

דער פֿאַקן-טרעגער

Pakn Treger

From Yiddish roots to the
frontiers of Jewish culture

Searching for
the Promised Land
in the Bronx
by Julie Cooper

Boychik Nation
by Diane Simon

A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

by Adam Shemper

Mississippi Jews

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Photographs by Adam Shemper

Mississippi Jews

"The story of Jews in the South," writes Eli Evans in his classic study, *The Provincials*, "is the story of fathers who built businesses to give their sons who didn't want them." Photographer Adam Shemper is one of those sons. After leaving his native Mississippi to go to college in New England, Shemper returned to document the heritage he left behind: both his father's scrap metal business in Hattiesburg and the quiet life of Southern Jews.

A population spread out across a broad countryside, Southern Jews did not so much cluster in cities as settle in small towns, at first as peddlers, then as merchants, store owners, junk dealers. When Shemper returned to rural Mississippi this past summer, he says, his trip was "mostly a journey from one Jewish-owned business to another. I drove to Shaw, Mississippi to see the Shiz brothers, who own and operate the Dixie Tobacco and Candy Company. I went to the town of Alligator to meet with Aaron Kline,

a Lithuanian Jew who immigrated in 1937 and opened up his dry goods business in a town with only three other stores. I visited the Kossman's Cadillac dealership in Cleveland, Mississippi, the Silverblatt's and the Lipnick's children's clothing stores in Indianola, the Kornfield's clothing store in Greenwood, Nat Okun's Shoes in Clarksdale."

Shemper's great-grandfather, Sam Shemper, came to the United States from Russia in the 1890s. A Jewish aid agency in New Jersey sent him to Vicksburg, Mississippi, where he spent the next several years, like many East European immigrants to the South, traveling from town to town as a peddler, buying and selling furs, cowhides, bones, tallow and pecans.

Adam Shemper's photographs of his family's junkyard will appear in an upcoming issue of The Oxford American. He is currently working on a series of photographs of Southern housekeepers.

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Above: Floyd Shankerman in Shankermans, Inc., Clarksdale.
Opposite: Robert Hirsberg and Marvin Joe Sawyer in Hirsberg's drugstore, Friar's Point.



Top: Joshua Shemper unloading a scrap customer at Ben Shemper and Sons, Inc., Hattiesburg.
Bottom: Aaron Kline in front of The Whale Store, Alligator.



Top: Rabbi Moses Landau and Melissa Chiz in front of the Adath Israel Temple, Cleveland.
Bottom: Juliet Kossman playing mahjongg at her home, Cleveland.



Melvin and Maureen Lipnick in Weinberg's, a children's clothing store, Indianola.



David Shemper at home with his girlfriend, Jackie Scanlon, Hattiesburg.

By 1905, he'd settled in Hattiesburg and started the scrap metal business that survives to this day. Sam's sons did stay, and his sons after him. Today, two of Shemper's brothers, are learning the business. Jonathan is comfortable dating non-Jews and living in Mississippi. Josh (pictured on p. 26) planned to live on a kibbutz after graduating from college, says Shemper, "but he backed out a week before he was to leave. My uncle offered him a job in the business which couldn't wait, so Josh stayed in Mississippi. He still stays in touch with the Jewish friends he made in college though, and visits them in places like Chicago and Las Vegas. None of them live in Mississippi."

Today, 1,400 Jews live in Mississippi, down from 2,500 in 1970, 4,600 in 1937. The allure of professional careers in the West and the North, the declining industry of the South, and the pall of racism that still hangs over Mississippi have all taken their toll. During the 1960s, some of the Mississippi Jews stood their ground, determined to help build what they considered a better South. Rabbi Charles Matinband of Hattiesburg joined the masses of Northern Jews and the small band of Southern Jews who fought for civil rights. Another rabbi joined the Mississippi nativist White Citizen's Council. But Matinband's congregation, long accustomed to keeping a low profile, sent their activist rabbi packing, and Mississippi Jews turned their backs with even greater disdain on the hate-mongers among them. Meanwhile, their sons and daughters sought safer ground, where they might be relieved of the burden of Southern history, and free to explore Jewish history. As Jewish populations swell in New South centers like Atlanta (70,000, up from 16,500 in 1970), the slow attrition of the peddlers' sons and daughters in Mississippi continues.

"The last of the Delta dry goods stores are waning," says Shemper. In Clarksdale alone, he notes, he visited the abandoned shells of Jewish groceries, a shoe repair business, and a clothing store. Their closings mark the end of the culture of the small-town Jewish shopkeeper in the South, a peculiar accommodation with a doubly messianic Christianity. "The old rebel chant still heard and seen on bumpers throughout the Delta, 'The South will rise again,' also hints of a larger second coming," he says. "That of Christ. I grew up not bowing my head or closing my eyes at baseball games, graduations, cub scout meetings, and other public events, in open defiance of the invocations always in the name of Jesus. If I was with my family, I'd look around to see what my brothers, mother, and father were doing. My brothers and I would smile, acknowledging to one another that we were conscientious objectors. And my father, with his chin on his chest, would wink, reassuring us that he was only being polite." PT

— The Editors



WRITE FOR

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