



Branches

News From the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice University

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An Open Book: Glimpses Into the Lives of Early Jewish Students at Rice

By Melissa Kean

The earliest students at the Rice Institute were a hardy and enterprising bunch. Free to build a campus culture from scratch and with minimal adult supervision, they proceeded with a friendly, open, and eager spirit of self-reliance and democracy.

They quickly adapted to the university's strict academic requirements and began creating the organizations that still form the heart of student life today: the band, the Thresher, the Campanile, and all of the various social and intellectual clubs and organizations.

From the very first class that en-

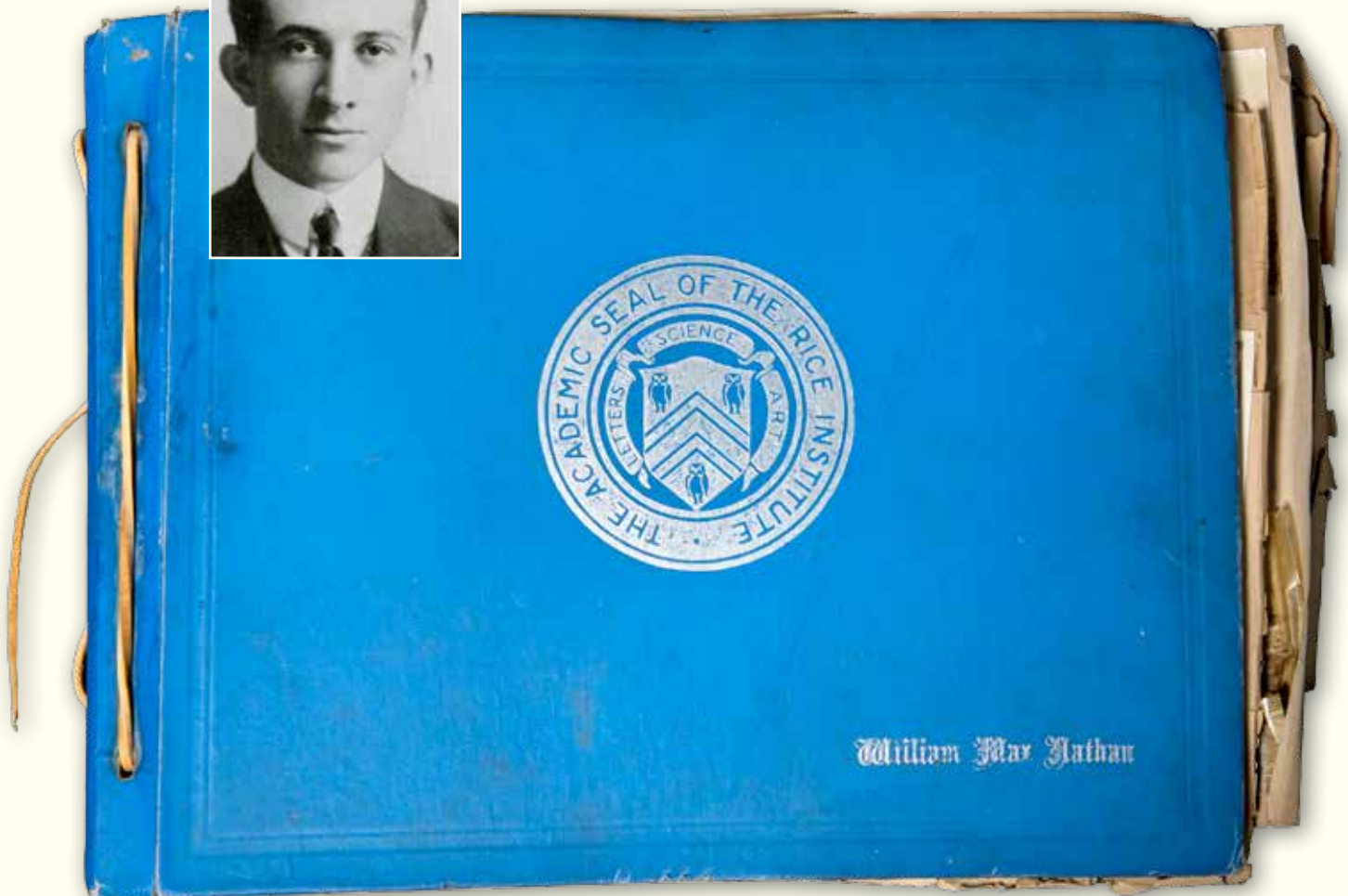
tered in 1912, Jewish students have been a part of this community. One of the most surprising things about the early Rice Institute is that in an era when private colleges were overwhelmingly denominational, it was secular. William Marsh Rice seems to have picked up this idea from the charter of Girard

