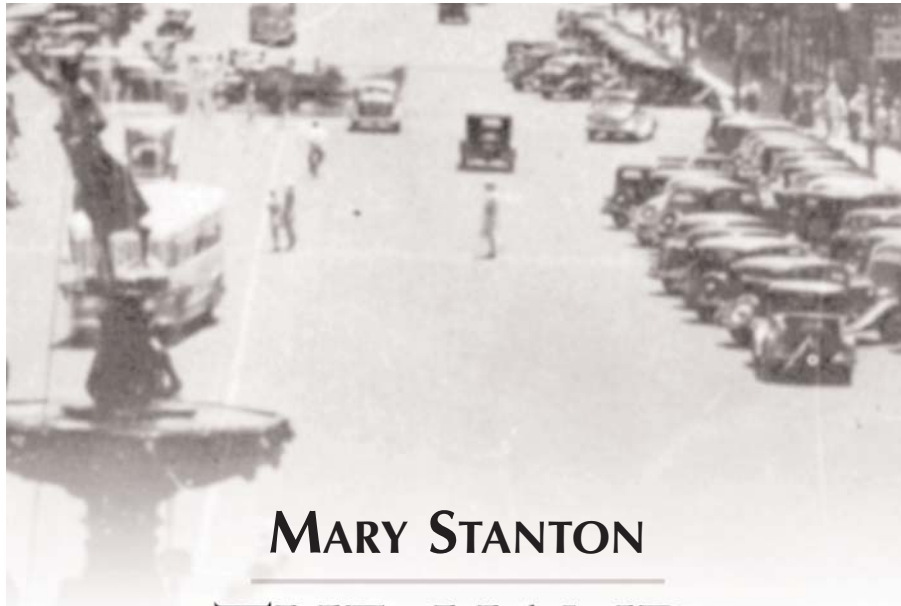


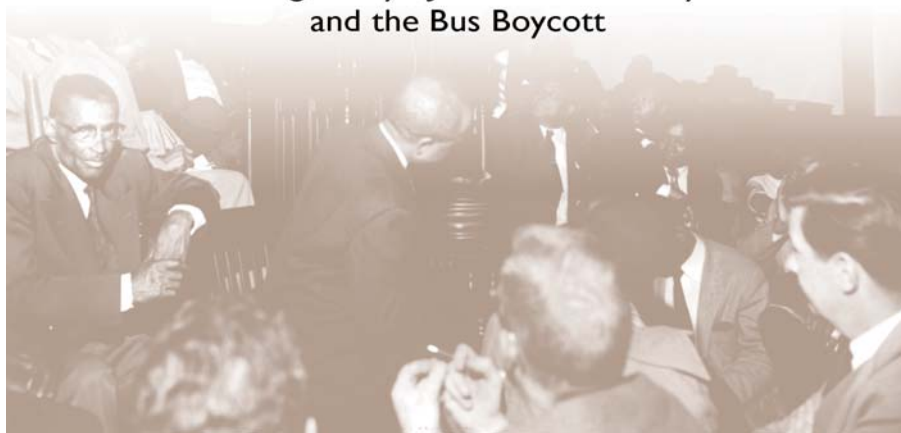
Media Information



MARY STANTON

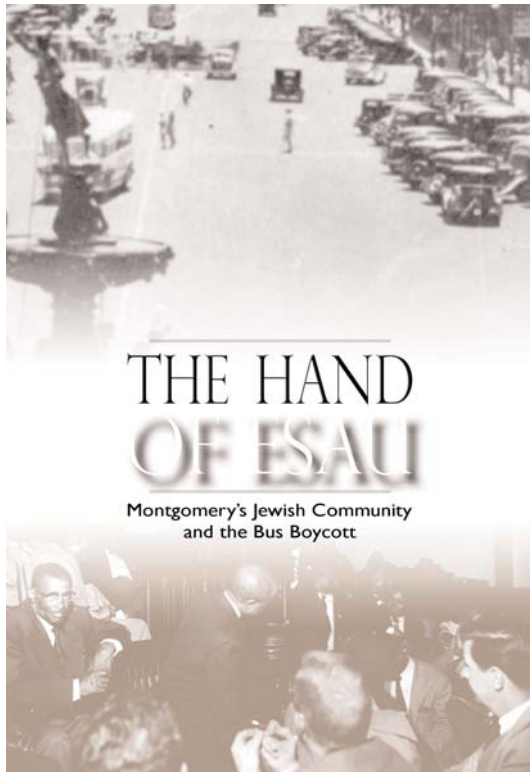
THE HAND OF ESAU

Montgomery's Jewish Community
and the Bus Boycott



River City Publishing





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About River City Publishing

Like the nearby Alabama River that flows through the heart of the South, literature sustains us, transports us outside of ourselves, and brings us home. River City Publishing, a literary press located in Montgomery, Alabama, is dedicated to discovering the books that do just that.

