

# **Florida Jewish History Month**

## **January 2015**

**The Arts And Florida's Jewish Community**

**Division of Social Sciences and Life Skills**

## **Background Information**

In October of 2003, Governor Jeb Bush signed a historic bill into law designating January of each year as Florida Jewish History Month. The legislation for Florida Jewish History Month was initiated at the Jewish Museum of Florida by Marcia Jo Zerivitz, the Museum's Founding Executive Director and Chief Curator. Ms. Zerivitz and State Senator Gwen Margolis worked closely with legislators to translate the Museum's mission into a statewide observance. It seemed appropriate to honor Jewish contributions to the State, as sixteen percent, over 850,000 people of the American Jewish community lives in Florida.

Throughout the history of the State, and like other groups, Jewish people have actively participated in shaping the destiny and direction of Florida at its roots. In 250 years, the Jewish community of Florida has left their indelible footprints across the entire State. Floridian Jews have served in every U.S. war, and have been prominent in the cattle, citrus, tomato and tobacco industries, to name a few. Diverse cultures have enriched the state of Florida since its earliest days and Florida's Jewish communities have become an integral part of the state and its history. Jewish History Month is a time to learn about the rich tapestry of Jewish life here. Since 1763, Jews have been involved in enhancing the lives and dreams of *all* Floridians. Florida Jewish History Month celebrates these accomplishments.

Florida Jewish History Month has been so successful since its establishment that it inspired the legislation for Jewish American Heritage Month, which is observed in May with a Proclamation signed by President George W. Bush in April, 2006. The Proclamation states that "The faith and hard work of Jewish Americans have played an integral role in shaping the cultural fabric of America. During Jewish American Heritage Month, we celebrate the vital contributions of Jewish Americans to our Nation. Throughout our history, Jewish Americans have contributed to the strength of our country and the preservation of our values. The talent and imagination of these citizens have helped our Nation prosper."

## **10 Miami-Dade County Florida Jewish Leaders of Note**

- Barbara Baer Capitman**      Founded Miami Beach Art Deco District, also known as the square-mile District bounded by Fifth Street to 23rd Street, and Lenox Avenue to Ocean Drive. Comprised of the largest concentration of 1920s and 1930s resort architecture in the world, this was one of the earliest National Register listings to recognize the importance of the designs of this period. The vibrantly colored buildings represent an era when Miami was developed as a "tropical playground."
- John and Johanna Bass**      Jewish art collectors John and Johanna Bass, founded the Bass Museum of Art in order to house their 16th and 17th century paintings, textiles, and sculptures. The Museum belongs to the City of Miami Beach.
- Mitchell Wolfson Jr.**      Founded the Wolfsonian Museum to preserve his 70,000 objects including: furniture, decorative arts, paintings, books, print, and ephemera. In 1997, Wolfson donated his collection to the State of Florida.
- Marcia Jo Zerivitz**      In 1995, after traveling for 8 years around the state to retrieve material evidence of Jewish life in Florida, Mrs. Zerivitz opened the Jewish Museum of Florida, which collects historic memories, tells stories of Jews helping to develop the state, and presents Jewish art and culture. These give pride to strengthen Jewish identity and future generations. For non-Jews, this is education to increase tolerance for people who are different. Americans are all immigrants, or descendents of immigrants. This story is an example of the ethnic acculturation process of one group, each having its own unique narrative.
- Isaac Bashevis Singer**      Polish born I.B. Singer wrote in the Yiddish language and was known for his romantic and legendary stories, some of which had a Florida setting. His works were translated into English and many other languages. A longtime Miami Beach resident, Singer was awarded the 1978 Nobel Prize for literature; he died in 1991.

**Ted Arison**

In 1996, Ted Arison contributed \$40 million to Miami's youth orchestra. Michael Tilson Thomas founded the New World Symphony group to have a place for young musicians to refine their skills. As alumni move on to professional music careers around the world, the goal is realized. Thomas is a grandson of Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, who were founding members and stars of the Yiddish Theater in America.

**Toby Ansin**

In 1985, after a conversation with Edward Villella to hear his 10-year plan, and enticing six friends to join her in each contributing \$1,000, Toby Ansin decided that ballet was what South Florida needed to round out its cultural life. Thus, the Miami City Ballet was born. Today the Miami City Ballet is one of the nation's major dance companies and performs globally.

**Judy Nelson Drucker**

Judy Drucker has been a major force in the South Florida cultural scene since 1967 when she started bringing classical music's greatest artists, including orchestras, opera and dance. A New Yorker who migrated south, Drucker began studying piano at the age of five under the tutelage of her mother, became an opera singer and educator and founded the Concert Association of Florida. Drucker, acclaimed for her tireless efforts and passion, once enticed Pavarotti to perform on the beach (on South Beach) and is currently Senior Artistic Advisor to the Florida Grand Opera.

