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Judaic Studies and Me

By Joel Martin Halpern, University of Massachusetts Amherst

It is, of course, not entirely unexpected that at this stage of my life, having been retired for more than a decade, that autobiographical reflections would come to mind. While to some this scholarly collection might not seem to be the setting for personal reflections on the role of the Jewish experience in one's personal career this would, in my view, not be an accurate interpretation. It needs to be made explicit that the way in which personal backgrounds have intersected with professional experiences has for some time been a central concern of the social sciences. It is also an approach particularly in harmony with understanding the nature of fieldwork in anthropology. Canons derived, in part, from literary criticism judiciously applied to deconstruct ethnographies of the "other" can provide a needed alternative to the notion of the observer-researcher as completely objective presence. While I personally have reservations about this approach, and think its importance can be exaggerated, I do see its applicability to some aspects of my own research.

More than three decades ago Myrdal in his now classic work, *An American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (N.Y. Harper and Row) commented on this situation.

In our profession there is a lack of awareness even today that, in searching for truth, the student, like all human beings whatever they try to accomplish, is influenced by tradition, by his environment, and by his personality. Further there is an irrational taboo against discussing this lack of awareness. It is astonishing that this taboo is commonly respected leaving the social scientist in naiveté about what he is doing." (1969:4)

More recently Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays* (N.Y. Basic Books) noted, "Self-consciousness about modes of representation (not to speak of experiments with them) has been lacking in anthropology. (1973:19). There is now a vast literature on reflexivity and a significant one on reflexive anthropology, simply put; it is an anthropology which looks upon self in relation to others.

At the time I carried out my researches in Alaska among the Eskimo, in Balkan villages and in Southeast Asia among the peoples of Laos I must admit that I usually perceived "Self" and "Other" as distinct categories, and certainly not interactive ones. But, from a contemporary point of view, applying a reflexive approach, I now readily perceive interrelationships which, at that time, seemed remote from one another. This specifically applies to the ways in which Jews and the Jewish experience have not been separated from but really a part of my experiences in distant places.

There has recently been a symposium at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association on this very topic. But at the time when I received my graduate training in sociocultural anthropology and Russian Studies at Columbia University in the mid 20th century the scientific-objective model was dominant. The humanistic aspects of the discipline were never absent but much of the stress was then on increasing the precision of field techniques. The perception was that these procedures would increase “objectivity” by making one’s observations more precise as in e.g. the role of how the particular structures of kinship systems functioned in shaping cultural values or, in another setting, the ways in which ecologically based strategies of adaptation to the specifics of a given environment shaped cultural patterns.

There are really four separable but interrelated dimensions to my anthropological research experience. First, is how my anthropological approaches affected my analyses and interpretations of specifically Jewish settings. The second dimension concerns the ways in which my Jewish background played a role in my fieldwork. The third dimension is a contextual one, pertinent to a sociology of knowledge approach, and focuses on how the changing contexts and value systems of American society played a role in structuring my perceptions. Finally, there are the specifics of my personal autobiography including, of course, my role as a teacher as well as researcher. These all form part of my field experiences and my subsequent writings. And perhaps, most significantly, the things I did not write about and why this was so.

At this point it seems appropriate to provide some temporal and spatial dimensions. Since I am now in the midst of my eighth decade it is perhaps easiest to provide a temporal frame dating from my initial involvement with anthropology, which began in the late 1940s and, with some limitations, is still ongoing. The geographical frames of my experiences include the places in the U.S. in which I have lived and taught on both coasts and the Midwest where I was an undergraduate. My anthropological field experiences encompass the high arctic from the Seward Peninsula in Alaska to the Baffin in what was formerly the Northwest Territories. and is now known as Nunavut, in Canada. Second would be mainland Southeast Asia, specifically Indochina and particularly Laos and, to a lesser extent, Vietnam. Finally, and most prominent in my research experience, is Eastern and Central Europe generally but specifically the Balkans and within that area the region that what was once Yugoslavia but also includes, to a lesser degree, Bulgaria and Albania and Austria

Some of my particular research interests have been in family and kinship, including historical demography and autobiography. Other orienting scholarly concerns have dealt with the ways in which ethnic and national identities and have been formed and maintained including the roles of both boundary maintenance and the process of negotiating the crossing of cultural boundaries.. A final, and more recent approach, has to do with the use of temporal categories as analytical frameworks. From this range of interests and experiences I have selected several vignettes, which pertain to the concerns of Judaic Studies, broadly interpreted.

