

From Swastika to Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges

Linda Medvin, Director

Arthur and Emalie Gutterman Family

Center for Holocaust and Human Rights Education

Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

Florida Atlantic University

January 1933: Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party legally and democratically rose to power in Germany.

- Hitler began a systematic campaign of oppression and terror against Jews, who had been an integral part of German culture, commerce, and education.
- Only months after Hitler seized power in Germany in the spring of 1933, Jewish intellectuals who had held prestigious positions in Germany's universities were targeted for expulsion. One of the first pieces of Nazi legislation excluded “non-Aryans” from civil service or academic positions in Germany.

April 25, 1933: Law for Preventing Overcrowding in German Schools and Schools of Higher Education

- This law restricted enrollment of Jews and soon Jewish professors began to be dismissed from universities.
- Scholars realized in the early 1930s that Jews had no future in Germany and began to flee to the United States.

As the Nazis took power in Germany, Jews faced immediate danger.

Jews fleeing Nazi rule couldn't just leave Germany and come to the United States.

- Prove they would not be a “public charge” (ability to support themselves financially) before they would be eligible for a visa.
- Refugees were required to leave almost all of their money in Germany, so they had little hope of supporting themselves upon arrival in the United States. They were forced to secure affidavits from U.S. citizens, typically relatives, who pledged to support them.
- Private organizations and individuals stepped up to help refugees circumvent barriers erected by U.S. immigration policy. Beginning in the mid-1930s, the American Friends Service Committee drew on its networks to find strangers who would pledge to support refugees as a way to sidestep the “public charge” rule.

Most of the 1,200 refugee scholars who arrived in the United States could not find work in their fields.

Finding jobs was not a simple task, even when placing highly qualified professors with degrees from distinguished institutions.

- The same antisemitism that fueled efforts to keep Jews out of the United States also pervaded academia.
- Most colleges did not throw open their doors to lesser-known academics seeking refuge from the Nazis.
- In the aftermath of the Great Depression, American faculty members who had seen their salaries slashed, resented the idea of refugee scholars who might add to the strain on already limited university resources.

In that atmosphere, salvation at times came down to the actions of a single college administrator who intervened with the offer of a job and a visa.

- That was the case at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), where administrators saved the lives of 53 Germans Jewish Scholars, who were hired at 19 Institutions such as Howard University in Washington, D.C., and Tougaloo College in Mississippi and other historically Black colleges of the American South.
- For the scholars, employment at the Black colleges offered an invaluable opportunity to continue their professional work at a time when work in their fields was scarce.
- For many of the Jewish professors it was the first time ever meeting a black person, and the students themselves often had little or no prior exposure to Jews.

The American South

Southern Blacks lived under the oppression of the Jim Crow laws, which legislated the strict segregation of Blacks from Whites.

- Blacks were considered second-class citizens forbidden from:
 - Attending the same schools
 - Eating in the same restaurants
 - Playing in the same parks

The South was openly a racial hierarchy and Jews were not considered white.

Shunned by the White community for being both Jewish and foreign, unable to fully integrate with the Black community due to segregation laws, the experience of the refugee scholars would prove to be very difficult but, in many cases, very rewarding.

Scholars discovered that the American South was not unlike Germany in the mid-1930s