Carolyn Newman
Publisher



A Synopsis

In 1955, the majority of Montgomery's Jews confounded Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by ignoring the Bus Boycott. Many were locked in a painful ambivalence, torn between applying the Torah's ethic of justice and a desire to protect their homes and business interests and maintain their white status. People continue to agonize about what they did or didn't do in those troubled days.

The 50th anniversary of the Bus Boycott, an event that destabilized the city and spread terror in the small Jewish community, offers an opportunity to examine roles that Jews played in this historic event and how their experience as Southern Jews influenced the choices they made. Why did some respond positively to the demand for social justice while others vehemently opposed it?

The experience of the Jewish community in Montgomery during its first hundred years shaped its collective response to the 1955/56 Bus Boycott; how Montgomery's Jewish community dealt with this tension is the story of their Southern experience. The arrival of Jewish immigrants in Montgomery in the 1830s began a saga that eventually took on almost Biblical proportions, a tale of the second son's struggle to outfox his elder brother, the designated heir, while desperately trying to maintain family peace: the story of Jacob and Esau writ large.



Q & A

How did a life-long New Yorker become fascinated by Montgomery, Alabama's Jewish community?

Well, I'm a biographer, and sometimes while biographers are searching for other things they stumble on buried, forgotten, or merely over looked treasures. That happened when I was researching the life of Juliette Hampton Morgan, a white Montgomery librarian who became involved in the 1956 Bus Boycott. From Juliette's papers, which are housed at the Alabama Department of Archives and History, I learned that she'd dated Louis Kaufman, a successful Schloss and Kahn liquor salesman. Kaufman was Jewish and nearly ten years older than the Episcopalian Juliette. Since 1936, they'd been friends, enthusiastic New Dealers, and active members of the local Democratic club.

Kaufman served as a Temple Beth Or trustee in the early 1930's when the congregation's charismatic Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein organized the capital city's small group of liberals (including Kaufman and his first wife Bea) to raise funds for the Scottsboro Boys defense and support a black sharecroppers union.

Who were the Scottsboro Boys?

Nine young black men—most still in their teens—who like many Alabamians during the Depression were out of work. On March 25, 1931 they hitched a ride on a freight train to Memphis hoping to find work. All were arrested near Scottsboro after being accused of raping two white women who were also riding the rails. The Scottsboro Boys were tried without adequate counsel, convicted with little evidence, and if Alabama's Governor Miller had not sent in the national guard to protect them they would have been lynched. In less than three weeks they were sentenced to die in the electric chair, despite the fact that one of the women rescinded her story and denied being raped. Rabbi Goldstein and his group, many of whom were the wives of Beth Or trustees, were determined to help them defend themselves.

Through Juliette Morgan I discovered Louis Kaufman who led me to Temple Beth Or and ultimately to Rabbi Goldstein. Wanting to learn more about this circle, I rummaged around in Montgomery's Jewish attic and found things that I never anticipated.

What did you find ?

The polar opposite of everything I expected—and that *really* stimulated my curiosity. In my limited experience Jews were doctors, dentists, pharmacists, lawyers, and my high school teachers. I grew up in the New York City of the 1950's and 60's when all the smartest kids in my classes were Jewish. Like their parents, most were liberal—supporters of Adlai Stevenson and later Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. That's why I believed I understood the crusading Rabbi Goldstein. What I didn't know was that he was an exception. The idea that Jews had been living below the Mason Dixon Line for generations and that many supported segregation was unbelievable to me. But it was true.

Montgomery, I discovered, had been home to Jewish segregationists, moderates, and a smattering of liberals since before the Civil War. They were spread among three congregations: reform Temple Beth Or; orthodox congregation Agudath Israel, (which has been conservative for the last fifty years); and Congregation Etz Ahayem, Alabama's first and last Sephardic congregation. It merged with Agudath Israel in 2001.

In my enthusiasm for the story I proposed writing an article for a historical journal whose editor informed me that the Southern Jewish story had already been told. The history of the Jews in Montgomery,



he said, would no doubt be a repetition of the histories of Atlanta, Mobile, and Charleston. After writing about Montgomery for a decade, however, I knew that the city was many things, but a repetition of anyplace else? *Never.* So, I went back to the Department of Archives and History and dug deeper.

What did you find this time?

