



## Yetta Kohn's Legacy

by Sharon Fried



his is the story of Yetta (Goldsmith) Kohn, a pioneering German-Jewish woman in New Mexico who lived by the enduring values of hard work and

helping others. Yetta had an acute business sense, placed as high an importance on cultural pursuits as she did on having a good time, and, from all reports, was an exceptional mother and community organizer.

Notably, Yetta had no formal education and no apparent parental nurturing or direction after the age of ten, but she met every challenge with faith and determination. Yet words such as these do little to capture the soul of this remarkable woman. What made Yetta stand out is that she did not let life's challenges, which included tragedy, keep her from forging ahead and paving a road that outlived her and made a lasting mark on the landscape of east-central New Mexico.

Yetta Louise Goldsmith was born in Bavaria on March 9, 1843. She came to America at the age of ten. While she traveled with three family members who

were old enough to be her parents (one of them old enough to be her grandparent), no record of any of them has been found since. She traveled to America via Le Havre, France, arriving in New York aboard the *William Tell*. The next official record of Yetta's whereabouts is



*Yetta Kohn and her family in Denver, 1899. Standing, left to right: Howard, Belle, George; seated: Charles, Yetta, Stanley (Belle's son), Albert Calisch (Belle's husband).*

the 1860 federal census, which shows her living in the Kennedy household in Leavenworth, Kansas. She was seventeen years old and may have been caring for the two Kennedy children.

Yetta married Samuel Kohn in Leavenworth in about 1860, probably after the census enumeration in June, traveling soon afterward with him to Cherry Creek (Denver). They made the 600-mile trip in a covered wagon at the time of the Colorado gold rush. While we don't know how the young couple made their living in Denver, family oral history has it that after a few years, Samuel declared, "Cattle do not do well here; we're going back to Leavenworth." It was probably after a flood wiped out Cherry Creek in May 1864 that Samuel made his decision. While in Denver, Yetta and Samuel

had their first two children, Howard and George.

Returning to Kansas for four or five years, Samuel went into the wool and hide business with a partner, Jacob Weil, while Yetta had three more children. Born about

two years apart, the first two children died within a few months. The third, Belle, arrived in December 1868. Soon afterward, the family set out on their next venture, traveling 800 miles by stagecoach or oxcart via the Santa Fe Trail to Las Vegas, New Mexico.

In Las Vegas, Yetta worked as a seamstress while Samuel ran another wool and hide store on the plaza. Notably, Yetta was the only wife or widow who had a vocation other than homemaker on the 1870 federal census, and was one of just a handful who did on the 1880 federal census (as reported by Henry Tobias in *The History of the Jews in New Mexico*). In 1871, she

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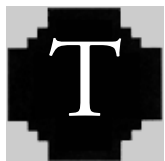
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**Have you renewed your membership for 2009?**

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## Message from President Noel Pugach



The New Mexico Jewish Historical Society just completed a very good year. It was a year filled with productive initiatives, successful activities, and exciting programs. I credit the Society's past presidents and board members for putting our organization on a stable and firm foundation when I assumed the presidency in June. At the same time there remain a few areas that we can improve upon.

Major highlights of 2008 included the "Rock and Roll Nostalgia Trip," a presentation by legendary photographer Baron Wolman in Albuquerque on August 24. "Sephardic Voices" filled the Lensic Theater in Santa Fe on October 16 with crypto-Jewish songs, poetry, and play readings. The next weekend in El Paso, the Society held its first joint conference with the Texas Jewish Historical Society October 24 - 26.

Last April, a capacity audience attended the film showing and discussion of "The Jew and the Lotus" at the Santa Fe Film Center. However, our efforts to run a summer film series were less successful and we are evaluating the outcome. Your comments and observations will be valuable as we plan events for 2009.

Another Society event that took place in November was a genealogy workshop in Santa Fe, organized by Dorothy Amsden. If you missed that one, another is scheduled in Taos next May. Other Society activities included the cleanup of the Montefiore Cem-

etry in Las Vegas last spring. The Labor Day Weekend book sale at Wild Oats in Santa Fe was splendidly organized and run by Sheila Gershen and Shirley Jacobson. This annual book sale is a very important fundraiser for the Society, and this year proved most successful.

We are extremely proud of the past year's four excellent issues of *Legacy*, thanks to our hard-working editor Dorothy Amsden. *Legacy* is a vital link to our membership and general community that provides information on Society activities and future programs. It has also become an important vehicle for reporting on the rich history of New Mexico Jewry. This year *Legacy* has published accounts of significant families written by their descendants as well as Helen Horwitz's delightful reminiscences of growing up Jewish in Albuquerque.

In this issue of *Legacy*, I would like to draw your attention to the lead story by Sharon Fried about the prominent Kohn-Bidegain ranching family. Ms. Fried, a new contributor to *Legacy*, reported on some of her findings at the Joint Conference in El Paso. Another fascinating article is by playwright Robert Benjamin, a retired Los Alamos scientist, who discusses his new play "Parted Waters" about a present-day Hispanic family with crypto-Jewish heritage. I am sure you will find much to garner your attention in all the articles in this issue.



NMJHS President Noel Pugach.

If you have not already renewed your membership in the Society for 2009, please do so as soon as possible. Our work depends on your support. We also want to hear from you — your comments, ideas, and criticism. Please email them to me at npugach@unm.edu, and I will consider them carefully.

Consider asking your friends and family members to join the Society or give them a gift membership. I also invite you to work on our various committees. They range from program planning, films, and membership to the newsletter and public relations. We welcome your skills and talents.

