



“But They’re JUST People”

Teaching Jewish American (Auto)biography in a Jewishly Impoverished University

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The Context of the Course

[1] My purpose in teaching a course on Jewish Americans in a nominally Jewish academic institution is threefold. I have come to realize the importance of the Jewish community in the local region and want the students, most of whom are local, to realize that what they see as a homogeneous community is not one. Second, these students have little background in American history and culture, and a course in some type of minority culture would hopefully broaden their understanding of the multi-cultural nature of the United States. Finally, as a faculty member hired to teach general education courses it is rare that I am afforded the opportunity to teach a topic in which I am interested.

[2] Southwest Missouri State University (SMS) is a state university of just under 19,000 students (Student Information) in a predominately white state (almost 85%) and county (nearly 94%) (State . . . Missouri; State . . . Greene). Most students are from Missouri, with all the counties represented. In addition, students from 46 other states and 90 countries attend (Student Information). Our Jewish Student Organization was officially recognized in May 2003 and has an e-mail list of barely 12. In fact, of the 2569 entering freshmen of fall 2002, only 12 notified the university that their religious preference was Judaism (ACT Class Profile Report: 13). SMS proves the latter part of Cooperman's statement, "there is at least one, and usually more than one, full-time instructor in Jewish studies at almost every university in this country" (1), false. We have none. The only previously regularly taught course on a Jewish subject on campus is Introduction to Judaism in the Religious Studies Department.

[3] This course, Public and Private Identities in Biography and/or Autobiography - Jewish Americans is now the second regularly taught course with a Jewish theme. It is offered one section every spring. Labeled as a Capstone Course, it requires at least 60 credit hours and is offered with numerous other Capstone Courses as part of the general education curriculum. The idea behind these capstones is to "address public affairs issues and choices of broad importance from the perspectives and interaction of multiple fields. Includes an examination of crucial decisions facing individuals and communities" (Course Descriptions). Proposed by faculty in the English, History, and Religious Studies Departments, Public and Private Identities should "explore the many and varied ways in which an individual=s [sic] private life is intimately connected with public affairs" (Course Descriptions). There have been sections that focused on: Colonial Americans, women, and self-image and self-perception. I chose Jewish Americans. In each case, the choice is the faculty member's and reflects the interests of that faculty member.

[4] Since these students live in one of the most homogeneous communities in the country, we must consider seriously when Lee explains that "we cannot cede understanding of religious diversity to scholars of comparative religions. Diversity is around us and we must take a long, thoughtful look at what we're seeing and involve ourselves" (in Boys, Lee, and Bass: 259). The use of the adjective Jewish adds an interesting twist to the study of auto(biography). Jewish literature falls into the category of ethnic literatures. I did not even mention this term in class for the very reason that Danahay explains: "to designate texts as 'ethnic' is to risk marginalizing them at the outset." The adjective Jewish seemed to me enough of a descriptor and, considering the local context, marginalizing.

[5] I offered this course with some trepidation because I knew what Braiterman so eloquently stated, "one cannot convey Jewish culture, in a radical Gentile space, without negotiating the dialectics of difference on which multicultural societies rest. The advent of Jewish Studies in a Gentile space (still) entails a tension between trust and suspicion, candor and reserve" (396-97). I was placing myself in much the same position I had before where "self discourse is risky for the teacher" (Gold: 268) resulting in "distress . . . because: (a) my religion . . . [may be] considered uninteresting, (b) my research interests . . . [may not] inspire others, [or] (c) I [might] feel . . . [student comments as] a personal slight" (Cohen Ioannides: 51). The plan was not to disclose myself as a member of the community being studied; however, this was not a fact I was going to hide either. The first week or so, hiding behind my name kept the course fairly academic, but as the discussions became more student inquiry based the "I's" and "we's" fell out of my mouth. However, I took the plunge and discovered some amazing notions among my students.

[6] The reading list was long, almost too long. It included famous and non-famous Jews (see [Table 1](#)). My selection of readings tried to include as many areas of interest as possible, for example:

- Arts: Menuhin, Asimov, Lazarus, Helprin, Tam, Brodsky, Sherman
- Sciences: Sure, Asimov, Wald, Carvalho
- Business: Paster, Sondheimer, Rosen
- Explorers: Carvalho, Jonas, Bogen, Herder, Sondheimer, Sessel
- Education: Arbeitman, Wise
- Sports: Cosell
- Religion: Wise, Jonas

Along with studying the text in chronological order to provide historical context, I added two extra units: one on Marranos because I knew the students would know nothing about them; and one on the Ozarks, our local region, to give them some context. I also tried to get a large selection of types of autobiographies (e.g., letters, diaries, poetry, books) and biographies (e.g., obituaries, encyclopedic entries, books) so that we could examine these as the genres on which the course focuses.