College in Philadelphia, which was one of his early models for the Institute and which completely banned religious observations from its campus. Outside of Tulane, which was unusual in many respects because of its location in New Orleans, it's hard to think of another private college or university in the South that so readily admitted Jewish students into the heart of the campus life. Still, there is no question that the early Rice Institute, while carefully nonsectarian, was — like the rest of Houston — culturally Christian. The vast majority of students and faculty were Protestant society, which meant



Left: William Max Nathan in a 1916 Campanille photo.

Below: From the archives of Rice's Woodson Research Center — the scrapbook of William Max Nathan, a member of the first class of 1916.



that while Jewish students participated freely in the intellectual and public life of the Institute, there were lines drawn in private. This produced a sometimes complicated set of relationships, with Jewish students both part of and separate from the broader student community. In this rather ambiguous environment, Rice's earliest Jewish students banded together to create avenues for fellowship that were uniquely their own.

We are fortunate to have in Rice's Woodson Research Center (WRC) a rich resource that sheds light on the experiences of those early Jewish students both on campus and in the larger Jewish community of Houston. Up on a shelf in the back room of the archives, nestled among our collection of early student scrapbooks is one

We are fortunate to have in Rice's Woodson Research Center a rich resource that sheds light on the experiences of those early Jewish students both on campus and in the larger Jewish community of Houston.

particular book whose blue cover is jauntily emblazoned "William Max Nathan." A member of the first class of 1916, Nathan was the business manager for the first Campanile, a member of the Debate Society, vice president of the senior class, a member of the Honor Council and one of the founders of the

Rice chapter of the Menorah Society. He was also a careful saver of ephemera — his scrapbook is packed with random bits and pieces of life at Rice and around town in the mid- to late-teens. Among other things there are invitations, tickets, dance cards, receipts, exam papers, photographs, news clippings, programs and report cards. Some of these items are generically "Rice" but many others are particular to the social and intellectual life of the Jewish students.

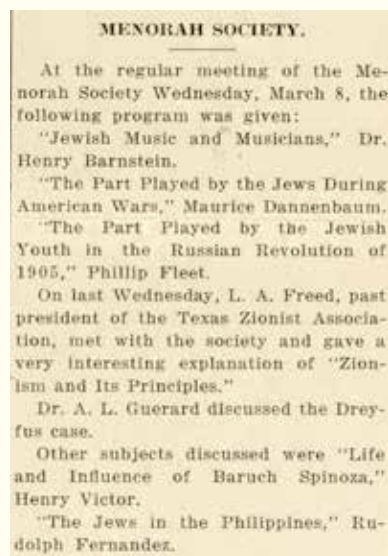
One of the most important groups for these students was the Menorah Society, a chapter of the Intercollegiate Menorah Association, which was organized at Rice in October 1915 with William Nathan as its first president. The aims of the society were less specifically religious than those of campus Christian groups, which often provided de-

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Above: Will Nathan (left) is next to Maurice Dannenbaum '19. Both Nathan and Dannenbaum were from Houston families, although Nathan was born in Navasota. At right is Philip Fleet, who traveled a somewhat farther distance to reach the Rice Institute. He was a native of Berdichev in what was then Russia, now Ukraine. Already a graduate of the gymnasium at Vilnius when his family reached Fort Worth, Fleet entered Rice with such strong academic skills that he was granted credit for several courses by examination, a rare feat in those days.



nominational services to their student members. Rather, the stated goals of the Menorah Society were cultural and intellectual: "To spread the knowledge of Jewish ideals and culture among not only Jewish students but also to all who are interested in this line of study." The society also served more purely social needs, holding frequent receptions, outings and parties. Still, they were a serious group, spending most of their time preparing and hearing talks on Jewish history, literature and art, and current Jewish problems. Speakers came from the ranks of Rice faculty members, local rabbis, the students themselves and successful Jewish professionals. The Rice library eagerly cooperated in a program of acquiring books on Jewish topics to help them in the preparation of the talks.