The illustrative case studies consist of first, an anthropologist's beginning -- a Jew among the Eskimo and a Jewish Eskimo as mediated by an "Explorer Ethos.." My second case poses some questions, such as are "Are the Chinese Really Yellow Jews?" Third, several Balkan views, Serbian Peasants and Yugoslav Jews; then, "Fiddler on the Roof, a "Croatian" Shtetl Without Jews." Finally, a 1990s visit to Mauthausen. These very brief case studies will then be followed with some concluding remarks and reflections.

My first case study dates to the summer of 1950 just before I began graduate school the following fall. Since I first started to study anthropology in 1948 I had become fascinated with the far north, the further north, the better. Among other interests as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan I was intrigued by geology, a natural sciences orientation then quite congenial to combining with cultural anthropology. Although a nominal history major, I had decided too late to complete the requirements for the major in anthropology, I took to attending graduate seminars in geology. In these seminars a dominating presence was an elderly Professor Hobbs. I remember going to the library to look up his publications. Among his geological papers was a study this man had done on his family history in which he stressed the importance of his white Christian roots. This discovery didn't deflect my interests but it did make me avoid this professor. Being told inferentially that I was different was not a new experience. A professor of German, who was also a Holocaust Survivor, stressed to me that one of the great challenges of learning was to continually flush the garbage out of one's head. This advice did help me adjust to this discovery of a reality behind the seemingly totally objective scientific demeanor of the geology seminar. It also burned into my consciousness the notion that I was in the category of "Other," although that terminology was not in use at the time. This experience also provided preparation for my Alaskan experience.

Anti-Semitic Archeologists and "Jewish Eskimo"

My contacts at Michigan's University Museum provided a more congenial setting. Through archeologists there I learned of a planned joint expedition of the Danish National museum, the University of Pennsylvania Museum and the University of Alaska to the Seward Peninsula. The objective of this expedition was to excavate a prehistoric men's ceremonial house in the Eskimo village of Deering on the northern side of the Seward Peninsula. With the backing of an anthropology professor I wrote to the organizer at the University of Alaska and was told that I would be welcome to join if I could pay my own airfare to Fairbanks and then to Deering. Fortunately, between my father's generous monthly expense allowance and my work at a campus cafeteria I had saved enough to buy a one-way air ticket to Alaska. (t the end of the summer I hitch-hiked home from Fairbanks to New York). I was entranced to be able to visit with the descendants of the people I had been reading about. This opportunity gave a fresh impetus to my anthropology studies.

The time to depart came quickly and before I knew it I found myself in the little Eskimo village of Deering. The principal members of the expedition were two senior

archeologists who had spent much of their careers specializing in Eskimo prehistory and also several graduate students from both Denmark and the U.S. I soon settled into the daily regimen of working carefully on the excavation, which had to be done ever so slowly because of the permafrost, permanently frozen ground. But the frequent uncovering of historic objects provided a continuing motivation. There were many local Eskimo employed to assist with the expedition's various chores. There was also always a lot to do but there was also time to explore the area around the village with its cliffs and bird rookeries as well as to visit a placer gold mining operation in the interior of the peninsula.

However, I was soon troubled by the fact that the Director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum had apparently taken a profound dislike to me. It is true that I was not very knowledgeable about excavation techniques but that didn't seem to be an issue. Matters began to come into focus as one afternoon I sat on beach facing the Arctic Ocean, relaxing from a stint of digging, and heard the learned Professor Rainey from Philadelphia complain to his Danish colleague about his erstwhile associate, the physical anthropologist Harry Shapiro, head of the Anthropology Department of the American Museum of Natural History, and his failure to complete the skeletal analyses of the materials collected at a nearby Eskimo site. From this claim he went on to a seemingly unconnected denunciation of the leadership of the Communist Party USA who were then on trial in NYC for conspiracy. Hanging was too good for them he opined.