That Montgomery was indeed different. That my instincts were right. As opposed to Atlanta, or to be fair, as opposed to what was happening in most of the urban South, Montgomery's three congregations supported and sustained each other. This sounds simple, but was actually a profound difference. In most American cities it would have been considered extraordinary for reform rabbis to preside at Sephardi weddings and funerals, and unheard of for them to officiate at high holy day services. Not in Montgomery. Sephardic rabbis were hard to find in America and harder to attract South. So, Montgomery's reform and orthodox rabbis filled in when needed. Sephardi children attended the reform Sunday School where the orthodox rabbi's wife taught Hebrew, and it was not unusual for members of one congregation to apply for associate membership in one of the others.

Was inter-congregational cooperation the only thing that made Montgomery's Jewish community different?

No. A stubborn streak of social activism runs through this history and sets Montgomery's rabbis and some of their congregants apart. Although all three congregations became divided over the issue of segregation, from the Scottsboro Boys days (1933) through the *Brown* decision (1954) and the Bus Boycott (1956), one can point to social justice champions. It is true that they were few, but the supply never dried up. Each generation provided a spokesman. This, despite the fact that Jews constituted a minority in the nation, the state, and in the city of Montgomery, and for any of them to advocate for another disenfranchised minority took great courage.

Who were these Jewish activists?

In 1907 Congregation Beth Or's Rabbi Benjamin Ehrenreich worked toward establishing a juvenile court. In 1915 he raised matching funds for a "Rosenwald school" for black children and expressed outrage at the treatment of Tuskegee scientist George Washington Carver who was forced to use the Exchange Hotel's freight elevator to get to the ballroom for a presentation he'd been invited to make to the United Peanut Growers Association. But Ehrenreich's public voice was silenced later that year after the lynching of Leo Frank, an Atlanta Jew, charged with the murder of a thirteen year old white female worker in his pencil factory.

The Beth Or trustees entreated Rabbi Ehrenreich to tread lightly in the area of social justice since he represented them to the gentile community and they were fearful of retaliation.

This highlights a second theme which runs through Montgomery's history. Activist rabbis were knowingly hired—especially by the reform congregation, and yet as they began to articulate their objections to segregation they were often appealed to by their congregations to avoid the issue. In hiring them the congregations appear to have welcomed challenge, and yet when they *were* challenged they backed down. One senses real struggle and painfully conflicted emotions in the minutes of trustee meetings. Several rabbis insisted that separation of the races was contrary to the teachings of Torah despite the arguments of businessmen in their congregations who maintained that refusal to join the White Citizens Council meant losing their businesses and in some cases putting their lives and the lives of their families in danger.

Rabbi Ehrenreich ultimately acceded to the wishes of the Beth Or trustees, but when his successor, Rabbi Goldstein would not, he was asked to resign. Almost two generations later, Rabbi Seymour Atlas of



Congregation Agudath Israel lost his pulpit after he publicly supported the Bus Boycott of 1955-56.

Your book is subtitled “Montgomery’s Jewish Community and the Bus Boycott” can you comment on why some Jews came forward to support the Boycott while a majority joined the White Citizens Council which opposed it?

First, I think we must accept that the dilemma Montgomery’s white residents, both Christian and Jewish, suffered was a values clash which paralyzed many of them, especially those who considered themselves religious. Judaism and segregation, Christianity and segregation, democracy and segregation—none of these could be reconciled. To attempt to reconcile them was to live dishonestly and to lose one’s moral center. Alan Paton, in his wonderful book *Cry, the Beloved Country*, explains it by putting the following words in the mouth of a white South African activist. “I do this,” Arthur Jarvis says, “not because I am courageous and honest, but because it is the only way to end the conflict of my deepest soul. I do it because I am no longer able to aspire to the highest with one part of myself and to deny it with the another. I do not wish to live like that. I would rather die than live like that.”

The compulsion to resist segregation as evil became stronger in these few activists than their fear of loss of their possessions, status, and in some cases even of their lives. *Hand of Esau* is the story of how a marginal community in a racially polarized society struggled to find its way as a mammoth clash of wills played out over a bus strike. The power of their story is in that struggle. In the end, it becomes not only the story of Montgomery’s Jewish Community, but of Montgomery itself.





About the Author

Mary Stanton is a public administrator for the Town of Mamaroneck in Westchester County, New York. She has taught at the University of Idaho, The College of Saint Elizabeth in New Jersey, and Rutgers University, and is the author of *From Selma To Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo* (1998), *Freedom Walk: Mississippi or Bust* (2003), and the upcoming *Journey Toward Justice: Juliette Hampton Morgan and the Montgomery Bus Boycott* (2006). Her work has appeared in *Southern Exposure*, *Alabama Heritage*, and the *Gulf South Historic Review*.



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