Nathan's scrapbook also holds a great deal of evidence of the social life of young Jewish Houstonians after the turn of the century. They regularly attended religious events such as confirmation services as well as informal gatherings. An especially important social hub was the Concordia Club, a prominent Jewish literary and social organization. Organized in 1901, the club was housed in a handsome and well-appointed building and held an annual debutante ball as well as a grand New Year's Eve celebration in addition to a regular schedule of dances, parties and dinners.

After he graduated from Rice in 1916, Nathan enrolled in Harvard's law school but soon left to join the military during World War I. When the war was over he came back to Texas and earned

his law degree from the University of Texas College of Law in 1921. He spent the rest of his life in Houston, devoting time to his family, a successful law practice and active participation in the city's Jewish community. He was one of the founders of the Congregation Emanu El in 1943 and served as the first secretary of its board. Nathan remained steadfastly devoted to Rice for his entire life. A stalwart of the Association of Rice Alumni, he worked at fundraising and the general promotion of the Institute and he proudly spoke at Rice's first-ever Golden Anniversary Reunion in 1962. Even today his legacy and relationship to the university lives quietly on — many books in Fondren Library's Judaica Collection bear a bookplate with his name.

During the celebration of Rice's

This photograph, taken during the 1915–16 school year, shows William Nathan with several of the Jewish girls who studied at Rice that year. Judging from their location near the front gate and their arms full of books, they likely have just arrived together on the streetcar that brought students from town to campus.

At far left is Elizabeth Morgenstern '19, whose family arrived in Houston from Brooklyn. The young woman second from left is Zillah Longfellow Willner '17, vice president of the Menorah Society from 1915 until she graduated in 1917. Zillah was the daughter of Rabbi Wolff Willner, who served Houston's Orthodox Congregation Adath Yeshurun from 1907 until 1924. Rabbi Willner, himself a graduate of Yale, (B.A. 1885 and an M.A. in Oriental languages in 1887) was a strong supporter of higher education for women.

Next to Zillah is Fannie Eldridge '19 who came to Rice from Texarkana. On Nathan's right is Rose Levin '19. Rose grew up in Brenham, which was then home to a large Jewish population. In Houston, Rose lived with the family of Rabbi Willner and went back and forth from home to campus with Zillah on the streetcar.

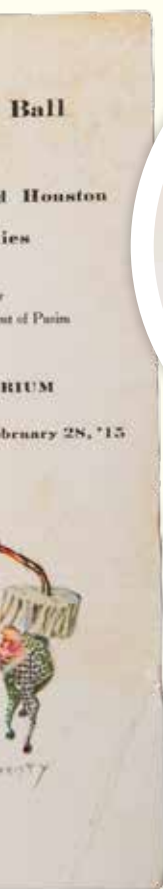


One of the most interesting items in the collection is this invitation to the Purim Ball in 1915, with a surprising attachment pinned inside.



Centennial in 2012, two of William Nathan's grandchildren visited Woodson Research Center and spent some time looking through his scrapbook and helping us puzzle out some minor mysteries. It would be hard to overstate the importance of memorabilia like this is understanding the history of the university and the Jewish community in Houston. ■

If you have something that would help this effort, please contact Melissa Kean at kean@rice.edu. I'd love to talk to you!



An invitation to the Leap Year Ball at the Concordia Club, a prominent Jewish literary and social organization.

One of the most unusual things in William Nathan's scrapbook is a photograph taken 24 years after he graduated. It captures a remarkable group at the 1940 commencement ceremony: (left to right) Edmund M. Dupree, the first student to enroll at the Rice Institute; Capt. James A. Baker, the first chairman of the Rice board; Charles Nathan, the first child of an alumnus to graduate from Rice; and his father, William Max Nathan, one of the first students to graduate from Rice with distinction. (Charles Nathan graduated with distinction as well.)