Rome, Georgia



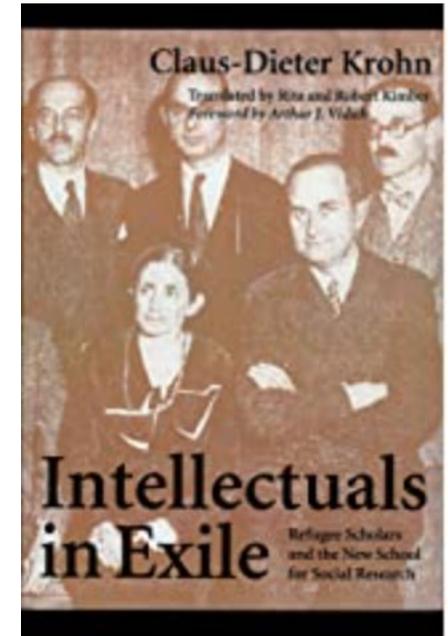
Only for Jews



Historically Black Colleges

- The historically Black private colleges represented a rare opportunity for educational advancement and were havens for aspiring young Blacks.
- Exempt from local segregation laws, they were one of the few places where Blacks could freely associate with Whites without being arrested under the myriad of ordinances enforcing segregation.
- Many of these colleges needed qualified teachers and saw in these refugees, prominent scholars to attract to their campuses, and who, having fled oppression themselves, might have special sensitivity to the experience of the Black students they would teach.

Claus Dieter Krohn writes that mutual sympathy arose between the Jewish professors and their black students – united as victims of persecution and discrimination. ***“Racial segregation reminded me a lot of Nazi Germany, except that I wasn’t a victim, the black population was,”*** said George Iggers, a German Jewish refugee who taught history at Philander Smith College.



[Intellectuals in Exile: Refugee Scholars and the New School for Social Research](#)

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- For many of the Jewish professors it was the first time ever meeting a black person, and the students themselves often had little or no prior exposure to Jews.
- ***“They found a place where they could make a contribution, and they found a place where they could pursue their intellectual life. They found a place where they could make a difference”.***

Dr. Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor, Jewish Theological Seminary





Ernst Borinski, Tougaloo College

For the Black colleges including Howard University, Hampton Institute, and Tougaloo and Talladega Colleges the refugee professors provided the opportunity to add great talent to their faculty; for the professors, the arrangement provided a new home, a classroom of students eager to learn, and an insider's look at an America that few had ever seen. While most of these pairings between Jewish refugees and Black colleges began as marriages of convenience, very often they blossomed into matches that lasted a lifetime.



Ernst Borinski became a noted sociologist from his perch in the deep South, but his legacy at Tougaloo College extended far beyond his academic field.

He created an interracial intellectual salon called the Social Science Forum that featured speakers critical of injustice, a dangerous act at the time. Even more radical were the dinners that preceded the talks. He asked his African American students to come early and sit in every other seat, so that whites arriving later had to sit next to a black person. For many, black or white, it was the first time they'd had a meal with someone of a different race.

German philosopher Ernst Manasse was rescued by North Carolina Central University (NCCU), largely thanks to James Shepard, the university's president and founder, after years of searching for safety.

As soon as he arrived in the U.S., he set about finding an academic position. After a year of searching, a month before his visa expired, Shepard offered him a position at NCCU that paid just enough to survive and qualify for a work visa.

“If I had not found a refuge at that time,” Manasse later reflected, “I would have been arrested, deported to a Nazi concentration camp, tortured and eventually killed.” Instead, he remained on the NCCU faculty until he retired in 1973 and lived the rest of his life in Durham.

Shepard eventually hired three more German scholars. He was motivated by humanitarianism but also recognized an unprecedented opportunity to bring world-class scholars to NCCU. Shepard's foresight was a boon to students for generations to come.

Ernst Manasse *“It was relatively easy to teach them, something that may not have been as easy as that at a white college.”*



Ernst Moritz Manasse

The roster of students who called these refugee intellectuals their mentors is impressive:

Including but not limited to:

- Civil rights activists Joyce Ladner,
- Former Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders
- Artist John Biggers
- Julius Chambers, who went on to become a prominent Charlotte civil rights attorney
- Wade Kornegay, son of a tenant farmer from Mount Olive, won a Fulbright scholarship and later became a leading expert on ballistic missile defense at MIT.
- Eugene Eaves, who was later a professor of linguistics and provost at NCCU

“These teachers cared for us, they demonstrated a recognition of the barriers we had to confront and committed themselves to arming us with what we needed to survive it all,” former student Eugene Eaves of Manasse’s who was later a professor of linguistics and provost at NCCU.

