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The Princes of Seventh Avenue: Ybor City’s Jewish Merchants

Yael V. Greenberg-Pritzker

As a people, Jews have left an indelible mark on the state of Florida, making contributions to its economic, political, religious, and social life. From the establishment of early known settlements of Pensacola to the creation of modern public institutions, Jews have played a significant role. While most Florida residents are more familiar with arrival of Jews after World War II, documented Jewish history can be traced as far back as 1763 (see Figure 1). In that year, Alexander Solomons, Joseph de Palacious, and Samuel Israel arrived in Pensacola. The majority of Jewish families began immigrating to the U.S. in the 19th century and to Florida in the 1920s and 1930s. Today, Florida boasts the third largest Jewish population in the United States (about 750,000) next to California (967,000) and New York (1,651,000), and South Florida has the largest concentration of Jews living outside of Israel (650,000).1

The Jewish experience in Florida has not been without its share of achievements. Undergoing successive periods of acceptance and discrimination, Jews managed to leave a lasting impression, despite their limited choices of settlement and employment in the early beginnings of statehood. With the transfer of Florida from Spain to England in 1763, Jews were legally permitted to establish permanent residency. Prior to this pivotal year, during early Spanish rule of Florida, Jews and other religious groups who did not practice Catholicism could only reside temporarily and were not allowed to practice their beliefs. During the administration of President James Monroe, a treaty with Spain was signed February 22, 1819 which conveyed to the United States all the lands situated east of the Mississippi River. Yet, even as more Jews immigrated to Florida, persecution and prejudice remained a feature of life. It wasn’t until an act of Congress on March 3, 1821, when the region became an American territory, that Florida pledged a new attitude of tolerance of religious diversity. This act made it more attractive for persecuted immigrants to settle in the territory. During this period, Florida’s Jewish population only numbered between 30-40 individuals, with the majority of the population living in the northern part of the territory. On March 3, 1845, the day the state of Florida was admitted to the Union, Jews numbered fewer than a hundred people, out of a total state population of 66,500.2

Jewish population figures continued to rise steadily; six synagogues were established throughout the state by 1900. Florida’s first congregation was founded in Pensacola in 1876 and was named Temple Beth El. Avath Chesed followed in Jacksonville, 1882; Rodeph Sholom, Key West, 1887; United Hebrew of Ocala, 1888; Schaarai Zedek, Tampa, 1894; and B’nai Israel, 1899 in Pensacola. Remarkably, all of the congregations established more than a century ago remain in existence today, with the synagogue in Key West changing its name to B’nai Zion and United Hebrews of Ocala splitting into two separate institutions.3

Prior to 1900, all of the congregations formed in Florida were based on Ashkenazic Judaism, the religious traditions and practices that came out of eastern and Central Europe. While it is true that Ashkenazic Judaism dominated the religious landscape of Florida synagogues, a few congregations followed Sephardic doctrine, which originated in the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal). With only six congregations in 1900, Florida’s synagogues have
Figure 1. Jewish Immigration into Florida from 1763. (Used with permission from the collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida, Miami Beach.)
grown to nearly 300 today and new facilities spring up each year. 

JEWISH MERCHANTS

For centuries, Jews have been linked to the mercantile, dry goods (needles, buttons, ribbons, and non-perishable food items), and apparel businesses. Part of the reason for this association stems from historic anti-Semitic sentiments in Eastern Europe, where Jews were often prevented from pursuing other occupations. Additionally, the majority of Jews were forced into a cultural dependency given the discrimination they faced and had to rely on their own abilities and skills, including trading, selling and provisioning in order to support themselves. Generation after generation of Jews followed their ancestral footsteps, moving into the same trades and businesses of fellow family members. Immigrating to the New World did not alter this earliest of Jewish economic patterns. 

Unlike other immigrants to the United States who had thoughts of returning to their native homelands, Jews were knowingly aware that once they left Eastern Europe, they would never be able to settle or visit their birthplaces again. Instead, they carved out new niches, moving from portable occupations such as peddling to establishing permanent businesses including pawnshops, dry goods, and haberdasheries.