Like his father, Charles Nathan attended San Jacinto High School in Houston, where he was an outstanding student (and the state Latin champ in 1933). After he left Rice, he studied chemistry at the University of Pittsburgh, earning his Ph.D. in 1948. He served in the Navy during World War II, participating in the atomic bomb test at Bikini Atoll in 1946. After the war, he worked for many years as a chemical engineer in industrial laboratories, then became a professor of petroleum engineering at New Mexico Tech. He too displayed a deep commitment to the life of the Jewish community everywhere he lived. After he retired in 1989, he returned to Houston, where he died in 2001.

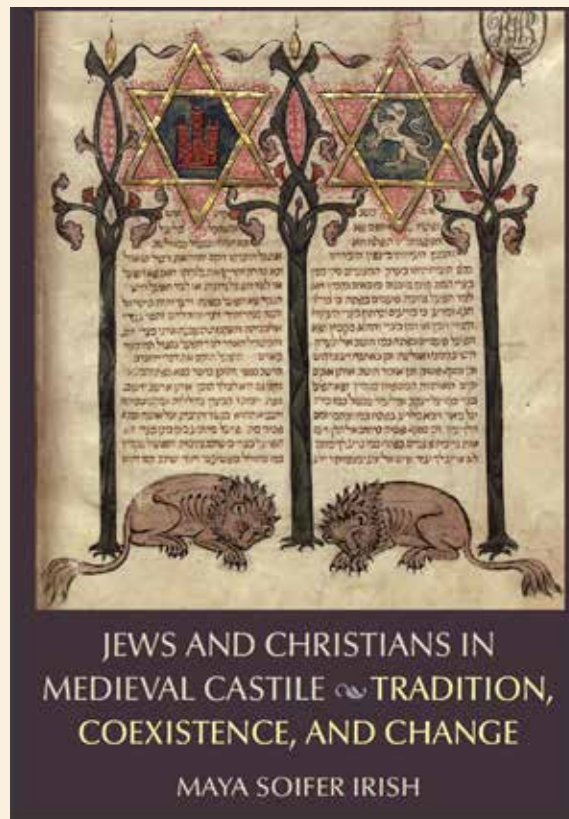
Book Excerpt: 'Jews and Christians in Medieval Castile: Tradition, Coexistence and Change'

by **Maya Soifer Irish, Assistant Professor of History**

Surveying the state of Jewish-Christian relations along the Camino de Santiago at the end of the Middle Ages, Francisco Cantera Burgos, renowned scholar of Castilian Jews, tries to imagine what it was like for the pilgrims from northern Europe to encounter Castilian interfaith coexistence first-hand. He envisions the pilgrims experiencing a strong culture shock: "How greatly would such state of toleration between Christians, Jews, and *conversos* surprise the foreign pilgrims in whose own countries it had become highly unusual!" Cantera's enthusiasm is contagious, but his conjecture about the pilgrims' reaction is probably wrong. Rather than contemplate the wonders of the Jews' presence in Castile at the time they had been expelled from much of northern Europe, a pilgrim from abroad would be too focused on the rigors of the journey to pay such matters much attention. The section of the Camino running through the Northern Castilian plateau could put a traveler's mental and physical health to a severe test. As one modern study of the medieval pilgrimage to Compostela puts it, "those long, arid stretches and rocky defiles" seemed "not only metaphorically a 'return to the desert' but literally such." Seemingly endless, harsh winters and short, hot summers provided an appropriate stage for the journey "to the end of the world." Northern Castilian meseta was a barren and forbidding land. If the pilgrims were indeed surprised by the Jews' presence, it was probably because they were wondering why the Jews came here at all.