I still hadn't put the pieces together. But I was soon to be enlightened. Later that day, after supper, one of the graduate students invited me to take a stroll. It was summer, and our being sufficiently far north, the sun never set. As we walked along the beach on that sparkling evening the graduate student, who subsequently would become an accomplished archeologist, sought to enlighten the neophyte. "I guess you don't understand what is going on," he began, and proceeded to tell me that Rainey wanted me out, because he, Rainey, felt that one New York Jew was enough for him to deal with, i.e. Dr. Shapiro was enough. This student was supposedly acting as my friend. He explained some of the details of what was to happen. I was soon to be invited to leave. To ease my parting and, presumably, to minimize any complaints I might make, I was to be offered some money. He didn't know exactly how much I would be paid, "to do some cultural anthropology" in the nearby Eskimo town of Kotzebue.

I was somewhat surprised but expressed my appreciation for his preparing me for this situation. But I was totally unprepared for his follow-up comment.. It was one thing being subjected to a not totally unexpected bit of academic anti-Semitism but I was not ready to be put into a related stereotypical role of "the radical New York Jew." It seemed my "kindly older brother" informant had more on his mind than simply helping out a younger colleague. For after conveying his prediction, which subsequently proved accurate, he began to launch into a totally unexpected denunciation of the American capitalist system with its glaring class with its racial and related ethnic inequities. I was, by implication, part of the latter

category. My older “friend” seem to feel that since we were now, by this sharing of a confidence, on close terms he had a suggestion to make.

He felt that it was possible that someone in my “oppressed” status had not considered. His suggestion was that the way to struggle against injustice was to join the CPUSA, and what better place to do so, since I would be going to Columbia, was in NYC. This thought had not occurred to me nor was it one that I was prepared to consider but fortunately I was savvy enough to keep my mouth shut. Ironically, Dr. Shapiro, who was very proud of his Harvard degree, impressed me as the establishment personified. But then ideological passions and bigotry do not operate on logical categories. The anti-Semitism of leading American archeologists of fifty years ago is not surprising. Clearly not the only boundary they were concerned with maintaining was the one between the resident Eskimo and themselves. The “Otherness” and subservient role of the local Eskimo was made manifest in countless ways involving, in no small part, the allocation of relative power of the outside anthropologist hiring them to document their own cultural history. The irony of this situation was, I’m sure, not something either side seemed to be aware of, even marginally. As concerns a young Jewish apprentice scholars in archeology his “Otherness” need to be maintained in more subtle, less punishing ways as I was soon to experience . Another element of irony in this experience was that a “New York Jew,” of German-Jewish origin to be precise, had become the outstanding American anthropologist of the early 20th century. Franz Boas of Columbia University had died only eight years earlier. It is a prominent part of contemporary anthropological history that, among his many other accomplishments, he was one of the pioneer researches of Eskimo life back in the 1880s. He had lived in the high arctic under conditions that these archeologists had never endured.

I didn’t realize how quickly matters would be implemented. The next morning a plane came in to bring mail and supplies and I was on it with \$300 in my pocket complete with Professor Rainey’s “good wishes” for my cultural anthropological research in the town of Kotzebue on the southern side of the Seward Peninsula. (Rainey was then Director of the Anthropology Museum of the University of Pennsylvania). Little did I realize that day as I boarded the Piper Cub that I would be going from a setting where anthropologists erected boundaries to one where multiculturalism, although that word was not used half a century ago, was the accepted mode. I got off the plane in Kotzebue and strolled into town with my gear. It was a short walk and the town, like the village of Deering, was spread out along the beach. Kotzebue was, however, far larger and a regional center with stores, a restaurant, administrative offices, a high school and, most important, a regional hospital.

I stopped by the general store and asked about finding a place to stay. You might ask Father Riley I was told, he often has visitors, and then he added, “He’s come here from Ireland.” At that the clerk pointed out down the beach where a man was beaching a small craft with an outboard. I quickly went over to him and impulsively greeted him in Gaelic, a rudimentary form of which I had learned from my nanny along with the 1920s John M McCormack Irish songs she never seemed tired of playing on our family’s Victrola. After a

very brief conversation we switched to English. I quickly explained a bit about whom I was, where I came from and what I hoped to do in Kotzebue. At that time and place my story must have sounded a bit unusual, but he didn't seem a bit fazed. I also said that the clerk at the store had told me that he might be able to help me find a place to stay.