Student Learning in the Course

[7] The following student comments come from the student authored reading journals in which every student was to write at least one paragraph on each reading. The class closed at 40 students and by the end of the semester I had 36 registered for the course. There was 1 Jewish student in class, who dropped after the first month. Additionally, there was one immigrant student. The rest were white Christians. Most of the students took this section because it fit with their schedule; they had no clue what the topic was. Two students took the course specifically because I was teaching it.

[8] I must stop here and point out that during the first week of class I did a lecture that I jokingly refer to as "400 years of Jewish American history in 60 minutes or less." This lecture includes: vocabulary (e.g., kosher, synagogue), culture (e.g., holidays, Sabbath, calendar), and, of course, history. The texts are then used as lessons in how Jews adapted to and adopted from Christian American culture, while also exemplifying the types of (auto)biographies.

[9] Since I discussed American Jewish history and that this course would focus on Jewish Americans, the students then spent their time in their journals writing about the theme – there was almost no discussion on these texts as examples of the various types of genres under discussion. It is obvious that at the beginning of the semester the students expected the authors to write about Judaism or Jewishness and if this was not the case, the piece was irrelevant.

[10] The first class discussion focused on what is a Jewish American. I had the students list Jewish Americans they had heard of, either famous or not. Five could think of no one. Most of the students listed the 4 S's: Seinfeld, Stiller (Ben), Spielberg, and Sandler. The name that caused the most discussion was Kissinger. One student insisted that he was not American, "didn't he have an accent? Wasn't he born somewhere else?" This prompted numerous responses in the defense of Kissinger, although that particular student was not convinced. However, the discussion opened for me the opportunity to explain how one

can become a naturalized citizen (apparently news to at least one student).

[11] Two pieces, the first two incidentally, disturbed the students the most because of their lack of Jewish content and the preconceptions the students had about the course. David Salisbury Franks' letter to President George Washington is really a resume. He is desperate to get a governmental post and uses this letter to highlight his experience as a soldier. Mordecai Myers, another soldier in the American army, also wrote a letter. However, this is a personal one to his son about his military exploits. This focus on the men's military experience and not their religion confused and angered the students. Some believed them to be "ashamed of" or "embarrassed [sic] of" their religion. A few students were very confused as to the point of the readings. One wrote about the two letters: "I'm still confused as to why this class revolves around Judaism, when these two readings don't even discuss the men's religion. . . . So why are they such important Jewish figures?" Another student presumes Jewish authors write exclusively about their religion:

It is difficult to ascertain the importance of this reading or this fellow. It seems that he led his life much like any soldier [sic] would and the fact that he was Jewish does not sensationalize his life's account. Despite some humorous anecdotes, I was disinterested in this reading and believe it to be far from the scope I thought this class would involve.

NOTE: I do not know too much about the history of Judaism, however, I somehow need to believe that their [sic] would be more interesting accounts of how one's religion has impacted one's life, including persecution since that is so evident in history, rather than men whose religion is barely mentioned or perhaps forgotten.

This same student, during class discussion, protested about these readings because "They're JUST people." I spoke with the class about the point that Jews do not write about just Jewish topics, like women do not write about women's topics, men do not write about men's topic, etc. However, that did not change their minds about what should be included in Jewish American texts. One student did understand the point of these two readings, however: "The fact that they were Jewish is only incidental. It did not drive them toward anything and it did not change their was [sic] experience in the least." This was one of the points I was trying to make to the students.

[12] The selections chosen from Carvalho's diary, read only 2 weeks later, provoked much the same response. I carefully chose 6 chapters; 1 in which he discusses that he would not eat a wolf that had been caught even though he had not eaten in 3 days. The students were told that there was a VERY subtle reference to his religion in the text and I wondered if they would remember the dietary laws discussed at the beginning of the semester. One student remarked, "As with most of our reading so far except a few, Carvalho does not mention that he is Jewish. I suppose I understand not wanting to be different than the others, but I do think more of these people we are reading about should be proud of their heritage." However, a few others are beginning to see the point of the course that many of these people are Americans, who happen to be Jewish. For example, "he is a daguerreotypist that happens to be Jewish" and "No mention really of being a Jew. I find that interesting. No one really wants to talk about that so far. I think that I would. I guess for the excursion it really didn't apply anyway."