The Jewish Federation of New Mexico will hold its annual fundraising campaign in January. I urge you to respond generously when you are contacted by a solicitor. Your financial support is essential to carry on the work of many worthy and vital community agencies, including our own New Mexico Jewish Historical Society.

Finally, I wish you a very healthy, happy, and rewarding New Year. With your participation, encouragement, and financial support, we can look forward to another successful and productive year for the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society. ✧

## Roundup – Jewish Military Service

by Naomi Sandweiss



My grandfather, Ben Feinstein, was one of thousands of Jewish soldiers to serve in the U.S. military during the First World War. As I read his letters home from the European front, I couldn't help but wonder: What was it like to be a Jewish soldier in the American military?

Of course, Jews served as military personnel in all U.S. wars and conflicts. As far back

as the Revolutionary War, Jews received military honors and promotions. Salmon Bush (1753 - 1796), a Philadelphian, was wounded at the Battle of Brandywine, captured by the British, and later returned to the Americans from whom he received a commendation and promotion.

Here in New Mexico, Jewish resident Captain Louis Felsenthal (1832 - 1909) organized a company of Union volunteers to fight in the Battle of Valverde, the first

Civil War Battle in the New Mexico Territory. Jewish Corporals Jacob Levy and Simon Rothschild died in the battle and are buried in Santa Fe's National Cemetery.

According to some reports, about 5,000 Jewish American soldiers served with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders in the Spanish-American War, including Jews from the New Mexico Territory. These Jewish volunteers worshiped freely, and

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# The Making of *Parted Waters* – A new stage-play about crypto-Judaism in New Mexico

by Robert F. Benjamin

**P***arted Waters*, a contemporary drama commissioned by the Arizona Jewish Theatre Company, explores the conflict between personal and cultural identity experienced by the crypto-Jewish community of the Southwest. Clashes about Jewish identity, assimilation, and community propel three generations of Hispanics as they grapple with their ancestry.

The making of *Parted Waters* started with comforting the sick and having another script turned down. While visiting the Phoenix area regularly to attend to my father during his long illness, I was promoting another of my plays, *Time Enough*. During spring 2007, Janet Arnold, producing director of the Arizona Jewish Theatre Company, read it and responded, “I like the writing and story, but it’s not right for my audience. However, I’m looking for a compelling drama about a subject of growing popularity – the crypto-Jews of the Southwest. Because you’re from New Mexico, maybe you could . . . .” That’s music to a playwright’s ears – the hopeful tintinnabulation of a commissioned play.

I submitted a plot sketch several weeks later, and *Parted Waters* was conceived. Janet encouraged me to go for it. As I embarked on the research I told my wife about this new project. She laughed and said, “You don’t know anything about crypto-Judaism.” That wasn’t entirely true.

My research began with *To The Ends of the Earth* by Stanley Hordes and conversations with him. His authoritative book enabled me to weave the fictional story into a believable fabric. Then I attended the 2007 Conference of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies. No shortage of conflict and theatrical material there! Attendees were generous with their stories and suggestions. I realized that Janet’s instinct was correct – recent articles and books about historical crypto-Judaism have apparently created interest in how modern-day descendants react to discovering their hidden heritage.

I began to fashion the script into a play that will have its world premiere in March, 2009 in Phoenix. While crypto-Judaism is the main theme, this drama also explores conflict surrounding assimilation, anti-Semitism, and cross-cultural romance.

“Crypto-Judaism” can refer to different historical circumstances of hidden Jewish identity. *Parted Waters* focuses on the descendants of *conversos* who left Spain and its territories after the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. They settled in Mexico, then, when the Holy Office of the Inquisition came to Mexico, they fled to the northern frontier of New Spain (now the American Southwest). These hidden Jews were cut off from mainstream Judaism for centuries, yet they passed Jewish traditions from generation to generation while maintaining their secret from their neighbors and sometimes themselves.

In *Parted Waters*, three generations of Hispanics struggle with their crypto-Jewish ancestry. Reynaldo, the grandfather, embraces his ancestry. His son, Javier, knows about his roots, but rejects them. His rejection includes blocking Reynaldo from passing the tradition to Miguel, Javier’s son and Reynaldo’s grandson.

When Miguel runs for political office, Reynaldo urges Javier to disclose the family secret, but he refuses, leaving Miguel ignorant of his *converso* heritage. Miguel’s campaign manager is Rachel, attractive and Jewish, who is well acquainted with Miguel’s political opponent. When Miguel ignores Rachel’s advice and makes a blunder during a town hall debate, Javier is forced to reveal the family secret. Miguel is stunned and furious. As Miguel learns the significance of his ancestry

and misinterprets his father’s motivation despite Reynaldo’s protest, an intense quarrel breaks out that nearly kills one of them.

At one level, the play is about passing the legacy from grandfather to grandson over the objection of the middle generation.

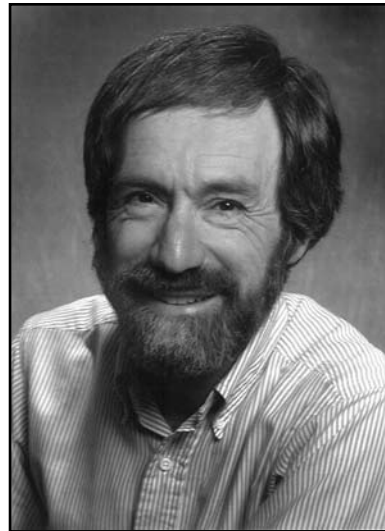
At another level, the play explores differences in how people relate to their religious experiences. Reynaldo finds solace and inspiration in Jewish beliefs, yet he attends Catholic Church and practices its rituals.