At that point he asked me if I went to church. I was not altogether surprised by his question but decided to be straightforward and explained that I was Jewish. Far from being put out by my answer he smiled and this time he did surprise me. "I have just the place for you," he remarked. "It's a somewhat old cabin owned by one of my best parishioners, Bernice Kaplan. But its summer and I think you'll do just fine there if you have your own sleeping bag. Her daughter goes to Parochial school in Seattle." Before I could begin to ask him questions he filled in some of the blanks. "Her father was a storekeeper here and married a local woman. The daughter became a member of our church."

Later I had a pleasant meeting with Bernice to arrange the details. The somewhat broken-down cabin proved satisfactory. But Bernice and I never had much a chance to talk about her father. Some years later I edited a collection of my Alaskan Eskimo slides for the Educational Division of the American Museum of Natural History. I suppose I could have labeled my slide of her in Eskimo skin clothing with her name – the slide might have attracted some attention considering its use in the New York City school system. It might also be interesting to research her father's history in Kotzebue through census lists. But in today's world of a number of books documenting the Eskimo children fathered by various arctic explorers and even their African American assistants, (Matthew Henson who worked for Peary is a notable example) this incident of a Jewish shopkeeper in an arctic town with his part Eskimo children would be most unremarkable.

But the contrast between the prejudices of a pretentious academic seeking to reinforce ethnic distinctions and the ongoing reality of the merging of identities in an Eskimo town was readily apparent. That fall at Columbia I recall asking Duncan Strong, a professor of archeology, and then a well-known arctic specialist, as to whether I might be able to use my summer's research in Kotzebue for an M.A. essay. He said that this would be impossible because I had not experienced a yearly cycle of subsistence activities in the Kotzebue area. His focus was entirely on seeing the Eskimo as a people apart, and enclosed ethnographic entity. Had I thought to mention the Jewish storekeeper as a participant in what was then called the process of acculturation I don't believe Professor Strong would have considered this relevant. In any case, it would have been less important to him than noting what remained of the aboriginal annual cycle of subsistence. This would have related to what he remembered and wrote about from his experience a generation earlier in fieldwork in Labrador. The idea that a Black professor of psychiatry at Harvard would be writing a book about Admiral Peary's manservant, Matthew Henson, and his Greenlandic Eskimo grandchildren (S. Allen Coulter, *North Pole legacy: Black, White and Eskimo*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts press, 1991) would then have seemed to him in 1950 beyond the pale of possibility. Certainly mention of it would not have been appropriate in

the pages of the National Geographic of the 1920s in which Peary's arctic journeys of discovery were celebrated before an elite white, male audience. Just as Peary's Eskimo children and grandchildren have now become part of the domain of African-American Studies, so the role of a Jewish storekeeper in Kotzebue, Alaska becomes part of the legitimate domain of American Jewish historical studies. This more inclusive perspective does not lead to sloppy scholarship but to studies of a more focused nature. There is a lot that Professor Strong missed wearing the spectacles of the traditional ethnologist! On the other hand, Eskimo children fathered by white explorers and their assistants were part of the assumed covert text and then relegated to the gossip of white males. While professional anti-Semitism was then quite acceptable, even after the Holocaust, detailed studies were then still in the future. Besides the attitudes of archeologists such as Froelich Rainey, then director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, were formed between the two World Wars when polite anti-Semitism was often the norm in academia and was as unquestioned as the basic presumptions of Western European imperial rule were by mainstream scholarship.