MIGRATION OF JEWS TO FLORIDA, TAMPA, AND YBOR CITY

The first recorded evidence of Jews in Tampa occurred in the year 1865. Seeking to find a refuge from political unrest and anti-Semitic sentiments in their native countries, thousands of immigrants were enticed by advertisements in newspapers to seek work in cigar factories around the state of Florida. One such ad, entitled “The Rush for Key West,” appeared in the Tobacco Leaf Journal on May 2, 1885 and made the case that in order for Key West to become a significant location for the manufacturing of cigars, “an increased demand of labor was needed.” Remarkably, a high proportion of Romanian Jews settled in Florida and came to Key West after 1880 before making their way to Tampa.

The majority of Jews who came to the United States were from the Iasi and Husi regions of Romania and ended up immigrating and living in Key West simply because of one man’s mistake. As the story goes, in 1884, a man by the name of Joseph Wolfson was on his way to Tampa when his ship encountered bad weather and he was forced to land off the coast of Key West. Having a limited command of English, and finding a small community of Jews already living there, Joseph mistakenly thought he had landed in Tampa and immediately sent for his Romanian family to join him. This pattern of chain migration was a common feature of eastern European immigration, and became a reason why so many families joined their relatives in Key West and Tampa to work as cigar workers and merchants.

Jewish peddler merchants had traveled throughout small Florida cities and towns during the 19th and early 20th centuries selling their goods until they could afford to settle down and open small stores. While only a small number of Jewish merchants remained mobile, catering to the economic and health related needs of many communities, the majority worked in order to be able to settle permanently in one place. The small stores they opened would sell a wide variety of merchandise including clothing, groceries, cigars, dry goods, and furniture to several generations of families. Some of these established merchants even managed to help their fellow immigrants and relatives in extraordinary ways by providing them with jobs or financial assistance to purchase their own stores.

In an effort to destroy peddler culture in 1891, the Key West City Council imposed a $1,000 tax on peddlers. This situation caused most peddler merchants to relocate their businesses further north. Unable to pay the tax, the Jewish merchants who had migrated to Key West from Romania packed up their carts and headed towards Ybor City in Tampa. German, Russian, and Polish Jewish immigrants were also part of the migration to Ybor, but came to Tampa independently of Romanians. Hearing stories of an expanding cigar industry in Tampa, many Jews also left Key West following cigar manufacturer Vicente Martínez Ybor’s decision in 1886 to relocate his production plant to the city. While most Jewish merchants who followed Ybor concentrated their efforts on opening stores and
The first Maas Brothers Dry Goods Store - The Palace - was located at 619-621 Franklin Street. (Photograph courtesy of Special Collections, University of South Florida Library.)

Abe Maas, at right with hat, is shown in 1896 with employees outside his store - The Palace - on Franklin Street. (Photo courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center.)

Businesses that would supply the needs of cigarworkers, a few did manage to operate their own factories and manufacture their own brand of cigars.\(^{10}\)

As Martinez moved his operations from Key West to Tampa in 1885, he sent for additional cigarmakers from Cuba and transferred many of his former employees to the new factories. Although the majority of laborers that Martinez brought to Ybor were Cuban, Jews were among the laborers albeit a very small percentage. Providing a bridge between ethnic groups, the cigar factories helped to foster the economy of an urban city like Tampa, while establishing organizations that assisted immigrant populations with settlement and health care issues. According to the 1911 Immigrants in Industries issued by the 61st Congress, “the order of numerical strength among the races employed in the cigar factories” was:

- First, Spanish;
- second, Italian;
- third, Cuban;
- fourth, all other races, including Creoles from New Orleans, Whites and Negroes from Nassau, Porto Ricans, German Hebrews, French, Chinese, Russian Hebrews, Greeks, and Americans.