**Rhoda Levitt**

Ms. Levitt has been promoting the arts since 1957. In the pursuit to establish arts organizations in the South Florida community and then the follow through to assure the continued good health of these organizations, Rhoda has participated in a number of arts activities for many years. A few to mention are: Miami City Ballet (former chairman of the board of directors, board member 23 years), Arsht Performing Arts Center (vice chairman of foundation board of directors, board member 18 years), Florida Arts Council (chairman 1996-2000), Southern Arts Federation (alliance of nine southern states), National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, and Arts for Learning.

**Barbara Stein**

Ms. Stein, along with her husband Dr. Lawrence Stein, founded Actors' Playhouse in 1987. Raised in Miami, she has developed the Playhouse into the largest not-for-profit professional Equity Regional Theater in Miami-Dade County, one of eight major Florida theaters. Her influence was the basis for the private public partnership with the City of Coral Gables in renovating the historic Miracle Theater into a three-stage performing arts center, which was the catalyst in revitalizing downtown Coral Gables in 1995.

## 2015 FLORIDA JEWISH HISTORY MONTH

### Study Guide

#### Research

**Using the Internet and other resources in your classroom and media center, research and respond in writing and discussion to the following:**

1. Research the history of the Jewish Museum of Florida and its core exhibit called, MOSAIC: Jewish Life in Florida. Use this research for reference work for the theme of this year's focus, *The Arts & Florida's Jewish Community*.
2. Research Florida's Jewish patrons of the arts from the 1950's to the present. Make a chart of 10 individuals, noting their names, their significant contributions to the arts in Florida, and to which genre of the arts they are known, for example: theatre, visual art, music, filmmaking, literature, or radio. What were the biggest challenges each individual faced? You can refer to the 10 patrons listed in this guide,
3. After researching and reviewing the 10 Jewish patrons of note in this guide, and their contributions to the arts, choose 5 of those noted and write a more comprehensive bio-essay on each and how they have truly impacted the south Florida community. Find photos of each of the 5 you have researched and post on a bulletin board in your class along with your written essay for all to view.
4. Research to discover what impact, if any, Florida's Jewish community's involvement in the arts has had on other cultural groups here in Florida. For example, Ruth Behar, a visiting scholar and professor at the University of Miami, is a Cuban Jewish author. How might her writing have impacted the Cuban community and their contributions to the arts? Find and choose one Florida Jewish artist, writer, or musician or any other profession which is directly related to the arts on which to focus your research. Specifically try to learn about that person's impact on *other* cultural groups and the arts in Florida, and then present your findings to the class. The Jewish Museum of Florida has a traveling exhibition called, *El Viaje... The Journey: Jewish Artists & Poets of Latin America*, which will give you a list of names with which to start your research. The website for your research is: <http://www.jewishmuseum.com/elviaje.html>.

5. Research and choose one particular piece of art, music, literature, or dramatization by a Florida Jewish artist that has special meaning to you. For example, you could choose Michael Pertnoy, a featured local filmmaker whose film, *The Last Survivor*, was recently chosen to be featured at the Miami Jewish Film Festival. After viewing the trailer for the film at <http://www.thelast survivor.com/>, you could then research more about the film, Michael Pertnoy, and perhaps make contact through his website to see if you could interview him. After your research is done, present your analysis of the film to the class along with a one page essay on your research about the the film and why you feel this piece is important to our multicultural community of Miami.
6. Define the word *Yiddish*. Research the *Yiddish language* and its importance in Jewish culture and the arts. You might start your search on the web following the links with a foundation such as the Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture, which is a national center that had its roots in Florida, [www.yiddishculture.org](http://www.yiddishculture.org). After researching *Yiddish*, expand your research to include *Yiddish* in Jewish art, and how it is used in modern Jewish artistic endeavors; however be sure to keep the scope of your search limited to Florida and the Florida Jewish arts community. Choose a piece of artistic endeavor which highlights the *Yiddish* language in some way and include it in a paper outlining your research. Isaac Bashevis Singer and his work would be a good place to start your research for this topic.
7. How is art, in all its many forms, a celebration of culture? Research to discover why it is important for Florida's Jewish community to be involved in the arts as an extension of their culture. What things are most important? Then, research another of Florida's many cultures, looking to discover the importance of the arts in the community. After you have finished your research on both the Jewish community and another cultural group in Florida, write a compare and contrast paper highlighting at least three discoveries you made about the arts relative to each group's culture and how art helped that cultural group keep its heritage alive.
8. Research and choose five pieces from Florida Jewish artists that you would like to know more about. Choose one specific genre for each piece from the following: music, literature, fine art, photography, theatre, architecture, television, filmmaking, and/or mixed media. Learn as much as possible about the artists and the history of the pieces. Then, create a presentation (smart board, multimedia, Power Point, etc.) highlighting the pieces you chose and some of the information you discovered about them.
9. Research "Shalom South Florida" or "Sunday Simcha," two Florida Jewish radio stations, as well as some of the music and musicians who are featured on these stations. Choose one aspect of the radio station i.e. cultural significance, historical information, biographies of the hosts, and the types of programs, etc. on which to focus your research. Most students do not know about these radio stations. Prepare a presentation for your class telling them about these Jewish themed programs and how listening to them can broaden their understanding of the Jewish culture.
10. Research one Jewish musical group, such as the Klezmer Company Orchestra, a Florida Jewish Klezmer band. Their website is: <http://www.klezmercompany.com/>. After researching them, be certain to include background information on the Klezmer genre of music. Share your findings with