Javier is a devout Catholic who cannot appreciate the significance of crypto-Judaism to his father. Javier strives to assimilate into mainstream America, much to the disappointment of his father. Although

initially ignorant of his Jewish ancestry, Miguel is attracted to Jewish practices and to Rachel. The conflict among these perspectives of religion forms the basis of this piquant drama set in New Mexico.

The play also speaks to personal and ethnic identity in the context of modern American culture. Reynaldo has lived in a fairly isolated farming community. Javier’s desire to assimilate has forced him to make decisions that Reynaldo never confronted. Miguel’s religious identity has been uncontested for thirty years, but the revelation of his Jewish heritage sends him into a precarious tailspin.

Play development occurs in stages: first there is a draft script, then script reviews, and then public readings by actors. Development of *Parted Waters* included five staged readings in 2008: February at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Albuquerque; June at “Friday Night Footlights” at the Scottsdale Center for the Performing Arts; August at the Annual  
(continued on p. 4)



Robert Benjamin, playwright.

**The Making of *Parted Waters*** (continued from p. 3)

Conference of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies in Phoenix; September at an Elderhostel and then at the Vortex Theater, both in Albuquerque.

Audiences attending these readings were consistently enthusiastic about the play. During post-show discussions, audience members often argued with each other about the relationships among Reynaldo, Javier, and Miguel, and about which is the main character. They also questioned the budding romance of Miguel and Rachel, and they enjoyed the humor, especially Reynaldo as the Hispanic Tevye. Their enthusiasm suggests that *Parted Waters* will become popular, and their feedback has been enormously useful in helping me shape the play that premieres next March.

I'm often asked about why I've written this play. I view a commissioned play as an honor and wonderful opportunity. Although I am neither Sephardic nor crypto-Jewish, I am fascinated with the plight of *conversos* who chose to leave Spain over five hundred years ago. I'm also intrigued about how people – including family, friends, and myself – relate to our Jewish heritage within the context of today's culture. Writing about crypto-Judaism has taught me how people relate to being Jewish. In addition, I had been searching for a good script idea about three generations, including a wise and whimsical elder, when the *Parted Waters* commission came my way.

The world premiere of *Parted Waters* opens at the Arizona Jewish Theater Company on Saturday, March 14, 2009. Performances are at the Center for the Performing Arts at the Paradise Valley Community College. The play runs for three weekends, closing on Sunday, March 29. For the benefit of audience members wishing to discuss the play, the performances on March 14 and 15 will feature post-show talk-back discussions with producer, director, cast, and playwright. Details and ticket information are available at [www.azjewishtheatre.org](http://www.azjewishtheatre.org) and by phoning 602-264-0402.

*Fifteen plays by Robert F. Benjamin have been produced on stage and tour. En route to becoming a playwright, Robert was a distinguished experimental physicist at Los Alamos National Laboratory for over thirty years. He was also a science educator and senior author of Spills and Ripples, the first-ever children's book about fluid instabilities.*

*Robert grew up in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, where he acquired his love of theater and science. He and his wife, Susan, met while undergraduates at Cornell University. After Robert's graduate work at MIT, they moved to Los Alamos in 1973 where they raised their two children. ☆*

**Excerpt from *Parted Waters***

The morning after a political debate, Reynaldo (Hispanic, age 70) talks with his son, Javier (50), and grandson, Miguel (30), who is running for public office.

REYNALDO. There's more.

MIGUEL *looks puzzled*.

REYNALDO. It's not just Phyllis Goldstein. When you insult one Jew, you offend all Jews and their ancestors.

MIGUEL. But there are only a handful in my district.

JAVIER. I should have told you. I never thought it would be important. I never imagined . . .

MIGUEL. What?

REYNALDO. Phyllis Goldstein's parents moved to the U.S. to escape the Nazis. Long ago, others came to escape the Inquisition. They were forced to become Catholic. But some remained secretly Jewish. *Judíos escondidos*. Hidden Jews. Crypto-Jews.

My father told me that these hidden Jews would teach their children and grandchildren about the commandments in the Old Testament. But it was unsafe to practice this tradition publicly. So they did rituals in secret with the hope that passing the legacy from one generation to the next might someday lead to children who would return to the Jewish tradition.

JAVIER. They refused to let go of the past, even though their lives would be far better without such secrets.

MIGUEL. You believe there are many crypto-Jews in our community?

JAVIER. (*looking at REYNALDO*) It's hard to count people who hide their identity.

REYNALDO (*pulls from his pocket an old mezuzah.*) My grandfather gave this to me and he would want you to have it now.

MIGUEL *accepts it, puzzled*.

REYNALDO. It's a mezuzah. It contains a scripture that long ago would be hidden in the door jamb or in a crucifix attached to the door-post. The scripture inside is from Deuteronomy. It's for the door-post of a Jewish home to protect . . . us.

MIGUEL. To protect us?

REYNALDO *nods*.

MIGUEL. Us? (*motioning all three of them*) Us? Us?

REYNALDO. I wanted to –

JAVIER. – It's not something –

REYNALDO. (*continuing*) – tell you for a long –

MIGUEL. (*stunned*) – No. No! No!! My own family!

