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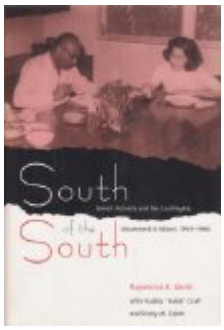

Raymond A. Mohl. *South of the South: Jewish Activists and the Civil Rights Movement in Miami, 1945-1960.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. x + 263 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-2693-0.

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Exceptional Women: Jewish Americans and Postwar Civil Rights in Miami

No scholar of Miami's history is unfamiliar with Raymond Mohl's work. His pioneering efforts have touched on many aspects of the city's history and development, from the settlement and migration of the first Caribbean immigrants to make Miami their home in the late nineteenth century, to the construction of Interstate 95 and mid-century "slum clearance," to the late-twentieth-century transformation of Miami's economy. [1] His latest work, however, is a different kind of undertaking--one that will surely inspire a new generation of scholars to explore Miami's Civil Rights era and yield new insights for veteran scholars of Florida history as well.

South of the South: Jewish Activists and the Civil Rights Movement in Miami, 1945-1960 is the result of a collaborative endeavor which draws from the experiences of Matilda "Bobbi" Graff and Shirley M. Zoloth. This volume is a triptych comprised a scholarly essay, autobiography, and a collection of correspondence and notes. Both women were Jewish-American. Both were born and raised in major cities in the northeast, and moved to Miami in the post-World War II era. But despite their membership in common organizations, their shared activism and interests, Graff and Zoloth never met.

Why Zoloth and Graff never met is more a testament to local racism and hostilities in mid-twentieth-century Miami than an indication of a vast political movement in size or scope. Graff was born in 1921, and raised in the largely Jewish community of Brownsville. Her father, Max Soller, a sewing machine operator in a New York City garment factory, was active in trade union and Zionist circles--activities that inspired Graff to further develop her own political views as well. She attended Brooklyn College, studying Marxism and Zionism. Graff translated her beliefs in a wider range of public political action after marrying her husband, Emmanuel, who was employed by Detroit's automotive industry in 1941.

While in Detroit, Graff engaged in a range of political activities by demonstrating for rent control and against universal military training, working in local political campaigns for progressive

candidates, supporting striking maritime workers, and protesting racial discrimination in Michigan hotels and restaurants, lynching, and poll taxes. True to her early involvement with labor unions, economic issues continued to hold particular interest. Graff also gave birth to two daughters, Lois Pauline and June Marian, and formally joined the Communist Party. By 1945, the FBI was actively following her work.

Not until she moved to Miami, however, was Graff considered "dangerous to the internal security of the United States" (p. 65). Her decision to move was based largely on her children's health--both girls suffered from asthma, and the warm weather was believed to be better for individuals with breathing difficulties than the cold winters of Michigan. Emmanuel got work as a painting contractor. They arrived in Miami in 1946 for the first time, but returned to Detroit after suffering targeted police harassment. They returned to Miami in 1948 after her second daughter was also born asthmatic.

Of particular concern to the FBI was Graff's involvement in the Miami Civil Rights Congress (CRC). As Mohl notes: "South Florida's mid-century political culture was much more conservative and much less accepting of activism than in the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest--conditions that made the work of left-wing activists more difficult and more dangerous" (p. 66). In 1954, immediately after the birth of her third daughter, Hope, Graff was forced to flee Miami along with her children when she and her husband were subpoenaed to the Brautigam grand jury.

Shirley Zoloth arrived in Miami within a few months of Graff's departure. Like Graff, Zoloth was born into a large Jewish community in the northeast. She came of age in Philadelphia, and was also active in a wide range of Jewish and political organizations, including Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, National Council of Jewish Women, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and a range of progressive, left-wing, and civil rights causes. Zoloth's parents were already living in Miami by the early 1950s, where her father worked in the real estate business. She moved so that her husband, Milton, could join her father's real estate firm.

Like Graff, Zoloth's activism was wide-ranging. Much of Zoloth's work focused on school desegregation through the 1950s and 1960s. She worked extensively on Jack Orr's campaign for reelection to the Florida state senate in 1958, and on Jack Gordon's successful bid for the Florida Senate in 1972. She encouraged the Miami chapters of the National Council of Jewish Women and the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom to push actively for desegregation of Miami's public schools. And she was active in Miami's Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Unlike Graff, Zoloth was able to remain in Miami where she was politically active well into the 1970s.

Graff did not return to Florida until her retirement. Instead, after a time in Canada, she returned to Detroit with her husband and children. She returned to school at Wayne State University's Montieth College in the late 1960s. Her autobiography, penned in 1971 as part of a class thesis, is re-printed in this collection, virtually unchanged. Her decision to write down her experiences was largely the result of her concern that her younger colleagues who were engaged in the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s were not fully aware of what had come before. In her words, she "hoped to give concrete evidence showing that the movements of the '60s were in fact the orphaned children of the struggles of the '40s and '50s" (p. 71). "I use the term orphaned because I can think of no better corollary," she continues. "I might also add that the parents were murdered. They did not die a normal death. They were eliminated by a society afraid of change" (p. 71).