the class and have the class all look at the website and discuss other ethnic Florida musical groups and then plan a program on how music of all ethnicities can bring people together in commonalities rather than differences.

## **Write, Discuss & Create**

**The following activities are based on the research completed concerning the contributions to the arts of the Jewish people in Florida:**

1. Using your research, prepare a definitive essay as to why it is important to celebrate the presence of Jews and their contributions to the arts in Florida. Send the essay to the Miami Herald as part of the celebration of *Florida Jewish History Month*.
2. Create a class Power Point highlighting the contributions of Florida's Jewish community-past and present to the arts. Groups of students can each select a different area of focus, such as: fine art, literature, theatre, photography, and music, and then create slides for their focus. Be certain to highlight specific individuals and their artistic achievements. Use as reference the 10 notable patrons listed in this guide.
3. Focusing on the theme, *The Arts & Florida's Jewish Community*, identify local Jewish leaders in the Miami arts community in addition to those noted in this guide and ask them to come to the school for *Florida Jewish History Month*. Plan a school-wide assembly where the individual can talk about what it means to be a Jewish artist and leader in Florida and how personal heritage affects him/her in their relationship with the community at large, as well as their contributions to the arts.
4. Create a museum exhibit dedicated to the contributions of the Jewish people to the arts in the state for *Florida Jewish History Month*. Collect photographs, passports, newspaper articles, copies of their work (if they are an artist), and any other type of documents that would make for an informative exhibit and display this in a prominent place in your school. This can be done by individual classes or created through the combined efforts of many.
5. Create a class "Photo-Biography" that highlights a few early Florida Jewish artists, writers or musicians through pictures and captions. Display the Photo-Biography in the school's media center so that others can read it. Refer to the 10 notables in this guide and or add more names and pictures.
6. Plan a *Florida Jewish History Month Arts* program with your classmates in which the entire school can participate. Invite the drama class to read selected poetry, invite the music department to perform selected music, ask the art department to create collages, paintings, posters, or other projects and then invite community members to come and celebrate!
7. Create an award in your school that recognizes an outstanding Florida Jewish American in field of the arts for his or her contribution to the community. Plan a school-wide program during *Florida Jewish History Month* to present the award.

8. Take a field trip to the Jewish Museum of Florida in Miami Beach. Select one artifact, picture, etc. that made the biggest impression upon you. Explain the item and why it meant so much to you in a talk presented to the class.
9. With the theme in mind , *The Arts & Florida's Jewish Community*, create a poster in the shape of Florida and dedicate it to one of the members of the Florida's Jewish community who has contributed greatly to the arts and that you admire most. Fill in the map with pictures of the person, quotes attributed to him/her, and several, "I believe..." statements.
10. Write an essay to complete the sentence, "My study of the history of the Jewish Community in Florida and their contributions to the arts has helped me learn and understand..." Be sure your response is supported by specific details and information you have learned through your research.

## **Resources & Webography**

### **Bureau of Historical Preservation**

Florida Department of State, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor  
500 South Bronough Street  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0250  
800-847-7278  
[www.flheritage.com](http://www.flheritage.com)

### **Historical Museum of Southern Florida**

101 West Flagler Street  
Miami, Florida 33130  
305-375-1492  
[www.hmsf.org](http://www.hmsf.org)  
[www.hmsf@historical-museum.org](mailto:www.hmsf@historical-museum.org)

### **Jewish Museum of Florida**

301 Washington Avenue  
Miami Beach, Florida 33139  
305-672-5044  
[www.jewishmuseum.com](http://www.jewishmuseum.com)

### **Tampa Bay History Center**

225 South Franklin Street  
Tampa, Florida 33602  
813-228-0097  
[www.tampabayhistorycenter.org](http://www.tampabayhistorycenter.org)

### **University of Miami**

Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies  
P.O. Box 248161  
Coral Gables, Florida 33124  
305-284-6882  
[www.miami.edu/miller-center](http://www.miami.edu/miller-center)