“Yellow Jews” and the Comparison of Marginality

My second illustration is taken from a different culture area and is derived from my Southeast Asian experiences. Early in the last century the Thai king Rama VI first published in 1914 a pamphlet about the “Yellow Jews” with reference to the role of Chinese merchants in Southeast Asia, specifically including his concern about their role in Thailand. Subsequently there were comparative studies by American academics concerning the role of Chinese merchants in Southeast Asia, specifically, Indonesia and the Philippines and comparing them to the role of Jewish merchants in Eastern Europe. But as far as I could determine during my time in Indochina, specifically Laos, my Jewish identity never did enter into my interactions with local people, including the Western educated elite. My North American origins and my status as a white person far overshadowed any such factors. One profound lesson that my time in Southeast Asia did impress on me, however, was the ability of local people to think in terms of multiple religious systems even within a dominant Buddhist society but especially in one more influenced directly by Chinese culture such as Vietnam. That is although the major Middle Eastern and European religions do share a common origin, which is widely known and recognized, i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam they are always thought of as totally separable, mutually exclusive systems. Even within Christianity Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism might recognize some aspects of a shared theology nevertheless they are ideologically and administratively separate entities. To a lesser degree this also applies to groups within the Protestant denomination.

But, for example, from a Vietnamese point of view one can simultaneously be involved with the Cult of Ancestors and related Confucian doctrines, Buddhism and aspects of Taoism without feeling oneself in conflict but rather such connections are sometimes seen as a pathway to inner peace and rewarding contemplation, meditation. Even the Catholics of Vietnam fought for a long time to have their Cult of Ancestors officially

included by the Vatican as part of their total expression of faith. While there are certainly many syncretic aspects of Middle Eastern monotheistic religious systems the idea of mutual exclusivity remains of paramount importance. Yet on quite another level there are obvious parallel domains of experience.

At UMass I gave a lecture (subsequently repeated) to an introductory Judaic Studies about ghetto life. Choosing my words carefully I went through about a half hour description of community organization and associated values, stressing the importance of education. I continued on in my description about the degree of isolation and the frequency of violence against the community and related activities of persecution and the ways in which communities were decimated and then reestablished. I also discussed the varying relationships of the ghetto community to the secular rulers. I then paused in my delivery and asked the instructor for her opinion. She said that while she thought my description was an accurate one she was a bit puzzled about the dates of the specific events I cited for this particular group. I then explained to the instructor and the class that the reason for this was that I was not discussing an East European case but rather the Chinese community of Manila in the 16th century. I had based my lecture not only on my Southeast Asian experiences and knowledge of Chinese communities there but on a specific article in the *Jewish Journal of Sociology* that had used the Chinese community of Manila as an illustrative example in an article comparing “overseas Chinese” with the Jews in Eastern Europe. (For those who may be interested in pursuing this topic see, “The Jews of The east,” in Kenneth Perry Landon’s, *The Chinese in Thailand*, (N.Y. Oxford University Press, 1941, pp. 35-43) This should put the musical, “The King and I,” in a more broader perspective. An analysis of the historical experiences of the Chinese community of Manila can be found in “Two Minorities: The Jews of Poland and the Chinese of the Philippines,” by D.Stanley Eitzen, in *the Jewish Journal of Sociology*, 1968, pp. 221-240.)

Two Views from the Balkans – Catholic Croatia and Orthodox Serbia

In the final part of my paper I want to discuss two communities in the former Yugoslavia in which I did research and in which questions of religious identity were of very significant and tragic importance. My first example is from the Croatian village of Lekenik, which is within easy commuting distance of the Croatian national capital and its major city of Zagreb. Actually, Lekenik is now located only a short ride away from the city’s international airport. Yet when I first went to do research in the village in the early 1960s it was still very much a rural community with a viable agricultural base although there were many commuters within the village. At that time much of the village’s traditional wooden architecture was then still very much in tact. It should then not be too much of a surprise to learn that when the film *Fiddler on the Roof* was being made in the 1960s this village was chosen as the locale for filming, forming as it were a living stage set in which to depict turn of the 20th century shtetl life. The fact that the real pale of Settlement of East European Jewry was a thousand or more kilometers to the East in Galicia and part of the

contemporary Ukraine was obviously deemed a geographic detail. Cold War attitudes were then at their height so that on site filming would have been most difficult if not impossible. By contrast Yugoslavia was relatively open to western filmmakers and apparently the price was right for filming rights to use the village as a backdrop.