JAVIER. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I've been –

## GENEALOGY CORNER: Reclaiming Our Heritage

by Stanley Hordes



W e in the history business have an old saying, "You can't know where you're going unless you know where you've been." This adage can be applied to nations trying to steer a foreign-policy course, but it also strongly relates to our personal and family histories, as well. Many of us are first, second, or third-generation Americans, while others of us have roots that extend back over 400 years in New Mexico. But, given the numbing pace of change and cultural transitions over the course of the past century, very few of us, from either tradition, know much about our rich cultural heritage.

Most Jews in New Mexico, as well as those with Jewish roots, have at least a vague idea of the general history of the world, the United States, and the Southwest. However, very few of us maintain an awareness of how we, as individuals and as families, fit into this larger context. Whether we are Ashkenazi or Sephardi, "Anglo," or Hispano, we all face a similar challenge, which is overcoming the disruption of the chain of knowledge of our own family heritage.

This breakdown in New Mexico occurs for two major historical reasons. For Ashkenazi and openly practicing Sephardi Jews it happened because of the migration of Jews from Europe and the Ottoman Empire to the United States and their consequent cultural assimilation into mainstream Anglo-American society. For Hispanos with crypto-Jewish roots it happened with the invasion of New Mexico in 1846 and the Anglicization of Hispano society over the course of the succeeding century and a half. In both cases, the result was the loss of language – Yiddish and Spanish, respectively, followed by the loss of many elements of traditional culture.

In so many cases, culture is passed down from grandparent to grandchild. If little Susie, Mary, and Billy (or perhaps Tiffany, Brittany, and Chip) cannot even speak the

same language as *zayde* or *abuelita*, then how can the traditions be passed down? The result is that thousands of years of family history and culture are lost with the proverbial snap of a finger.

So, ready or not, those of us who are privileged to have parents or grandparents who were born in the Old Country, or perhaps in Mora or Abiquiú, may be the last generation that has the ability to reclaim our history. Those of us who remember our grandparents, their customs and stories, represent the bridge between the old traditions and those of our grandchildren's generation. If we don't reclaim that heritage now it will be gone forever.

Genealogy is a wonderful vehicle for reclaiming our heritage. Talk to your elderly parents, aunts, uncles, cousins – whoever might have retained, either orally or in writing, some version of the family history. Find out if they know the places and dates of your grandparents' birth, or possibly the demographic profile of their parents. See if they may have inherited family Bibles, naturalization papers, military records, or land-grant records from the family's distant past.

On the basis of this information you can begin to enter the wide, wonderful world of genealogical research, using census records, ship manifests, military and judicial records, synagogue/church records, and many other sources to trace your family history back generations – or possibly centuries!

A few years ago the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society initiated a series of valuable and exciting genealogy workshops designed to assist all of us – Ashkenazi and Sephardi – in tracing our own family histories. I urge you to take advantage of these sessions and find out more about your heritage. Genealogy is your own personal connection to history. You are the bridge between the past and the future. ☆

Many thanks to Nancy Greenberg for her gift of the *Avotaynu Guide to Jewish Genealogy*, a comprehensive work by leading professionals today, to the Society. For the convenience of genealogists, this important reference book has been added to the NMJHS collection at the New Mexico State Records Center and Archives in Santa Fe.

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## Memorial Garden Honors Bibo, Bloch, and Seligman Families

by the Sandoval Signpost Staff

Reprinted with permission from June 2008 issue of The Sandoval Signpost.



On April 27, the Sandoval County Historical Society held a dedication ceremony of the Seligman, Bibo, Bloch Memorial Garden. Martha Liebert, archive

director/program coordinator for the Historical Society said that the desert garden honors "the lives and labors of the pioneer mercantile families who made such historical contributions to our local communities commercially, politically, and socially."

The garden was designed and installed at the DeLavy House in Bernalillo by grounds chairman Tom Wilson. It includes a plaque near the center, naming the three families and two benches built by current Historical Society president, Gary Williams.

The ninety-four-year-old patriarch of the Seligman family, Dr. Randolph Seligman, attended the dedication, along with approximately thirty family members. Seligman opened his solo practice in Bernalillo in 1950. He delivered 7,500 to ten thousand babies throughout his career, including Martha and Joe Liebert's three sons.

Here is the text of Martha Liebert's dedication speech:

We gather today to honor the lives and labors of your families—the Bibos, Blochs, and Seligmans, who have made such historic contributions to our communities—commercially, politically, and socially.

It all started with Lucas Rosenstein, who came to America in 1812 from Westphalia, Prussia, to avoid the Napoleonic draft. It was his tales of the wonderful new land that prompted the mass exodus; one after the other, as they came of age, they followed his lead to the New World.

First came Nathan Bibo, the harbinger of the commercial revolution in New Mexico. His nine siblings followed him in good

order and worked for old friends from Prussia, the Spiegelbergs, who had a large trading operation in Santa Fe. In 1870, Willi Spiegelberg sent Nathan to manage his Fort Wingate store, where he soon became a sub-agent for the Navajo tribe.

By 1871, Nathan had come to Bernalillo, bought land, and planted a vineyard. In 1873, he opened the Bibo Mercantile, and the next year got the job of postmaster, built stables, and ran the stage mail line. He had great hopes for the future development of Bernalillo, when in 1875, the AT&SF came looking to buy land for a transcontinental center. José Leandro Perea, the local land owner and sheep king, jacked the price to \$425 an acre for land that was valued from \$2 to \$3, so the Santa Fe went south to Albuquerque and it consequently boomed, while Bernalillo remained small and quiet. In 1880, the railroad came through with a line anyway and brought a boom and gold rush in the San Pedros and the Sandias.

