw, Kenneth Leventhal, Stanley Gold and Alan Casden. Each one of them has been a major force at USC and in Southern California, not only for the advancement of Jewish Studies and the Casden Institute, but for the pursuit and advancement of excellence in our region and, indeed, in the world. We are all very fortunate that they, too, along with their families and loved ones, found their way to Southern California where they could build a life that is both distinctly Jewish and distinctly Californian.

It is insightful to note that I have always been asked by Alan Casden to use my full title—not just Director of the Casden Institute, but Myron and Marion Casden Director. Myron and Marion are Alan Casden’s parents, and it is clear that he sees the pursuits of the Casden Institute as being a special homage to them—his way of acknowledging how much he owes his success to their efforts as Jews and Americans, to find a productive role in our country. Alan Casden’s personal story is, in microcosm, a reflection of the greater story of the Jewish contribution to America (and especially to Southern California)—a story that in macrocosm merits the kind of academic recognition and careful study that this volume intends to represent. It therefore seems all the more appropriate to dedicate this volume to Alan Casden and his parents Myron and Marion Casden, whose role in the life of Southern California, America and the world is something for which those of us who were born and raised in Los Angeles can be most grateful.

Bruce Zuckerman, Myron and Marian Casden Director