

Program in Jewish Culture & Society

2008-2009 Newsletter



ALMA GOTTLIEB JEWS IN/AND/OF AFRICA: NEW RESEARCH IN CAPE VERDE AND THE CAPE VERDEAN DIASPORA

I'm excited to join the Jewish studies community after almost three decades specializing in African studies.

In 2006-07, I spent a sabbatical year in Lisbon, where I discovered a fascinating community with deep roots in both Judaism and Africa, and I'm now researching both the history and contemporary experiences of Cape Verdeans (on and off the islands) who have some Jewish ancestors. As such, this new project bridges my longstanding professional interest in Africa with my upbringing as a Jew.

Arriving in Lisbon in summer 2006, I considered possible research projects with Cape Verdean immigrants. The focus I thought would be the most intellectually daring—and the most practically difficult—and the least likely to attract interest on the part of either Cape Verdeans or West Africanist scholarly colleagues—and the least likely to even net me any living “informants”—concerned the option of finding living Cape Verdean immigrants with Jewish ancestry. But the possibility fascinated me, and I asked about it.

From preparing to work with Cape Verdean immigrants in Portugal, I'd read that the 15th/16th century peopling of the originally uninhabited ten Cape Verde islands—some 300 miles off the West African coast of Senegal—had comprised a mixed group that included Jews fleeing the Iberian Inquisition. But those early immigrants arrived a half-millennium ago. Would current residents

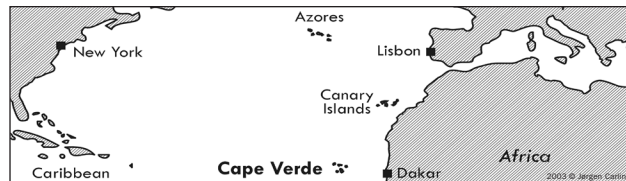
of the islands have any knowledge of the Jewish portion of their islands' complex history? More importantly for me—since I am an anthropologist looking primarily for a living community to work with—could I find any descendants of Jewish immigrants who now recognized their Jewish ancestors?

To my surprise and delight, the answer to both questions was an exuberant Yes. Everywhere I went, both in Lisbon and, later, in Cape Verde during a brief first visit (in March-April 2007), every Cape Verdean I met knew that their islands' history included Jews. Not everyone knew the exact reasons for the presence of Jews, let alone the details concerning who arrived, and when; but every Cape Verdean I met knew that a significant number of Jews had arrived at some point on the islands. Moreover, virtually everyone could point to someone they knew who had some Jewish ancestry; and the first Cape Verdean I met in Lisbon who could trace some direct Jewish ancestry easily led me to many more.

Indeed, I soon learned that not one but two distinct waves of Jewish immigration characterized Cape Verdean history. New research is now demonstrating that the first wave—resulting from the Iberian Inquisition's persecution of Jews in both Spain and, soon after, Portugal—brought far more Jews (and former Jews, or “New Christians” forced to convert) to the Cape Verde islands than had previously been acknowledged by scholars.

The second wave of Jewish emigration to Cape Verde occurred in the 19th century, when North African Jews fled difficult circumstances in Morocco. Descendants of this second wave of Jewish immigration retain an active memory and knowledge of their Jewish ancestors' travels from Morocco, and it is this group that has, so far, constituted my main “informant pool.” In short, what had begun as a charming fantasy of an exotic project turned out to be an entirely viable and compelling study that should occupy my professional time for many years to come.

Of the many fascinating intellectual discoveries I've made, let me share two notable ones here. First, some European scholars of Cape Verde as well as indigenous intellectuals claim that the nation of Cape Verde itself is a “creolized” culture with Judaism as a foundational component. Thus one prominent Cape Verdean writer, Germano Almeida, told me, “many, many Jews came to the islands and married Cape Verdeans, and had children with Cape Verdeans. So although they've all died,



they mixed with us, and they are part of us.” Likewise, the British historian Tobias Green argues, “the presence of people of Jewish descent helped to shape the Caboverdean economy and modes of exchange; yet the idea of the Jew was equally, if not more, important, as helping to shape the perception and thereby the reality of the creolizing societies that evolved.” In an even broader claim, Green argues that the international dimensions of the 15th-16th century Atlantic space constituted in many ways a significantly Cape Verdean/Jewish space and, by extension, that the origins of modernity itself owe much to post-Inquisition Jewish trading networks and liminal diasporic mentality, both of which were forged in good part via the 16th century Atlantic entrepôt that was Cape Verde. Second, scholars of Judaism often characterize Jews as the original diasporic people; likewise, many scholars of Cape Verde describe write of a “diasporic nation.” In other words, the history of both Jews and Cape Verdeans is parallel in such a way that their travels crossed and became inextricably interlinked at two crucial points in their shared history.