By 1890, Florida’s Jewish population would grow to nearly 2,500 persons.\(^{11}\)
As Tampa became the leading manufacturing center in Florida during the early 20th century, the economy continued to become more financially dependent on the booming cigar industry in Ybor City. Driven by the wages of the cigar laborers, the local economy relied heavily on their weekly salaries to support and maintain business and industry. For the merchants doing business on Seventh Avenue, the brunt of their clientele consisted of cigar-workers, local residents in neighboring areas, and to a lesser extent, farmers from Plant City. While the larger population in the small-town South frequently regarded Jews as being part of the merchant class, Jews in Ybor City received similar attention. In fact, so prevalent was this connection that when dry goods merchant Adam Katz announced the birth of his son, the Tampa Tribune heralded the event as “A new Hebrew merchant was born today.” Not even a day old, Adam’s son was already designated by the Tampa community part of the next generation of merchants.12

In the following excerpt, Manuel Aronovitz, a Jewish merchant, recounts his experiences of his arrival to Ybor City:

In the month of June 1914, I arrived in this country and at that time there were two stations, one in Ybor City and one in Union Station. And by mistake my brother waited for me in Ybor City. So I landed in Union Station and I was trying to get a ride to Ybor City and they used to have those horse and buggies. And they wanted fifty cents (charge for ride), but I only had thirty-five cents in my pocket, so I showed them here...here’s thirty-five cents. And they said they ‘no we can’t do it.’ I gave them the address and one man did pick me up for the thirty-five cents but he let me off at the corner of Nebraska and Seventh Avenue. I had to walk eighteen blocks to get to my brother.13

In so many ways, Ybor City was a distinct community for immigrants in that it offered different populations, including Jews, the chance to interact in a multi-ethnic environment. Language also served in Ybor as a unifying agent among the diverse groups. Spanish was the principal language of Ybor; Spanish, like Romanian, was a part of the Romance language family. It is conceivable that because Romanian shared “qualities of tone, inflection, and emotional context” that are similar to Spanish, Romanian Jews had an easier time learning Spanish than those who spoke the other languages of Jewish Ybor, e.g. Yiddish, and Russian.14

In Susan Greenbaum's book, More Than...
Table 1: Jewish Dry Goods (Wholesale) Stores in Tampa: 1910

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Last Name/Store</th>
<th>First Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abramovitz Bar</td>
<td>Bar</td>
<td>1807 14th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bergman E M</td>
<td></td>
<td>1813 7th av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britwitz Manuel</td>
<td></td>
<td>1612 7th av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buchman J M</td>
<td></td>
<td>1906 7th av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crackowaner Daniel</td>
<td></td>
<td>1012-1014 Franklin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crackowaner Morris</td>
<td></td>
<td>1514 7th av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essrig Meyer</td>
<td></td>
<td>1304 and 1605 7th av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falk O &amp; Bro Offin</td>
<td></td>
<td>714 Franklin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishman Solomon</td>
<td></td>
<td>1926 9th av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldberg Solomon</td>
<td></td>
<td>2105 7th av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldstein A N</td>
<td></td>
<td>1224 Franklin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guterman Daniel</td>
<td></td>
<td>1713 7th av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katz Adam &amp; Co Adam</td>
<td></td>
<td>1430 7th av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katz Manuel</td>
<td></td>
<td>307 Main W T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirstein Philip</td>
<td></td>
<td>26 City Sav Bank bldg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maas Bros Abe</td>
<td></td>
<td>619-621 Franklin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repp Isidor</td>
<td></td>
<td>169 Howard av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rothman Jacob</td>
<td></td>
<td>1515 7th av W T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schwartz Solomon</td>
<td></td>
<td>1328 7th av and 311 Main W T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segall Philip</td>
<td></td>
<td>1727 7th av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simovitz Abraham</td>
<td></td>
<td>1806 7th av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simovitz Samuel</td>
<td></td>
<td>301 Main W T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steinberg E H</td>
<td></td>
<td>1611 7th av</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weisberg Charles</td>
<td></td>
<td>N.E. corner Main and Howard av W T</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

W T = West Tampa
Source: 1910 City Directory, Vlm. X.

Black: *Afro-Cubans in Tampa, Florida 1886-2000*, a story about the organization of the Martí-Maceo Society (black Cubans) in Ybor City, she notes the willingness of Jewish merchants to learn Spanish as a means of attaining economic and social positions in a Latin immigrant society:

Adam Katz owned a dry goods store at 1430 7th Avenue in Ybor City. He was part of a small group of Jews in Tampa who had fled pogroms and discriminatory laws in Romania around the turn of the century. Like Katz, many were merchants in Ybor City who spoke Spanish and found a comfortable niche in the immigrant enclave.

