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**REMARKABLE STORY OF JEWISH REFUGEE SCHOLARS AND THEIR STUDENTS AT  
HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES TOLD IN NEW EXHIBITION**  
*Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges*  
*at the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust*

NEW YORK, NY— In 1935, an article in the *Afro-American* paper stated: “We rejoice that our newspapers condemn German Nazi atrocities. It’s a good sign that they may yet discover the Nazism which is outside their own doors.” The relationship between two disenfranchised groups—Jewish professors who fled Nazi Germany and African-American students — and the unique bond that grew between them is the subject of the powerful new exhibition *Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges*, opening at the **Museum of Jewish Heritage — A Living Memorial to the Holocaust on May 1, 2009. The exhibition will be on view through January 2010. A press preview will be held on April 30.**

*Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow* will tell the story of Jewish academics from Germany and Austria who were dismissed from their teaching positions in the 1930s. After fleeing to America, some refugee scholars found positions at historically black colleges and universities in the Jim Crow South. The exhibition will explore what it meant to the students to have these new staff as part of their community, how the students were affected by their presence, and what life was like for white, European Jews teaching at Black colleges and universities. The exhibit will look at the empathy between two minority groups with a history of persecution, some of whom came together in search of freedom and opportunity, and shared the early years of struggle in the Civil Rights movement.

“The close relationship forged between refugee Jewish scholars and their black students is a moving and instructive story – and a timely one, especially as we begin President Obama’s first year in office and reflect on how far we have come as a nation in the area of civil rights and race relations,” said Museum Director Dr. David G. Marwell.

In early 1933, before the Nazis started dismissing Jews from their posts, more than 12 percent of faculty members at German universities were Jewish. While the top academics, like Albert Einstein, were in demand at prestigious universities, less well known professors had a much more difficult time finding work in the United States. The country was still in a depression, and unemployment, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism were prevalent. As anti-Jewish actions in Germany escalated, several organizations, including the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars, worked to obtain positions for the exiled scholars. Of the several hundred refugee scholars who came to this country, more than 50 of them ended up at historically black colleges.

**About the Professors and Students Featured in the Exhibition**

Notable professors in the exhibit include: prominent sociologist Ernst Borinski (Tougaloo College), political scientist John Herz (Howard University), and art education pioneer Viktor Lowenfeld (Hampton Institute). Notable students featured in the exhibit include artist John Biggers (Hampton Institute); Dr. Joyce Ladner (Tougaloo College), the first female president of Howard University; and Dr. Joycelyn Elders (Philander Smith College), the first Black Surgeon General of the United States.

The refugee scholars who found work at black colleges were often more comfortable in the black environment than their peers at white universities who faced prejudice at their jobs. Some professors, such as Ernst Borinski and Ernst Manasse, felt a deep connection to black students, and spent the rest of their careers at the historically black colleges. Borinski was even buried on the campus of Tougaloo. His tombstone reads, “Ernst Borinski, Inspiring Teacher.” Dr.

(More)

Ladner said of Professor Borinski (whom the students affectionately called Bobo) that he had “an affinity with blacks because they experienced a similar persecution.”

Many others professors also developed deep ties to the schools where they taught and lasting friendships with their black colleagues and students that still endure today, like Professor John Herz who said, “It was a great good luck of mine to find my first teaching job at a black university where I felt I had so much in common with teachers and students.” He felt “at home very quickly,” at Howard University, where he attended lectures and concerts and spent many of his social hours.

### **The Impact Each Group Had on Each Other**

The mutual respect the students and professors felt for each other resulted, in some cases, in the refugee professors getting involved in the Civil Rights movement officially or unofficially. For instance, Prof. Borinski was identified as a “race agitator” for promoting integration both on and off campus. He wanted to be a “facilitator,” to “bridge communities,” as he felt his contribution to the Civil Rights movement was to get both black and white people into a room together to share ideas. He created the Social Science Forums which hosted lectures and discussions for the community with top thinkers of the time. He would have his students from Tougaloo arrive early and scatter themselves in the room so the white participants would have to sit among the black students. In many cases it was the first time they had had a substantive conversation or dined with someone of another ethnicity. The Mississippi branch of the ACLU gives out an annual award in Prof. Borinski’s name.

Professor Lore Rasmussen, an Associate Professor of Elementary Education at Talladega College, along with her husband, was arrested for having lunch at a café with a black colleague. At first the police thought she was a German spy, until she explained that she was a Jew who had escaped from Nazi Germany. “You should be glad to be in a place where there's democracy and freedom,” they told her. “The experience of injustice I felt in Germany from Hitler coming into power I felt was being repeated,” said Prof. Rasmussen. Prof. Ernst Manasse at North Central College for Negroes in North Carolina, faced similar opposition when he would entertain black colleagues and friends. His white neighbors complained and threatened to shoot his guests should they return.