[13] Joseph Jonas' letter to *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* (the 3rd reading) about the creation of the Jewish community in Cincinnati, Ohio, or his part in the creation, was far more what the students expected. The same student who was extremely negative about Meyers "was very glad to read of a person who was motivated by their religion . . . I am not convinced that this selection is of better quality than past readings, but I do believe it to be more significant." Obviously, to this student importance of the author rests on the adjective "Jewish" rather than the noun "American." Another student actually did what I desired in their journal entry and that was to compare the account to their own experience: "I don't know much of anything about the Jewish culture or religion. . . . However, there are some similarities in the worship service to that of churches that I have attended. They both have choirs, a preacher of some sort, Sunday school, and offering. . . . I found it very unique that at the head of the temple they constructed an ark. Most churches that I know of have a cross." Here we can see how this student has been unable to transcend their view of American houses of worship as churches into a multi-religious view of Americana: some houses of worship are churches.

[14] One selection that worked well for the course was Merriam's biography of Emma Lazarus. I included this piece because of her association with the Statue of Liberty, something the students would know about, and at the third week of class, I wanted the students to read something about women. Imagine my astonishment when I read: "I had never heard of Emma Lazarus before until this class and after reading the biography of her by Eve Merriam. . . . I was astonished to find out that there was a poem enscribed [sic] in [sic] the base of the State of Liberty, but I was even more impressed that the author of

'the New Colossus' [sic] was a Jewish woman" (emphasis added). Faculty can never presume previous knowledge, no matter how basic - a reminder to me. This was not the only student to claim such ignorance, although the other added, "I also learned a lot about American and Jewish history."

[15] The chapters from Wise's autobiography were also effective. Mostly because, as one student said, "this piece is (more than some of the other readings) what I thought we would be reading. It was about a Jewish man and his religious struggles." I chose these chapters for very much that reason. Wise writes about "the hope of Americanizing the Jews and enveloping a greater respect from their new neighbors," which another student says and finds "to be contradictory . . . [that] the strict Jewish beliefs would be compromised" to achieve this.

[16] Yet, when students were presented with a more common personal struggle of adaptation to American culture, the responses were mixed. Calof wrote her autobiography for her children, not for the public. In it she discusses how she rises above family oppression, hers in Russia and her in-laws in North Dakota, to succeed in America. However, one student writes, "Through all this they [the Calofs] made sure to abide by Jewish customs as best as they could. The words, 'why bother?' went through my head as [I] read about events such as the wedding ceremony and finding out whether the meat was kosher or not." Another student found this book to match her stereotype of Jewry: "I've heard that you can describe the background of the Jewish people as the culture of the poor and oppressed. Rachel's story depicts that description perfectly." A third student found this to be "the first book that I have read [in this course] that finally talks about their religion."

[17] In a pluralistic society it is impossible to talk about one's religion, especially when it is a minority religion, without discussing the majority's, as is the case with Mary Antin's description of her life. This seemed to be what the students wanted to read about, or expected to read about: the struggle to be Jewish, the conflict between Jew and Christian. Yet, when confronted by Antin's presentation of her harsh treatment by Christian neighbors, the students were "shocked," a word used by more than one student. The students' lack of religious and historical education was shocking to me.

The way in which she describes the relationship between Jews and Christians is unlike any description I have ever heard. The horrible treatment the Jews received from Christians was very sad. . . . When I was reading this I was ashamed to even be associated with those horrible acts by sharing a belief system, but I was able to close myself off. After the first couple times things were described I began to think of the Christians as people that have a different religion than mine. Obviously the Christian faith is different now than it was then. I don't think any religion would be nearly that cruel to any other religion in these days. I can't help thinking that maybe she exaggerated this part a little. Maybe she saw it as worse than it was, or maybe the Jewish people were equally as guilty, and she just didn't see it.

Since I discussed with students that autobiography is the author's perception of events, the last set of statements surprised me. A few students offered some interesting insights into Antin's work. "She didn't want to understand the Christian religion. Mary Antin only wanted to understand her religion. The Christians acted the same way as Mary Antin. They didn't want to understand or accept the Jewish religion." This is a particularly interesting comment because as Antin progresses in her life, she drops most of her religious involvement and discusses how her father does as well. Perhaps this student explains the best what many of the others were trying to: "It was a perspective on Christians that I am not used to reading. I grew up in the Springfield area and the idea that Christianity is the 'right' religion got planted into my head early. I never really bought into it, but the idea still floats around in my mind. So it was mildly shocking to read how she thought of Christians." One student went so far as to say they felt "guilt about being a Christian" after reading this yet "by the end . . . [they were] filled with a strong sense of what it means to be an American." Finally, there was one student who found the message that Antin was trying to get across in her book "that not every Jewish American is poor and stupid."