Nathan joined the gold rush, but in 1884, he left the mercantile with his brother Joseph and sister Lina and went to California, where he married Flora Abrahams and set up a mercantile. However, the timing was bad and he was wiped out in the San Francisco quake of 1906. He returned to Bernalillo to live and sold insurance there.

Bernalillo had been a crossroads for trade because of its location on the Jémez and Rio Grande, which was an east-west/north-south junction of trading trails dating to prehistoric times, so Nathan was following in a long-established tradition of trading. This new group of traders, however, had to cross an ocean and learn new languages (English, Spanish, Keres, and Navajo). They were literate in a basically illiterate community, open-minded culturally in a prejudiced society. They acted as bankers, scribes, and legal advisors; wrote letters; and did legal papers, etc.

(continued on p. 7)

**Memorial Garden** *(continued from p. 6)*

To these men whose lives and talents had been restricted and rejected in the Old World, it must have been little short of heaven to find that in the New World they were limited only by their imagination and intelligence. The sky was the limit, and here they could live long and prosper—and they did. They created a dynasty, and you are the living results. Families and faith were their strength and keystone.

During their lives, we went from a barter system to a monetary one. Trails became roads and rails. At the height of the mercantile period, they had ten stores.

Since Nathan left, Joe and Lina Bibo were running the Bern Mercantile. In 1899, Siegfried Seligman came to work for the Bibos, followed soon by his brothers Julius, Carl, and Ernest. Carl soon went to Grants and bought out Simon Bibo's mercantile. Ernest went to Santo Domingo with Julius, and after becoming a partner, Siegfried ran the Bern Merc in 1903.

Siegfried was an innovator; he had the first electricity and gas heat in his home. He bought a surrey with fringe on top with coupons of Arbuckle's coffee and he had the first automobile in Bernalillo—a 1912 Buick.

Their wives were socially active. Blanche started the Women's Club in Bernalillo and many were active in hospital foundations. The men were members of the County Commission and the school board. Always civic-minded, they played a major role in the growth of the area.

A visit to the Bern Merc was as exciting as a three-ring circus to rural children who were isolated on ranches, far from town. As a special treat, a child would get to come with Dad in the buckboard to get the month's supply of food and seed, get their grain ground, and see the sights. The wide-eyed child might get a peppermint stick from Siegfried if he was lucky.

The mercantile sold everything from coffee to coffins, Studebaker wagons to shawls and overalls. They even imported exotic birds and bells and shells for the Native Americans and ran a pawn operation.

A word about the garden we dedicate today: All are new plantings and will grow and fill in and serve as an oasis after we are long gone. One plant in particular, a yucca, by special request of Randy, because the Santo Domingo pueblo gave each of his family Indian names of part of the plant. His father Julius was tsyo-tyume; Randy was acho wa (seed pod); and Jack was ah-sonah (stalk)." ☆

**Roundup** *(continued from p. 2)*

a majority of them attended Yom Kippur services. During Roosevelt's subsequent presidential campaign, his staff made signs in Yiddish. According to the American Jewish Historical Society, these signs were meant to remind Jews that, "under Roosevelt's command there were many Jewish Rough Riders. Roosevelt was like a brother to them. He recommended them to the President for promotions, and sang their praises to the world."

During the First and Second World Wars, Jews were over-represented in the armed forces. They comprised 3.3 % of the population and 5.7% of military personnel in World War I and 3.3% of the population and 4.2% of U.S. armed forces during World War II. On the eve of World War I, efforts were made to attend to the reli-

gious needs of Jewish soldiers and sailors. In 1914, a Passover Seder was organized and attended by over 450 Jewish military men. It was during the same period that Jewish military chaplains officially served as military staff and the Jewish Welfare Board was established. Soldiers had access to Jewish services and social organizations sponsored by the Board in Europe.

The stories shared by veterans themselves are most fascinating. The Library of Congress through its Veteran's History Project has collected interviews with veterans. Much of the testimony and artifacts can be found online, including accounts by individuals such as Aben Caplan, a Chicagoan who served as a Technical Sergeant for the U.S. Army during World War II. Caplan was taken as a German prisoner of war,

**We mourn the passing of Ned Miller, who died suddenly on December 5, 2008. Ned was a devoted and active member of the NMJHS Board of Directors for many years. His presence and contributions will be greatly missed.**

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but did not reveal his religion to his captors. Finding other Jews among his fellow prisoners, Caplan was able to participate in Sabbath services held in the prison camp's washroom.

Since World War II, Jewish members of the military served in Korea, Vietnam and, of course, in the Persian Gulf. Surprisingly, Jewish religious freedom may be more at risk in this generation than previous ones. According to Albuquerque resident Mikey Weinstein, founder of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, today's Jewish military personnel are subject to proselytizing and unwelcome religious pressure.

As veterans of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan return from duty, they will share  
*(continued on p. 11)*

**Yetta Kohn's Legacy** *(continued from p. 1)*

gave birth to the couple's fourth surviving child, Charles, in Las Vegas.

Yetta and Samuel lived and worked in Las Vegas for about nine years, raising a family and building community in the growing town; but things changed in 1878, when Samuel died at forty-one years old. He left Yetta with four children who were seven, nine, fifteen, and seventeen — and a successful business.