The implications—both scholarly and political—of this unexpected braiding of two ethnic/religious groups concerning the history of the Afro-Atlantic world, as well as for contemporary interethnic/

interacial relations, are enormous. For Jewish studies, this group adds rich new dimensions to the perennial question of *What is a Jew?*—especially because most of the Cape Verdeans I have met do not consider themselves “practicing Jews” (some identify as Catholics while others deny having any religious orientation) yet they see their Jewish heritage as an integral part of their identity. At the regional level, I plan to expand my research to encompass Cape Verdean-Americans with Jewish ancestry living in North America (especially the New England seacoast), South America (especially Brazil and Argentina) and Europe (especially England, France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Gibraltar). At the theoretical level, I hope my project will speak to important conversations challenging essentialist notions of race and religion, and that it will foster dialogue among normally discrete groups of scholars and citizens in the race/religion divide that marks so much of the modern world. I've given a few conference talks stemming from this research and have begun writing articles that should ultimately culminate in a book.

Melanie Katz/Kantrowitz has bluntly written, “the history of Ashkenazim has often been read as all of Jewish history.” If even the erasure of those easily categorized as “Sephardim” is

a problem, imagine how those with far more historically and spiritually complex identities have been even more invisible in scholarly explorations. From the standpoint of Jewish studies, then, I hope that my new research can contribute to the growing urge to transcend established categories and explore the history and experience of Jews, and those with mixed/Jewish heritage, in Africa and elsewhere, as their diasporic travels have taken them—both literally and figuratively—far from the quintessential Jewish homeland. Thus down the line, on campus here at Illinois, perhaps we can forge links between the Jewish Studies Program and our Center for African Studies. As my research develops, I look forward to getting to know my colleagues in Jewish studies both on our campus and elsewhere, and to learning from the accumulated expertise.

Alma Gottlieb is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Illinois. A leading anthropologist of Africa, she is the author of several books, including *Under the Kapok Tree: Identity and Difference in Beng Thought* (1992), *Parallel Worlds: An Anthropologist and a Writer Encounter Africa* (with Philip Graham) (1993), and *The Afterlife Is Where We Came from: The Culture of Intancy in West Africa* (2004). She has recently embarked on research on Cape Verdeans with Jewish ancestry and joined the faculty of the Program in Jewish Culture & Society in 2008.

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Bruce Rosenstock, Associate Director
Craig Alexander, Assistant to the Director

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Yasemin Yildiz (German): Bilingualism in German Literature; Muslim Imaginaries

* Members of the Program in Jewish Culture & Society Executive Committee.

COURSES IN JEWISH STUDIES

Listed below are the courses approved for Jewish Studies credit at the University of Illinois. A selection of these courses is taught every academic year.

ANTHROPOLOGY

The Holocaust and Its Meanings ANTH 161
 American Jewish Culture ANTH 190
 The World of Jewish Sephard ANTH 275
 Jewish Cultures of the World ANTH 290

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Jewish Storytelling: From the Russian Shtetl to New York CWL 221
 Literary Responses to the Holocaust CWL 320
 Jewish Life-Writing CWL 421

ENGLISH

Minority Images in American Film ENGL 272
 Modern Jewish Literature ENGL 284
 Jewish Immigrant Literature ENGL 363
 Literature of American Minorities ENGL 460

GERMAN

Vienna 1900 GER 257
 The Holocaust in Context GER 260

HISTORY

History of the Islamic Middle East HIST 135
 The Holocaust HIST 252
 Introduction to Russian-Jewish Culture HIST 261
 Jewish History to 1700 HIST 268
 Jewish History since 1700 HIST 269
 Constructing Race in America HIST 281
 The History of the Jews in the Diaspora HIST 433
 The Middle East 1566-1914 HIST 435
 The Middle East in the Twentieth Century HIST 437
 Twentieth-Century Germany HIST 456
 Immigrant America HIST 472

RELIGION

RLST 101 The Bible as Literature
 RLST 106 Archaeology and the Bible
 RLST 108 Religion and Society in the West I
 RLST 109 Religion and Society in the West II
 RLST 110 World Religions
 RLST 116 Faith and Self in Global Context
 RLST 120 A History of Judaism
 RLST 130 Jewish Customs and Ceremonies
 RLST 201 Hebrew Bible in English
 RLST 221 American Judaism
 RLST 235 History of Religion in America
 RLST 242 The Holocaust: Religious Responses
 RLST 283 Jewish Sacred Literature
 RLST 415 Introductory Readings of the Talmud
 RLST 416 Readings in Rabbinic Midrash
 RLST 442 History of Early Judaism
 RLST 443 Ancient Near Eastern Cultures
 RLST 458 Christians and Jews 1099-1789
 RLST 496 Topics in the History of Judaism
 RLST 498 Topics in Biblical Studies

PHILOSOPHY

PHIL 230 Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion

POLITICAL SCIENCE

PS 347 Government and Politics of the Middle East

YIDDISH

YDSH 101 Elementary Yiddish, I
 YDSH 102 Elementary Yiddish, II
 YDSH 103 Intermediate Yiddish, I
 YDSH 104 Intermediate Yiddish, II

[Program in Jewish Culture & Society](#)
in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

109 English Building
608 South Wright Street
Urbana, IL 61801
Phone: 217.333.7978
Fax: 217.333.3624
jewishculture@illinois.edu
www.jewishculture.uiuc.edu

