

A Pioneering Work

**David R. Parsons on
The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South
by Eli N. Evans**

Billed as an "instant classic" when originally published in 1973, *The Provincials* is considered the first genuine attempt to chronicle and interpret the development of Jewish life in the American South. Interspersed with the personal recollections of the author, a native Jewish Southerner, the book's first edition has remained the authoritative source on this subject for nearly two generations, prompting an updated edition with four added chapters and a new photograph section.

Eli N. Evans, a skillful storyteller, initially recounts his early years growing up in the tobacco town of Durham, North Carolina during the civil rights struggle that transformed the South. His father was elected as Durham's first Jewish mayor in 1951 and was returned to office five more times by a racially divided electorate that valued his liberal Jewish sensibility, as he helped steer the city away from the violent discord besetting so many other Southern towns.

Evoking both the charms of the South and the hatreds and tensions that marred it, Evans focuses on a central question: how had Southern Jews navigated their way between the white Christian majority and the oppressed black minority for over three hundred years? To answer it, he traces the emergence of a unique "Southern Jewish consciousness" that was able to view both Confederate general Robert E. Lee and Dr. Martin Luther King as sympathetic, Moses-like figures. A Welcoming Environment

Based on his own family's story as well as extensive interviews, historical research, and the localized studies and limited surveys then available, the author assesses that on the whole Jews have felt welcome in what came to be known as the Bible Belt. They found acceptance as part of the white race while often serving as the only merchants willing to treat

blacks fairly and with compassion for their impoverished condition.

There were, of course, exceptions in the form of anti-Semitic incidents. In one case, Union general and future president Ulysses S. Grant issued a military command - soon rescinded - that all Jews be driven from the defeated state of Tennessee. This may have been the only time America flirted with the idea of an expulsion of Jews.

Evans also discusses his efforts to maintain his Jewishness under the constant challenge of a predominantly Christian culture. He notes that, in this region marked by strong religiosity, many Protestants showed greater respect for Judaism than Jews had experienced elsewhere in the Diaspora. For Evans, the "black Jesus" he encountered in "colored" churches usually lacked the intimidating quality of the "white Jesus" of the Anglo-Saxon churches. Sometimes his chapter on resisting proselytism descends into mockery. Nevertheless, Evans provides unusually candid insights into Jewish thinking about Jesus.

The book's conversational prose and interweaving of family memoirs with a broader historical narrative give it a special appeal, though it suffers somewhat from a lack of clear chronological or thematic order. A pioneering work, *The Provincials* inspired a new area of scholarship on Jews in the South. The revised version adds little to this growing body of work. Evans continues, however, the story of his own family with lyrical power, including the deaths of his father and mother, a well-known Hadassah activist.

As a whole, the book makes clear why Jewish communities are flourishing today in Southern soil.

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