With the help of her oldest son, Howard, Yetta rose to the occasion and kept the business going for the next four years. As wool and hides were the main products in the area at that time, this was a wise decision. In 1882, she took her gains and moved the family to La Cinta, a now-vanished tiny village near the present day Conchas Dam where Yetta had homesteaded in 1878.

We don't know what prompted Yetta to make the move. Las Vegas was a very difficult place to live from the start, and with the arrival of the railroad in July 1879, the problems worsened. But then, the La Cinta area of the Pablo Montoya Grant was wild, too. Perhaps Yetta made the change to escape a quality of life that required vigilance, not knowing that La Cinta would also prove challenging. Regardless, the dauntless Yetta was not stopped.

In La Cinta, she promptly opened a grocery and became the postmistress — and started buying land right away and grazing cattle. By 1887, she was running close to 4,000 head on the open range known as Arroyo de Las Alamosas in San Miguel County. The cattle were held in partnership with two investors, Louis Sulzbacher and H.L. Waldo, and her three grown children, Howard, George, and Belle.

Yetta had a few brands; the most widely used was the 4V. She also had the elaborate but unwieldy YK. Her granddaughter and namesake, Yetta Bidegain, has the brand-

ing iron for it in her home in Tucumcari, New Mexico. The business was known as Y. Kohn & Co.

While in La Cinta, Yetta was instrumental in starting up the Red River Social Club and served as its treasurer. The club was organized to provide activities such as reading, singing, dancing, and fine dining. Yetta took charge of the transportation to and from at least one event, as the editor of the *Red River Chronicle*, Louis Hommel, reported that she ran a flatboat for the occasion across the Canadian River, notably with great skill.



*Kohn Bros. mercantile store in Montoya circa 1908.*

Yetta's two younger children, Belle and Charles, left La Cinta by 1885 to attend school in Kansas and New Jersey, respectively. By January 1887, Yetta, Howard, and George started to leave La Cinta one by one, selling the family's livestock to Wilson Waddingham in 1888, whose holdings would become known as the Bell Ranch Co. the next year.

Over the next fourteen years, Yetta and her children lived and worked in various combinations in four or more cities, in four states. Yetta bought and sold land in Las Vegas and Kansas, and had addresses in Wichita, New York, and Las Vegas. During this time, she and her brood honed their relationships with each other and their individual business skills, joining for what would be the start of their grand finale in 1902 in Rountree, New Mexico, soon to be renamed Montoya.

Charles moved to Las Vegas, where Yetta and George were, in about 1900, where the brothers and Yetta started up a general merchandise store on Bridge Street. But things must have taken an unexpected turn, because about two years later, Howard moved there, also, and from Las Vegas, Yetta and her sons arranged to buy a mercantile business from Henry K. Rountree.

On May 2, 1902, the family made the deal that put Montoya on the map and opened the door for Yetta's greatest legacy, today's T4 Cattle Co. Granddaughter Yetta Bidegain tells us: "There had been a rather bad drought, which encouraged Mr. Rountree to sell. The deal was made on the morning of May 2, and that afternoon, the town received a wonderful several-days-long rain, which ended the drought." Yetta and her family were showered with good fortune right away.

In Montoya, Yetta and her three sons developed four businesses: a mercantile, a land company, a ranch, and a bank. Belle, her husband

Albert Calisch, and their son Stanley joined the rest of the family in Montoya, where they started their own ranching business in 1904.

With Yetta Kohn at the helm of her clan, the family prospered. Howard managed the cattle operation and served as vice-president of the bank; George managed the overall business and the store, and was the town's postmaster; and Charles was an agent for the family's land company and also became a politician. The overall business was called Kohn Bros., while the ranching component was called Yetta Kohn & Co. Success came quickly, it seems, as by 1907 or perhaps earlier, Yetta was advertising for domestic help in the *Tucumcari News* and *Tucumcari Times*.

*(continued on p. 9)*



**Yetta Kohn's Legacy** (*continued from p. 8*)

The town of Montoya grew considerably, and Yetta and her family prospered greatly during the next fourteen years. However, in January 1916, thirty-eight years after Samuel died, tragedy struck. Yetta's son Charles died four days after his marriage to Hannah Bonem while the couple was in Kansas City, Missouri, on the first stop of their honeymoon. The cause was septicemia resulting from an abscessed tooth. Then, while anxiously awaiting the return of his beloved brother's body in Tucumcari — along with two hundred other family members and friends — George died of heart failure. The brothers were buried a day later in a double funeral.

Many reports were made of the family's extraordinary harmonious relations and their many contributions to the area. The February 4, 1916, issue of the *Montoya Republican*, which came out the day after the brothers were buried, said:

About twelve years ago, the brothers settled in the Montoya Valley, and in that short space of time have amassed a fortune of half million dollars by their keen business insight and harmonious team work. Each was assigned their several departments of the business and each excelled in that line. There never once arose a ripple of discord to mar the extraordinary harmonious and loving relations.

Yetta died fifteen and a half months later, at seventy-four. Family oral history has it that her death was hurried along by the circumstances of her two younger sons' deaths. These words were spoken at the funeral of the woman known as Mother Kohn:

She had a special faculty for comforting the unsuccessful without injuring their pride, and hundreds of needy will miss her ever-ready response to their appeals. The home life was her greatest pleasure and ideal, and legions have been made happy through a hospitality that has become proverbial. A real type of womanhood has departed, but her good influence will live with us always.