And yet the Jews came, in fairly large numbers, to settle in this region and form numerous *aljamas* [communities] along this stretch of the Camino, from Logroño (the Rioja) to Astorga (León). Many of them came from al-Andalus, where the intolerant policies of the

Almoravids in the late eleventh century, and of the Almohads in the second half of the twelfth century made the distant northern Castilian lands seem like a safe haven for refugees. An economic and urban boom along the Camino in the early twelfth century provided another strong incentive. The Camino beckoned to the Jews, even if they were not destined to achieve much success in the region's long-distance trade. It is telling that



most of the largest Castilian-Leonese *juderías* [Jewish settlements] north of Duero – in Burgos, Carrión, León, Sahagún, Nájera, and Logroño, with the notable exceptions of Palencia and (farther south) Valladolid – were located directly on the Camino. Two other large and prosperous *juderías* – in Briviesca and Pancorbo – lay on a subsidiary route that ran from Vitoria to Burgos. It would not be an exaggeration to say that without the Camino and a variety of other roads, major and secondary, Jewish life in the region would be unimaginable.

The origins of Jewish settlement near the Camino in Northern Castile and León are obscure. The earliest evidence indicates that Jews were already present in the Burgos area during the reign of Fernán González, count of Castile (923-970), and possessed stable settlements during the dominion over Castile of Sancho III Garcés, king of Navarre (1000-1035). Documentation from León indicates the Jews' presence there in the tenth century. The 1017 *fuero* [charter] granted by Alfonso V to the city of León mentions Jews in a way that suggests the existence of a Jewish community in the city. Significantly, some of the earliest evidence comes from sources that describe violent attacks on Jews. According to the *fuero* of Castrojeriz, upon the death of Sancho III in 1035, some "men" from the castle rose up in rebellion and killed four royal officials and sixty Jews at the nearby royal palace in Mercatello. The others were promptly removed to the castle. In the first two decades of the twelfth century, assaults on Jews occurred in several Castilian towns. In 1110 the walled *judería* in Toledo suffered an attack, with a number of Jews killed and some houses looted. Riots that simultaneously targeted royal property and the Jews occurred shortly thereafter in the diocese of Palencia. In 1127 king Alfonso VII issued a pardon to the inhabitants of Saldaña, Cea, Carrión, Cisneros, and several other towns, forgiving the perpetrators for killing Jews and taking their property, as well as for robbing the royal palaces and burning the king's hunting grounds. He accepted a fine of two silver coins from each perpetrator's household. The underlying causes of these events are difficult to ascertain. Religious hostility as well as dynastic struggles, temporary setbacks to the reconquest, and general political instability of these years might have contributed to outbursts of violence against Jews. ■

Donor Spotlight: Melvin and Frieda Dow

By **Melissa Weininger, Anna Smith Fine Senior Lecturer in Jewish Studies**

For Melvin and Frieda Dow, their affiliation with Rice is a family affair: three generations of Dows have attended Rice. Melvin's father studied at Rice when part of Main Street was still unpaved and missing the bus meant slogging through the mud in bare feet to campus. Melvin graduated in the class of 1948, and the Dows' son, David, who also is the Rorschach Visiting Professor in the history department, graduated in 1981.

The Dows also are, in their words, "committed to Jewish education in its many forms." They see their support of education as connected to Jewish tradition. "Jewish tradition has the highest respect for teachers," Melvin and Frieda said. "It's why Moses is not referred to as Moses the liberator or Moses the lawgiver but *Moshe Rabbenu*, Moses our teacher. In our tradition, we're taught to respect teachers."

In fact, education is, in a sense, the family business. The Dows have five sons, and all of them are professional educators or involved in education administration and policy. Frieda herself seldom misses a Jewish educational program

in the community. An avid reader, she is simultaneously in three book clubs.

These deep personal connections to Rice, teaching, education and the Jewish community make the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice a natural fit for their support. "We think that the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice is invaluable and we are in favor of all the support the community can give it," the Dows said.

Their strong commitment to the program led Melvin and Frieda to host an early gathering in support of the new Program in Jewish Studies at Rice in 2009. They wanted to spread the word in the wider Houston Jewish community about the new program. And since its inception, Melvin has served on the program's advisory board.

In particular, the broad appeal of Jewish studies courses at Rice reinforces the Dows' support for the program. The Dows noted, "we treasure the opportunity to support the Program in Jewish Studies at Rice, where both Jewish and non-Jewish students can study the rich tradition of Jewish religious thought, Jewish history and Jewish culture in the academic environment of a world-class university." ■



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