In addition to getting involved in campus life and the political landscape, the professors, who came from a formal and rigorous academic background, did their best to instill high standards of learning. The historically black colleges, mostly founded between the late 1860s and the 1880s, were mostly private institutions funded by philanthropists and missionary groups that focused on liberal arts primarily while a few others were public schools that offered both vocational training in agriculture, trades, and service and the liberal arts. In both scenarios, the refugee scholars expected academic excellence from their students.

“The German Jewish professors had a tremendous impact on young blacks in the South,” said Jim McWilliams, a student at Talladega College, who is now a retired attorney. “They exposed us to new music, art and academic programs.” Jocelyn Elders was also grateful for her education and understood the importance of it, “Grandma Minnie was constantly at me. 'You’ve got to get an education.' That was her refrain, like a drumbeat. 'You want to pick cotton and live in all these mosquitoes the rest of your life?’” said Dr. Elders.

Many of the professors also encouraged the students to learn more about their own history and culture like Prof. Rasmussen who took her students to a field to pick cotton. She often used unconventional and innovative teaching methods to give her students concrete experiences that brought them closer to their backgrounds. Likewise, Professor Lowenfeld encouraged his students, many of whom had never been exposed to art before, to explore their heritage and their struggles through art. The renowned artist John Biggers, who had been studying to be a plumber when he met Prof. Lowenfeld, said, “I fell in love with art,” Biggers said. “Art became the way we could speak.” Several of the other students of the refugee scholars went on to become top notch educators themselves.

### **About the Exhibition**

The exhibit is inspired by Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb’s landmark book *From Swastika to Jim Crow: Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges* (Krieger Publishing Company, 1993) and the subsequent PBS documentary by Joel Sucher and Steven Fischler. The exhibition will include artifacts, photographs, and two new films, by Sucher and

Fischler, featuring both the professors and the students. It begins with the dismissal of the refugee scholars from German universities and continues through their search for positions in the United States. The exhibition then highlights the backgrounds of the black students and follows the professors and students coming together to teach and learn and to share a community on campus. The exhibition includes their mutual participation in the Civil Rights movement and concludes with a look at the impact of the contributions of the professors and the students to American life.

Exhibit highlights include:

- Receipts for the \$28 in fines Professors Lore and Donald Rasmussen paid for having lunch with a black civil rights colleague at a black café in Birmingham. Eating in a public place with someone of the other race without a seven foot high separation wall was considered “incitement to riot.” Prof. Lore Rasmussen and her husband were arrested. When Prof. Lore Rasmussen was free to go, she was not allowed to ride home alone with her black student, so she stayed in jail with her husband until bail was posted for them by a black dentist.
- Paintings by Prof. Viktor Lowenfeld and his student John Biggers show their influence on each other’s work. Biggers went on to get his PhD from Viktor Lowenfeld at Penn State University, and then chaired the art department at Texas State University (later Texas Southern University), where he stayed until his retirement in 1983. His work is in the permanent collections of the MoMA and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, among other institutions.
- Menorah and spice box brought from Germany by Professor George Iggers to the United States. He taught at Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas. Prof. Iggers and his wife, Wilma, were involved in the Civil Rights movement and spearheaded a challenge to the Little Rock Board of Education in the 1950s. Prof. Iggers was one of the first white members of the black fraternity Phi Beta Sigma.
- Borinski student Donald Cunnigen’s fraternity sweater from Tougaloo College. Dr. Cunnigen followed in his mentor’s footsteps and became a sociology professor.
- Bronze owls given to Dr. Joyce Ladner by Prof. Borinski, and a telegram offering his heartfelt congratulations when Dr. Ladner finished her PhD, also in sociology. Along with the telegram he sent her a check for \$100 to use for a celebration because she “deserved it.”

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### **About the Museum**

The Museum’s three-floor Core Exhibition educates people of all ages and backgrounds about the rich tapestry of Jewish life over the past century--before, during, and after the Holocaust. Special exhibitions include *Woman of Letters: Irène Némirovsky and Suite Française*, extended through August 30; and *Seeking Justice: The Leo Frank Case Revisited* and *Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges*, both opening on May 1. *Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges* and *Seeking Justice: The Leo Frank Case Revisited*, both opening on May 1. The Museum offers visitors a vibrant public program schedule in its Edmond J. Safra Hall. It is also home to Andy Goldsworthy’s memorial *Garden of Stones*, as well as James Carpenter’s *Reflection Passage*, Gift of The Gruss Lipper Foundation. The Museum receives general operating support from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and is a founding member of the *Museums of Lower Manhattan*.

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