I came from a situation of forced segregation where we were victims, and now I belonged not to the oppressed, but to the oppressor. And that was very, very uncomfortable for me”.

Ernst Manasse

The refugee professors recall the kinship they felt with their students because of their shared experiences as persecuted minorities, a rapport that may have been hard to build at other institutions.

The connection between Blacks and Jews has a far more complex history than most people know. In the civil rights era, for example, Jews were involved behind the scenes in activist groups like the NAACP and Urban League.

“For blacks that don’t want to hear or believe that we have a history tied to Jews and Jews who might want to believe the reverse, the history is just full of contradictions,”

“Like it or not, we’re all family in a way, especially in the South.”

The cultural dynamic between the Jewish professors and the black students proved transformational for both.

Jeffrey Leak

Director of the Center for the Study of the New South at UNC Charlotte

- For some students going to school in the South, there emerged a dichotomy between sympathy and resentment, resentment that America was fighting Nazism overseas while Jim Crow and discrimination reigned at home.
- Yet through the auspices of HBCUs, these relationships thrived.
- The debt the Jewish Refugee Scholars owed the black colleges who welcomed them could not be repaid.

Beyond from Swastika to Jim Crow Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4DecqDTB3Y>

From Swastika to Jim Crow

by Gabrielle Edgcomb

“The significance of this historical episode lies in the encounter between two diverse groups of people, both victims of extreme manifestations of racist oppression and persecution, albeit under vastly different historical conditions. The Europeans came out of a middle-class intellectual environment... African Americans at the time were two and three generations removed from slavery, under which even learning to read had been generally forbidden.”

Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida: Section 5. Paragraph (g) of subsection (2) of section 1003.42 (1994), Florida Statutes, is amended (2020) to read:

The history of the Holocaust (1933-1945), the systematic, planned annihilation of European Jews and other groups by Nazi Germany, a watershed event in the history of humanity, to be taught in a manner that leads to an investigation of human behavior, an understanding of the ramifications of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping, and an examination of what it means to be a responsible and respectful person, for the purposes of encouraging tolerance of diversity in a pluralistic society and for nurturing and protecting democratic values and institutions, including the policy against anti-Semitism, as described in s. 1000.05(7).

**Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida: Section 5.
Paragraph (h) of subsection (2) of section 1003.42 (1994):**

The history of African Americans, including the history of African peoples before the political conflicts that led to the development of slavery, the passage to America, the enslavement experience, abolition, and the contributions of African Americans to society. Instructional materials shall include the contributions of African Americans to American society.

Essential Question:

Did the HBCU sponsorship of the refugee Jewish scholars encourage a heightened sensitivity to fighting racism and tyranny and encourage a renewed understanding of legalized racial discrimination in America?

Many African Americans viewed the rise of fascism and America's involvement in the war in the same way as their fellow Americans: as a menace to American democracy. However, like other US citizens who faced racial inequality at home, they also understood the period from 1933 to 1945 through the lens of their own experiences. In some cases, this meant a heightened sensitivity and greater commitment to fighting racism and tyranny on another shore. But it also encouraged a renewed understanding of their own position in an America that perpetuated legalized racial discrimination, social and economic marginalization, and mob violence toward its own citizens.

Resources

From Swastika to Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges

Nazi Laws 1933-1939 – The Legal Assault on German Jewry

Comparing Nuremberg Laws and Jim Crow Laws

Map of Jim Crow America: Florida

Map of Jim Crow America

Major Themes: Jewish Refugee Scholars in the American South

Articles:

- *After fleeing the Nazis, many Jewish refugee professors found homes at historically black colleges and they were shocked by race relations in the South*
- *How historically black colleges helped rescue Jewish refugees*
- *Joined Together by Empathy: Historically Black Colleges and Jewish Refugees in WWII*