Motivated initially by Martí-Maceo’s struggle to pay off a substantial bank loan of $2,600, Adam Katz, a Romanian merchant, became a friend to this group and assisted them financially until his death on November 19, 1924. By learning Spanish, Jewish immigrants were not only able to gain respect with the dominant population in Ybor, but
also conduct business with few restraints.\textsuperscript{15}

While few in number, the Sephardic population (Jews who came from Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East) in Ybor also had an easier time of communicating with the Spanish community than other merchants, because of their knowledge of \textit{Ladino}. Originating in Spain, \textit{Ladino} is a dialect still spoken by Sephardic Jews today and is largely a combination of Hebrew letters and Spanish pronunciation.

Immigrants began flooding into Ybor City seeking work. Cigar manufacturers, expanding their operations, adding branches and relocating their factories, provided jobs and created opportunities for merchants of every kind. The unincorporated city of Ybor was developing rapidly and residents and city officials alike had to contend with growing problems of sanitation, utilities, and transportation. Reluctantly, with the prodding of the Tampa Board of Trade, Ybor City became incorporated on June 2, 1887.\textsuperscript{16}

By the time the bulk of Jewish immigrants had come to the city around 1890, Tampa and its newly incorporated Ybor City were moving at a rapid pace, growing nearly to 6,000 people within a decade. From its beginning as a “sleepy coastal village,” to a bustling urban center, the expansion of Ybor City necessitated a vibrant retail industry to meet the many needs of cigar workers who lived there and worked in the nearby factories. Seventh Avenue and its surrounding streets became a central area in which immigrants worked, socialized, and conducted the majority of their shopping. In a sense, one could say that Seventh Avenue helped to foster numerous exchanges between immigrants from different countries and provided a distinctive environment in which business could be conducted. Sharing the immigrant experience, Cubans, Spaniards, and Italians understood the determination of Jews to succeed, leading to the formation of lifelong friendships with merchants.\textsuperscript{17}

Even as the majority of Jews participated in the economic growth of Ybor through the retail trade, a small percentage was involved in the production of cigars. Although their contributions were minimal in comparison with that of their Cuban, Spanish, and Italian neighbors, the majority of available literature on cigar production does refer to a handful of instances when Jews did participate. For example, in the mid-1900s, the Rippa family moved their cigar-manufacturing factory from Key West to the Tampa area to produce their own brand of cigars. German Jews also came to Tampa around 1910. The Hamburger, Regensburg, and Bucksbaum families are a few of the German Jews who came to Florida seeking the prospect of lucrative investment opportunities.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{JEWISH MERCHANTS’ ROLE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR CUBAN INDEPENDENCE}

In many larger communities in the South, Jews were viewed as being outside the mainstream population. By contrast, Tampa Jews were not prevented from participating in the affairs of their community. When José Martí began speaking around the United States about his personal struggle for Cuban Independence, Jews who were working in the tobacco industry in Tampa
joined with Spanish activist groups to lend their support. Laboring in the cigar factories, Hispanics and Jews conversed about Cuba and its prospect for tremendous growth and change in the coming years. If anything, eastern European Jews could empathize with Martí’s struggle for independence from Spain, for most had been estranged from their homelands, too, and knew what it felt like to be without a permanent place to live.19

Steinberg, owner of H.R. Steinberg’s on Seventh Avenue in Ybor, was an important supporter of Martí’s cause and in November 1892, introduced Martí to organizations within the Jewish community as a way to obtain funding for his movement. Steinberg was later honored with a reception attended by the Cuban leader. Due in part to their experiences with repressive governments in their native countries, Jews, especially those from Romania, sympathized with Cuban cigarworkers and believed that they should receive fair

Figure 1: Jewish geography of Ybor City, 1920s-1970s. (Used with permission from the collection of the Jewish Museum of Florida, Miami Beach.)
benefits and wages. Some individuals took action in other ways by volunteering to fight in the war with Spain. Men like Max and Joseph Steinberg even settled permanently in Cuba after their War of Independence.  