Yetta and her three sons are buried in the Kohn family plot at Tucumcari Memorial Park, then known as Sunnyside Cemetery. Belle, Albert, and their son Stanley moved to El Paso in 1929. They are buried there in the Temple Mt. Sinai Cemetery.

Yetta left a remarkable legacy. Her cattle business, known since 1946 as the T4 Cattle Co., continues to flourish in Montoya today, though little evidence of the once-vibrant town remains. Together with her dynamic children, Yetta Kohn started Montoya from the ground up. Because of their good business decisions, determination, faith in the land and animals, and good fortune, their business eventually outgrew the town and continued to grow even after the town declined.

The headquarters of the T4 ranch encompasses the town today. Two buildings from the early 1900s are still functional. One was home to Yetta and her sons during the years that Montoya thrived. Howard's daughter Yetta Bidegain remembers living there, too, when she was a child. The second building was home to Yetta Kohn's daughter Belle and her family while they lived in Montoya.

The Kohn Bros. store had a warehouse on its north end, which was moved to the northeast side of headquarters some time ago. Today, it is filled with hay grown by Yetta Kohn's great-great-grandson Donnie on a farm on the east side of the ranch. Hay totally covers the postal scale from the store, which is also in storage there.

Yetta Bidegain and her husband Phillip managed the T4 for about forty years, and then turned it over to their son Phil H. and his wife Laurie (Burns) Bidegain. Yetta and Phillip rarely leave the area since they find heart in the soil there. Phil H. says that he got to do exactly what he wanted: "cowboy" and manage the ranch. "I would rather be outside than anything," he says. "I am lucky I got to do what I wanted to do, which is work on the ranch." Julee, the senior Bidegains' daughter, is grateful to be part of the family's successful business, as ranching is

a lovely way of life and has allowed her to do what she loves — raise a family, care for animals, and make art quilts.

The State of New Mexico plans to place a historic marker on a Quay County road in recognition of Yetta Kohn, an extraordinary pioneer German-Jewish immigrant matriarch and businesswoman, who left this part of the state with a remarkable legacy.

Author's note: In an article titled "Family Fortitude" in the September 2008 issue of *Western Horseman*, Ross Hecox talks about the operation of the T4 Cattle Co. today and speaks about the role that Yetta Kohn played. See <http://westernhorseman.com>.

Editor's note: If the story and photo of Yetta Kohn sound vaguely familiar, you may recall the article in the December 2007 issue of *Legacy* about the NMJHS collection at the New Mexico State Records Center and Archives, which includes the family papers of Yetta Kohn.

*Sharon Fried came to New Mexico in 1992 with a wide-ranging academic background in art history, education, cognitive psychology, urban design, drama therapy, and neuro-linguistic programming. In 2005, she began mastering the skills of book production in order to craft life-story and family history books. Today this Ohio-raised New York native researches, writes, designs, and produces personal memoirs in art-book format. This article is about one of the principal members in the seven-family history that Sharon is preparing for the Bidegain family of Tucumcari. ☆*

### Mission Statement

The mission of the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society is to promote greater understanding and knowledge of New Mexico's Jewish history. The Society's programs examine the state's Jewish heritage in all its diversity and strive to present this heritage within a broad cultural context. The Society is a secular organization and solicits the membership and participation of all interested people, regardless of religious affiliation.

## A Memorable Conference on the Camino Real

by Noel Pugach

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**Welcome to new members**

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**Raya Koreh, Bat Mitzvah**

**D**elightful!" "Satisfying!" "Stimulating!" "Well worth it!" These remarks from attendees describe the first joint conference between the

New Mexico and Texas Jewish Historical Societies held in El Paso on October 24 - 26. They confirmed my own impression that the conference was a resounding success.

The ambience of the Camino Real Hotel and downtown El Paso combined with the lovely Shabbat evening service at Temple Mount Sinai created a delightful atmosphere for the rest of the conference. But it was the genuine warmth, conviviality, and welcoming feeling among the guests as well as the high quality and fascinating content of the formal presentations that made the weekend a memorable experience. That feeling was evident the first night of the conference when, following the Shabbat evening dinner at the hotel, attendees had a lively, loosely structured conversation about the history, nature, styles, programs, and challenges of the two societies.

Papers presented at the two sessions on Saturday morning were substantive, professional, and informative. At the first session, Susan Novick discussed the important role played by Jewish merchants in creating commercial centers in downtown El Paso.

Noel Pugach picked up the same theme for merchants on the Santa Fe Plaza in the closing years of 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Similarities between the mercantile situations in the two cities made for an enthusiastic question and answer period.

In the second session Saturday morning, Erin Doren, Kay Goldman, and Sharon Fried showed the importance of Jewish women in the Southwest in many different aspects of life. Unfortunately, no time remained following these talks for audience discussion.

The pace of the conference changed after lunch with a visit to the El Paso Museum of History and the Holocaust Museum. Each museum offered excellent guided tours that enhanced our experience.

Saturday evening, following Havdalah Service at Temple Mount Sinai, conference attendees, many in evening dress, enjoyed



*Conference attendees from Texas and New Mexico listen to Barbara Angus, curator of the El Paso Museum of History, talk about the difficulties of stagecoach travel to El Paso.*

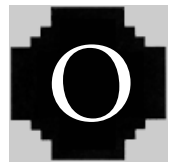
a catered dinner at the temple. Afterwards, Rabbi Stephen Leon gave a fascinating talk about his work with crypto-Jews in southern New Mexico and northern Mexico. Then Dr. Stanley Hordes spoke about his new research project studying crypto-Jews in the Caribbean. Following the talks, the audience deluged the speakers with questions.