[18] By the second half of the semester the students were beginning to see the complexities of what they were reading, the conflicts some of the authors had with their dual identities, and how each coped with this. Boris Bogan's autobiography engaged some students because he "seemed to talk more about being Jewish than some other recent works we have read" and, as another said, "It seems that the article was about him, the Jew; instead of just him as a person." I often discussed in class that (auto)biography focuses on a part of the person, not the whole. So one might read more about the personal than professional life or vice versa. One student thought Bogan's views of American Jewry particularly interesting: "all we've been hearing his [sic] how the Jews are forgetting their heritage to become more American, and here he's saying the immigrants are helping the 'American Jews' stay Jewish." Another student pointed out that Bogan "clarified the whole Jewish Community ideal we have talked about throughout class" when he visited a Jewish family near the textile factory he was working in, who later

let him board at their house.

[19] Kalfus' essay on Allen Sherman, the lyricist, provoked students quite a bit. One student believed Kalfus "was correct in stating the reasons for Mr. Sherman's parody songs. The songs are an expression of pride for Jews to be unique in the dominant Christian culture. I thought the songs were creative, but I didn't catch the humor." However, some students found Sherman to be confusing because "people of 'minority' status can vocalize or listen to the very terms the 'majority,' hinted with negative connotations [sic], uses. . . . Jews, using slanderish phrases, are able to use derogatory words towards other Jews and it is funny. Yet, if I were to echo these words, I would be a bigoted Jew hater." Some students found this essay interesting because "it talked about how Jews were treated and regarded in American culture and society," just "what we have talked about in class" and he "opened people's eyes to a different culture." It seems, though, that some students cannot be satisfied. First, the authors do not talk enough about their Jewishness and now "this Sherman guy seemed to be really obsessed with Jewishness." However, even nine weeks into the semester some students were still befuddled as to the purpose of the course: "I am assuming Sherman was Jewish." Others still had not come to terms with the idea that not all Jews are immigrants: "I can understand why his Jewish comedy is so popular among the Jews. They probably did not relate well with 'American' comedy, because they did not know the American way. They were more familiar with the Jewish way."

[20] These students could not pull themselves away from their cultural context. Reading about Allen Sherman prompted one student to discuss Adam Sandler, an appropriate parallel and a wonderful stretch in the journal for these students. "The whole time I was reading these articles what kept sticking out in my mind was Adam Sandler. He has songs out that came out during Christmas time and they are about Hannukah [sic]." I could not pass the opportunity to attempt to draw the student away from their cultural context and commented: "Oh, I thought they came out around Hanukah time." Unfortunately, there was no response in the next journal, so I have no idea how the student felt about this comment.

[21] In order to expose the students to the various biographical genre and as many Jewish Americans as possible, I included an encyclopedic entry about Mark Helprin. While most felt it to be fairly bland writing (and I agree), the stereotype of Jew as immigrant reappeared. "Helprin was comparing himself with the Jewish-American contemporaries but could he be also comparing himself to other Jewish immigrants [sic]. Could Helprin be saying that the reason he has no introspection is because he doesn't live the life of the ordinary Jewish immigrant [sic]. He hasn't felt the agony of the ordinary immigrant [sic] with the resentment for the old country."

[22] By the last month of the semester, most of the students had begun to understand the "secret" meaning of the course: our stereotypes are just that and Jews are "just people." In response to Cantor's essay about abortion, one student commented: "[some] say that Jews are obsessed with food. I think that is a lie [sic]. I think everyone is obsessed with food." A poem by Hillary Tam, which we discussed if it really was autobiographical, was not what most students wrote about. They "thought it was really interesting to hear from the perspective of someone you don't necessarily think of being Jewish;" she's an Asian convert to Judaism.