Ironically, during all the time I spent in the village in 1962 (before the filming) and despite my inquiries about its history there was never a mention of the village having had a small Jewish community prior to World War II. It was only in the 1990s that I discovered the actual situation. A young colleague of mine from the Southeast European Institute at the University of Graz did an historical study of that village for his doctoral dissertation. His research involved extensive archival work. Only then did I learn some vital facts. He discovered in the Zagreb State Archives extensive information about the Jewish families who had lived in this very village before World War II. It was in the second half of the 19th century when they first appeared in the area and settled in the village. (They were of Ashkenazi origin migrating south from the Pale of Settlement within the Austro-Hungarian Empire.) Subsequently some of them became leading figures in village life as traders, pub owners, storekeepers and moneylenders. Lekenik was then a bit of trading center since there was at that time an active timber industry in the area and the village itself was on the railway line. A few of the Jewish residents played a role in village organizational life.

One member of this community Julius Mann was the founder and president of the Fire Brigade. He also sponsored the newly established soccer club. He was said to have been a moneylender, one of the most prosperous men in the village and “was very influential in all communal questions.” (His name does not appear in a history of the village fire department that I solicited from a villager who had served as a local historian.) At the time of the beginning of the war the Kornfeld family had a grocery store, the Fischers a butcher shop and a small store and the Mann’s had a pub and were also active in the wood and iron trades. In 1941 these three resident Jewish families were deported by the Croatian fascist Ustashi, presumably to the concentration camp of Jasenovac. No one returned to the village after the war.

At present I am still pursuing the question of this “forgotten” part of village history with my colleague from the university of Graz. At this point I do not know if local Ustashi sympathizers played an active role in the deportation of these families. (During World War II the Croatian state was controlled by the Ustashi and, in fact, this mini state declared war on the U.S.) Presumably the producers of *Fiddler on the Roof* either did not know this history or were indifferent to it for the credits only acknowledge the “people of Lekenik” and their aid to the filmmakers. The Hollywood ambiance of this film, which reflected another time and place was obviously manufacturing a memory, an illusion to which the details of local events were irrelevant. Certainly it is more than conceivable that these resident families also came from the Pale of Settlement, the “homeland” which was created in this English language film for Americans whose parents or grandparents had originally been immigrants. Such links are, of course, only a matter of speculation. But this microcosm

of Jewish history is now only one of a multitude of small, dispersed footnotes to a lost world.

By contrast my encounters in the Serbian village of Orasac were not based on archival records but on personal recollections proudly given by the people directly involved. Orasac, the village which I studied, and in which I resided for a year in 1953-54, is located in central Serbia in the rolling hills south of the capital of Belgrade. It was here that I carried on my most intensive study of a Yugoslav community beginning in 1953. My wife and I initially lived in this village for a year with the family of the Secretary of the Village Council. My researches in this village have been well documented in a series of articles and books. After we became friendly with the family we learned of their wartime adventures in sheltering a Jewish family. As the head of the household related the tale to me, during the first few days of the war he was at a town fair to which he had come to sell some ducks. There he encountered a prosperous Jewish family from Zagreb desperately seeking a place to stay. He invited the family, father, mother, son and daughter home with him. Their home then was a wattle and daub house but one located far from the road. The strangers were then gradually made over into Serbian peasants. The parents even had their gold teeth yanked out.

The story is an improbable one. Why would a Serbian peasant, presumably possessed, as he was, of some intelligence take the risk of inviting home a Jewish family that would obviously stand out in the village community? Secreting such a family would obviously pose grave risks and consume food that was hard to come by. But despite the justifiable skepticism this event did happen and the surviving family in Israel with whom we spoke on a visit there provided further details. At this point in time it is more than likely that both sides have romanticized the encounter. The son became a general in the Israeli army but they remembered their Yugoslav friends and aided them in the difficult postwar years. But if this event is considered along with the many other stories of Jews having been saved during the Holocaust some of these facts may not seem so strange.

Concluding Thoughts

It is not easy to draw these diverse strands together but this reflexive approach to incidents in my academic career illustrates the connectedness between one's research experiences and one's own family environment and history. "Being Jewish" can be thought of as a religious commitment, a state of mind, a way of viewing the world, a heritage or some combination of these factors and, for some, a burden perhaps to be discarded. But reflecting on one's identity in a series of diverse cultural environments does forcibly illustrate the deep connectedness between one's observations and the lenses we develop to view these observations.