Graff and Zoloth's experiences are explored in three parts. The first, which shares the same title

as the book, "South of the South: Jewish Activists and the Civil Rights Movement in Miami, 1945-1960," is written by Raymond Mohl. Here, Mohl locates the work of Graff and Zoloth in the larger context of the early Civil Rights struggle, emphasizing the importance of both their Judaism and the particularly hostile environment for leftist political activity in mid-twentieth-century Miami. "In a southern city such as Miami, where both Jews and blacks remained outside the mainstream, one might expect to find significant evidence of common struggle against racism and bigotry," Mohl writes. "Miami, after all, was thought to be 'south of the South' in more than just geography. Not surprisingly, Miami became an important civil rights background for blacks and Jews in the postwar years" (p. 14).

Exploring whether or not the Civil Rights Movement represented a particular "golden age" for collaboration among Jews and African Americans remains a guiding question throughout this first part. Mohl breaks important scholarly ground by conducting what is indeed one of the first community-level studies of historic black-Jewish political coalitions. It is equally significant that the time period of his focus is the immediate post-war period, not the 1960s. His account is all the more striking because it takes place in Miami.

Miami of the 1950s was, of course, a city hostile to both Jews and African Americans. It was among the last of cities across the South to desegregate. Despite the growing size of Miami's and Miami Beach's Jewish communities through the post-World War II period, bombings at local synagogues and day schools were commonplace. So were bombings and murders along the city's "color line," including the well-known Carver Village bombings. "The Miami Formula"--racism, racketeering, and anti-communism--as it was dubbed contemporarily, created a hostile environment for even the most committed of Civil Rights activists. [2] This hostile environment, combined with the high degree of mobility among Miami's communities, has led many scholars to assume that Miami had either had little civil rights activism throughout the period or that efforts only developed in the 1960s.

This assumption, along with the oft-held view that Miami is somehow exceptional and not a "southern" U.S. city, provides the starting place for Mohl's analysis. In his words, "Despite Miami's repressive atmosphere, civil rights activists challenged segregation in the decade and a half before 1960.... Their stories are central to a larger narrative about racial reform in Florida's emerging Sunbelt city" (p. 8). To support this assertion, he draws on a rich array of primary and secondary materials including more than thirty interviews and extensive archival research. The latter drew from the Schomburg Library in New York City, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Richter Library at the University of Miami, P.K. Younge Library at the University of Florida, Florida State Archives, University of Maryland Library in College Park, and the National Archives, among others. He engages more than two decades of secondary literature on the Civil Rights movement in equally detailed fashion.

Mohl handles the discussion deftly. He does not downplay the limited successes of Miami's early civil rights activism, but instead emphasizes the importance of these grassroots activities and women's leadership on the local level. Likewise, he underscores the central role of Graff and Zoloth to Miami's Civil Rights Movement without over-generalizing about Jewish activism within the city. As Mohl notes, "Jews made up a high percentage of white activists in the Miami civil rights movement. But for the most part, the activists worked outside the framework of mainstream Jewish organizations, which distanced themselves from militant and confrontational civil rights action" (p. 59). The critical role of upbringing and communities which were heavily engaged in labor movements and progressive politics is emphasized, as is the importance of the Cold War as both

a limiting and a galvanizing force for civil rights activism.

Given the richness of this analysis and the tremendous amount of ground covered in a mere sixty-one pages, it hardly seems fair to fault Mohl for not doing even more. But I did wish for more detailed discussion of Graff's and Zoloth's activism as Jewish women and the role gender may or may not have played in shaping their life's work--particularly when the women themselves make the importance of gender so clear in their writing.

Mohl does not ignore the importance of gender. The broad outlines of how their experience fits with increasingly public roles for women in the World War II period is noted in his introduction. "Bobbi Graff, Shirley Zoloth, and many of their coworkers in Miami CRC and Miami CORE exemplified these new postwar roles for women, as they balanced family life with civil rights activism and other progressive causes," Mohl writes (pp. 3-4). Gender also takes center stage in his conclusion as he notes that this study supports recent scholarly work, such as that by Susan Lynn, Joanne Meyerowitz, Leila Rupp, and Sara Evans, that recasts the 1940s and 1950s as a "watershed in women's social activism" (p. 59). "Miami's civil rights women not only pushed progressive social and political agendas," Mohl argues, "but they demonstrated through their actions a rejection of the post-war ideology of domesticity" (p. 59).

The extent to which Graff's and Zoloth's sex played a significant role in their activism is doubly clear in their own words, which comprise parts 2 and 3 of the work. Part 2, "Matilda 'Bobbi' Graff and the Civil Rights Congress," includes a brief summary by Mohl of Graff's life and work. The bulk of part 2, however, is Graff's autobiography, "The Historic Continuity of the Civil Rights Movement." Part 3 is devoted to "Shirley M. Zoloth and the Congress of Racial Equality" and includes her transcribed civil rights correspondence and Miami CORE reports and minutes from 1957 to 1960.