Sunday morning the two societies said goodbye to one another over a simple breakfast and then went into separate board meetings. Members of the two societies agreed that the meeting was so enjoyable and beneficial that they should hold another joint conference in the next few years.

NMJHS is grateful to our Texas hosts, especially President Sally Drayer and the local El Paso committee headed by Shari Schwartz and Susan Novick, for all their hard work and attention to details in planning the conference. They have our deepest appreciation for a job well done. ☆

## Recap of Wolman Nostalgia Trip

by Lance Bell



On August 24, in Albuquerque at the JCC, the NMJHS hosted an eager audience that was ready to take a trip back in Rock 'n' Roll history with *Rolling Stone Magazine's* first photographer Baron Wolman. Wolman, a resident of Santa Fe, prepared a totally cool slide presentation with his photos of the many music legends whose chords and vocals have touched so many music-loving souls.

From the Grateful Dead, Santana, The Beatles, Frank Zappa, Janis Joplin, The Doors, Jimi Hendrix, and many, many others, Wolman was there with his camera to capture moments in time for us all to enjoy. Baron shared anecdotal stories on each performer and what happened the day or even the second the photo was taken. "Jews and Rock 'n' Roll" was



Baron Wolman (left) holds the portrait of Jimi Hendrix that Dr. Henry Watkins (right) won in a silent auction.

a unique format that allowed Wolman to present the stories behind his photos. Some rockers you may not have known were Jewish are: Kiss front men Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley, Billy Joel, Simon and Garfunkel, and Steely Dan. Other Jewish rock legends include Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Donald Fagen of Steely Dan, Robbie Robertson of The Band, and David Lee Roth of Van Halen.

After Wolman's career at *Rolling Stone* and a fashion magazine he created called

*Rags*, he learned to fly and started shooting aerial landscapes from the window of his small Cessna. From this experience he had the basis for a successful coffee



Raffle winner Peter Burman displays the Janis Joplin print that he got to take home.

table book called *The Holy Land: Israel From the Air* (1987). Wolman shared quite a few pictures from this book at the event.

A highlight of the day was the raffle and auction of two Wolman classic prints. Dr. Henry Watkins, who always wanted to own something special in memory of Rock icon Jimi Hendrix, found out he was the lucky bidder in the silent auction for the Hendrix photo. Santa Fe native, lawyer Peter Burman won the Janis Joplin

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**It is not too late to own your own nostalgic piece of rock 'n' roll history. NMJHS still has available for purchase a print of Jim Morrison of the Doors. This B&W 11x14 silver gelatin print is matted and framed with a retail value of \$800.00. NMJHS is taking offers starting at \$350.00. If you are interested, contact administrator Bobbi Jackson at 505-348-4471 or nmjhs@jewishnewmexico.org.**

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print in the raffle. He was very pleased because he always loved the one-of-a-kind sound and incomparable energy that Joplin put forth in her vocals. ☆

## Roundup (continued from p. 7)

more about their experiences as Jews in the military. They will find support, as many others have, from long-standing organizations such as the Jewish War Veterans of the United States. Established in 1886, the organization offers programs and resources for vets, including those in New Mexico, where there are long-established posts.

For more information on Jews in the military, visit the National Museum of American Jewish Military History. In addition to their exhibits in Washington, D.C., the Museum offers online resources about Jewish military service.

## Resources

*GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation*, Deborah Dash Moore, Harvard University Press, 2004.

*Louis Felsenthal, Citizen-Soldier of Territorial New Mexico*, Jacqueline Meketa, UNM Press, 1982.

*The Fighting Rabbis: Jewish Military Chaplains and American History*, Slomovitz.

*Reflections on Jewish-American Heritage*, Booklet, City of Albuquerque Human Rights Office.

American Jewish Historical Society, [www.ajhs.org](http://www.ajhs.org).

*Jewish Heroes and Heroines of America, from Colonial Times to 1900*, Florida Atlantic University Libraries: <http://www.fau.edu/library/brodytoc.htm>

Jewish War Veterans of the United States, <http://www.jwv.org>.

Library of Congress Veteran's History Project, <http://www.loc.gov/vets/stories/ex-war-jewishveterans.html>.

Military Religious Freedom Foundation, [www.militaryreligiousfreedom.org](http://www.militaryreligiousfreedom.org).

National Museum of American Jewish Military History, <http://www.nmajmh.org>. ☆

### Calendar of NMJHS Upcoming Events

Check online calendar of Upcoming Events for more details at [www.nmjewishhistory.org](http://www.nmjewishhistory.org).

**Sunday, February 22, 2 p.m., New Mexico Film Museum, 418 Montezuma, Santa Fe. Bettina O'Neil Lyons will talk about her book *Zeckendorfs and Steinfelds: Merchant Princes of the American Southwest*, published by the Arizona Historical Society. Book signing will follow her talk.**

**Sunday, March 29, 2 p.m., Jewish Community Center, 5520 Wyoming Blvd. NE, Albuquerque. Henry Tobias will talk about his latest book, *Jews in New Mexico Since World War II*, published by UNM Press. Book signing will follow his talk.**

**Sunday in April or May. Montefiore Cemetery cleanup in Las Vegas.**

**Sunday, May 3, Taos Jewish Center, 1335 Gusdorf Road, Suite R, Taos [time to be announced].**

**Fall conference in planning stage.**

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