Cultural History of Jews in California

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Editorial Introduction
by William Deverell

Working on this volume of the Casden Annual Review has been a distinct pleasure. I’ve been able to renew friendships with a number of talented senior and junior scholars, and I’ve learned a great deal about an especially vibrant subfield of American and western American history. I am grateful to my colleagues Bruce Zuckerman, Myron and Marion Casden Director of the Casden Institute at USC, and Lisa Ansell, Associate Director of the Casden Institute, for the invitation to draw together these diverse essays on the subject of Jewish California. I’m especially grateful to my colleague Marsha Kinder; it was Marsha who first approached me several years ago to inquire whether I would care to become a partner on an intriguing multimedia and scholarly investigation of Jewish life and history in California and the far West. Having but a passing knowledge of this topic, and knowing of its importance to my field of interest (the American West generally), I was only too happy to become involved in the “Homegrown Jewish History” project which Marsha and Rosemary Comella have so expertly directed and put together. This project will be presented in detail Marsha’s contribution to this volume.

Along the way, I’ve had the good fortune of working closely not only with my USC friends and colleagues, but with others as well. Frances Dinkelspiel, an old friend from long ago college days, contacted me several years ago so that we might talk about nineteenth-century California, especially as it related to her extraordinarily important great, great-grandfather, Isaias W. Hellman. After several years of diligent, careful research, Frances produced a superb biography of Hellman, a man whose own career and rise to banking and financial prominence is intricately interwoven with the state of California’s own maturation and development. I’m pleased to have convinced Frances to contribute an essay to this volume drawn from her wonderful book.

Through my budding interest in Jewish California, I quickly encountered UCLA graduate student Karen Wilson, a doctoral candidate at work on a dissertation exploring the nineteenth-century Jewish history of Los Angeles. Talented, diligent, and extremely knowledgeable about her subject of interest, Karen has contributed two pieces to this Casden Annual; one is an examination
of the continuing ties which pioneering Jews of California maintained with Europe in the turn-of-the-century period, a theme Karen develops more fully in her doctoral work. The other is a fine annotation of an important diary from the same period (and same family), a document now housed in the Huntington Library's collections.

That this document which Karen worked on has found a home in the Huntington is not simply a case of good archival luck. On the contrary, thanks to the deep devotion of Gladys Sturman and David Epstein to the history of Jews of the West, we are all the beneficiaries of decades and decades of collecting efforts. David and Gladys are the archival heirs to the important work of Rabbi William Kramer and Dr. Norton B. Stern; in their postscript essay to this volume, Sturman and Epstein sketch out the history of the Western States Jewish History collections which they have so carefully superintended (and organized and studied). Thanks to their real appreciation of the importance of these archives, the materials have been and are being transferred to research institutions across greater Los Angeles where they can be drawn more broadly into scholarly work and scholarly curiosity.

Lastly, pulling together this volume allowed me to (finally) get the chance to publish something from the work of talented young American historian Shana Bernstein. Her essay in this volume, about Jews and civil rights in Cold War California, is drawn from her important new book on the topic. She reminds us that the Jewish history of the far West is inextricably tied to issues of racial accommodation and fights for racial equity.

There is also a fine contribution by the talented novelist Gina Nahai, in which she chronicles in a highly personal manner her journey as an Iranian Jew to Southern California and through it a sense of what this experience meant and continues to mean for these newest Jewish immigrants to the southwest.

Taken together, these essays and contributions—themselves but the tip of a growing iceberg of inquiry—provide tantalizing hints of the body of sources “out there” awaiting scholarly questions and scholarly efforts. Thanks to the work of the contributors to this volume and others, we know quite a bit about the Jewish history of California and the West. But there is so much more to know.