[23] It also helped that most of these pieces were modern or local. Jyl Lynn Felman's essay about her relationship with her mother prompted many female students to write about their own, because it "reminded me a lot of the relationship I have with my mother." The obituary of Joseph Sondeheimer, the founder of Muskogee, Oklahoma, inspired one student to comment that they "liked that his personal and public life was a little more important than Jewish life," although I admit I am not sure how one's Jewish life can be separated from one's personal life. A few pointed out the inaccurate language of the author where Sondeheimer is said to belong to "the Jewish Reformed Church." Another student found "the best part of the article was when it mentioned his religion. Most of the biographies and autobiographies I have read, did not mention about the people being Jewish." Apparently, some students did not come as far in their development as others during the course of the semester. In fact, one student definitely clung to those stereotypes. While many students struggled with the self-discovery in Lazo's essay about uncovering his Maranno history (and what Marannos are), this student commented, "I don't think anybody would ever think of Mexicans in a Jewish religion. That just seems like it wouldn't match." Yet they continue with: "My best friend is Jewish. He looks, acts, and thinks just like me. There isn't a difference in him except that he is from a Jewish background." This comment came despite our discussions of religion and ethics, abortion, marriage, women's rights, etc.

[24] Herder's diary about pioneering a Jewish communal farm in the Ozarks inspired a student who "love[s] reading other people's diaries." She was very curious about "how the family practiced religion. They were not very religious and wanted to fit in but still practice Judaism at the same time." The idea of reform and secular Jews is a hard concept for Christians to understand. However, Herder's own

descriptions do not make this easy. More than one student asked about Herder's use of the word Easter to describe a springtime celebration. Another student read through the words and commented, "Perhaps Herder meant that they were celebrating Passover which is at the same time as Easter. But this seems like an awful [sic] big mistake." This last student was one of the few who read the comments and notes attached to the readings.

Conclusion

[25] Imagine my surprise, after spending a semester trying to teach these students that not all Jews write about being Jewish, at finding the following letter in *Reform Judaism*:

When I was a youngster, my mother told me about the great Jewish songwriters. If they were so great, I asked her, then why didn't they ever compose a song about Passover or Hanukkah? Had they done so, my self-esteem in the antisemitic 1930s would have been given a boost.

Your article "Sultans of Song" (winter 2002) didn't make me feel any different than I did back in the '30s. I still believe a brave songwriter would have been preferable to a great one (Schick).

The preconceptions that I had spent 16 weeks trying to alter are also Jewish. Perhaps Schick needs to read Kalfus' essay on Sherman because "He showed that the Jews weren't so different. He made them look like everyday people doing everyday things, which was the truth."

[26] Jacob Neusner comments in his essay, *Jewish Learning and the New Humanities*, that studying "American Judaism teaches us about what happens to Judaism in America . . . what that means is not entirely clear. It can mean we learn much about America, with Judaism the constant. Or it can mean we learn something about the modernization of Judaism, with America the constant" (45). This idea applies as well to the study of American Jews. We can learn about America, with Jews as the constant, or Jews, with America as the constant. In this course, I tried both. We studied America through the eyes of Jews to see how a different, and until recently overlooked, ethnic group perceives the world and we examined how the American Christian culture affects Jews both personally and culturally. In many ways, I tried to do what Arthur Rosen, a Jew transplanted to the Ozarks who became the unofficial spokesman for the local Jewish community, did his whole life as one student pointed out: "[He] venture[d] into people's non-Jewish and probably prejudiced minds to teach them about Jews."

[27] Did I succeed? Did I change students' view of America and themselves? The results of the course evaluation show they did change. Five of the twenty-five questions relate to this question of change. Of the 28 students who completed the evaluation, over 64 percent believe their "ability to think objectively about a variety of beliefs, attitudes and values" has been improved. Sixty percent have "broadened . . . [their] intellectual interests" and "increased . . . [their] willingness to change and learn new things." Over 71 percent have "increased . . . [their] willingness to consider opposing points of view." Perhaps most impressive of all is that 75 percent believe they have "increased . . . [their] awareness of global and international issues/events."

[28] Did I show students that Jews are people too? For at least two students, yes. They wrote in their journals:

This class has touched me in such a way that I will never, and I mean that, look at a Jew the same way again. . . . This class has shed a positive light on my perception of what Jews are, and on the Jewish experience and way of life as a whole. Don't get me wrong, I really didn't have a negative picture of Jewish people; however, I've never really seen any up close and personal.

I would like to take this chance to thank you for the course this semester. . . . I definitely have learned a lot of things from your class and I will say that my eyes have been opened wider because of the contents that we have poured through. I never have been a big reader but for the first time in my life, I am beginning to enjoy that aspect of living.

There is nothing more inspiring to a teacher than knowing you have touched at least one student. I know that I have changed 28. This course achieved its purpose by helping students cross their cultural barriers.

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