Graff and Zoloth may have rejected the domestic ideology that would have confined them to their homes and limited their public political activism. But each makes it clear that the particular contours of their activism were shaped as much by their identity as women and mothers as by their identity as Jews. Graff uses the metaphor of an orphaned child to characterize the contested civil rights movements of the 1960s (p. 70). Class and motherhood are inextricable from her political philosophy. "Our first child was born in 1943. We had high hopes that the United Nations would be the avenue for settling international disputes. These were our dreams for a beautiful world in which our children could grow up unafraid of the future. We were young and idealistic and we were of the working class," Graff writes (p. 76).

Graff never describes hostility toward her political action on the basis of her sex. But she does experience particular threats shaped as much by her gender as her politics. For Graff, harassment came in the form of sexual as well as psychological intimidation as she vividly describes in her section on her work with the NAACP. After intervening in a number of cases where a young black man is falsely accused of raping a white woman, Graff became targeted by a young, black man who she suspects of being an FBI informant when he accuses her of being pregnant with his child (pp. 100-101). She uses the birth of her third daughter--named Hope--to frame her discussion of her own activism. In her words: "[T]his persecution of us both, parents of three young children, aged 11 years, 7 years, and 4 days--all constitute a brutal attack upon human life and family that reeks of Hitlerism.... Let my bitter experience at the birth of my child be a warning to all who value their individual rights and their self-respect" (p. 122).

Although Zoloth's experiences are told largely through the letters and reports she authored for Miami CORE and during her work for school de-

segregation, the extent to which gender shapes her political activism and ideology is equally clear. It is women's political organizations, most notably Hadassah and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which form the base for her early political action. Her sex is a large part of her reason for focusing on school desegregation. As Zoloth notes in a 1959 letter to Rep. W. C. Herrell of Dade County, "We are opposed to the already existing Pupil Assignment Law.... Aside from the poor economics of the matter ... we find it increasingly difficult to explain to our children the lack of morality in the matter. They have an embarrassing way of sometimes taking seriously the words they say in the Pledge of Allegiance, or the Preamble of the Constitution, or in their history books, or in their religious teachings.... Would you care to explain the morality of this to my children for me?" (pp. 148-149)

It seems equally significant that neither Zoloth nor Graff is employed for wage work, which enables both them as well as many female complements to devote their days to public political work. Yet the way in which they frame their activism is somewhat reminiscent of nineteenth-century women abolitionists, suffragettes, and labor activists who campaigned on the basis that it was their role as mothers and as women which particularly suited them for political action. As Women Strike for Peace founder Amy Swerdlow notes when recalling her own political action of this time period, "[B]y stressing global issues rather than private family interests" women activists challenge "the key element of the feminine mystique: the domestication and privatization of the middle-class white woman."[3] For these activist women this meant conducting a struggle in the name of what made them unique as women--motherhood. For Jewish women and the children of immigrants, like Zoloth and Graff, connecting their struggle to global issues was second nature.

Mohl recognizes the significance of their work as women. And he articulates well how their Jewish identity shaped Graff's and Zoloth's involvement in civil rights. But he could explore more fully how being Jewish women shaped the form and focus of their activism.

Scholars of women's history might find these holes disappointing. But the richness of these primary documents and of Mohl's skillful analysis of their place in the larger civil rights struggle makes up for this gloss. Mohl has given us another pioneering effort--and one that will certainly inspire and shape new work on Miami's history, its women, and the Civil Rights Movement alike. In his words, even though Graff and Zoloth did not know each other, "the two women separately helped shape Miami's early civil rights movement--a movement notable for its assertiveness in a region where few white people spoke out for civil liberties or defended the right of black people to vote, ride a bus, attend integrated schools, live in racially diverse neighborhoods, or sit down for a cup of coffee in a restaurant" (p. 2). The power of their recorded experiences is undeniable.

Notes

[1]. A brief selection of these works includes Raymond Mohl, "Black Immigrants: Bahamians in Early Twentieth-Century Miami," ***Florida Historical Quarterly*** 65 (January 1987): pp. 271-297; "Ethnic Politics in Miami, 1960-1986," in ***Shades of the Sunbelt***, Randall Miller and George Pozzetta, eds. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp. 143-160; ed., ***Searching for the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region*** (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); "On the Edge: Blacks and Hispanics in Metropolitan Miami since 1959," ***Florida Historical Quarterly*** 69 (July 1990): pp. 37-56; "Making the Second Ghetto in Metropolitan Miami, 1940-1960," ***Journal of Urban History*** (March 1995): pp. 395-427; with Kenneth Goings, eds., ***The New African-American Urban History*** (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996); "'South of the South?': Jews, Blacks and the Civil Rights Movement in Miami, 1945-1960," ***Journal of American Ethnic History*** 18 (Winter 1999): pp. 3-36.

[2]. This term, "Miami formula," was coined in the 1950s by journalist Frank Donner, and is used by Graff as well (p. 112). See also Frank Donner, "The Miami Formula: Grassroots McCarthyism," *The Nation* 180 (January 1955): p. 71.

[3]. See Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (The University of Chicago Press, 1993): pp. 12-13.