The experiences of Jews in Eastern Europe caused both Russian and Romanian immigrants to offer their support to the Cuban struggle in rather distinct ways. Historically, Jews from Romania “suffered more through being considered an alien in the country of his birth than any other persecuted Jew of the present day.” When Romanian Jews began immigrating to the United States, many became so “completely” devoted to their new country and took such strong interest in political affairs that they established their own organizations including the Romanian American Republican Club and the Romanian American Independent Citizens Associations. These organizations not only served as a forum for the expression of their opinions, but also as a place where Romanian immigrants could gather and interact with one another. Albert Staar, son of former merchants in Ybor City, expressed his thoughts on the reasons for Romanian support of Cuban independence:

“Being from Europe and running away from army conscription by tyrants, kings, and communists made us sympathetic to a country where we were free. You should support anything you wanted especially freedom seekers Cubans.”

Russian Jews responded in an altogether completely different manner to Martí’s cause, and were not as involved as the Romanians. In fact, by the time Martí visited Tampa in October of 1892, the majority of Russian businessman began making plans to move their shops out of Ybor City making way for larger businesses. Unlike the Romanians, Russian immigrants were always looking for ways to expand their businesses, pushing to move downtown in the hopes of capitalizing on the growing
Edward H. Steinberg, at right, was the owner of Steinberg's Dry Goods, 1310 7th Avenue, Ybor City. During the Cuban Revolution, Steinberg gave money to José Martí and was later honored with a reception by the Cuban leader himself. (Photograph used by permission of Special Collections, University of South Florida Libraries.)

customer base rather than remaining in the unpredictable economic structure of Ybor City. At this point it is important to note the significance of Jewish participation in the public affairs of Tampa during this period. Along with other immigrant populations, Jews living in Tampa were allowed to express their freedom by attending public assemblies and vocalizing their opinions without having to be concerned about retaliation by supporters of anti-Semitic movements. In stark contrast to the experiences of Tampa, Jews living in the Deep South witnessed many examples of hatred displayed against them, and for fear of their lives often did not become involved in the public affairs of their communities. This approach was not always possible, particularly when Jews responded to national incidents such as the 1913 trial of Georgia citizen and Jewish businessman Leo Frank. Cited as the “most publicized event involving a Jew that ever occurred in the South,” Leo Frank’s case ignited concerns among the Jewish community in Atlanta and throughout the United States. Ultimately, the false conviction of Frank for killing a 13-year-old worker in his pencil factory taught Jews that no matter how much they assimilated into southern society, the larger population would never consider them “true southerners.” In the minds of many Jews, what happened to Leo Frank could certainly have happened to them. Frank was given life imprisonment by the governor, but unfortunately was later
hanged by a lynch mob. Having experienced first-hand blatant anti-Semitism, Southern Jews remained on alert, outwardly displaying feelings of calm, but among themselves continuing to be fearful of the future.24

ISADORE KAUNITZ

In 1903, Isadore Kaunitz, a native of Buzei, Romania, constructed the first brick building on Seventh Avenue in Ybor City. Hearing stories of a “golden medina,” a golden land, where a person was free to live, work, and pray without being persecuted, immigrants like Kaunitz believed that they could make a better life for themselves in the United States. Carrying few material possessions, many Jewish immigrants who came to Ybor did not have any relatives to rely on, and often were pointed toward Kaunitz to seek counsel and financial assistance. By 1910, only seven years after Kaunitz had opened his store, El Sombrero Blanco - The White Hat, the city directory listed 15 stores owned by Jews in Ybor City; all were recorded as dry goods businesses (see Table 1). Through the efforts of merchants like Kaunitz, Jewish immigrants were able to establish their credibility within Ybor and be part of the tremendous expansion that was taking place at the time. In just a few years, Jews had managed to become part of the economic force on Seventh Avenue providing the city with a wide range of goods, from everyday articles such as fabric and clothing, to items like auto parts that were not so ordinary in those days. In 1910, the Whol, Buchman, and Rippa families opened their stores in Ybor City. No one, not even the families themselves could have imagined that their businesses would have such far-reaching impact on the future development of Tampa.25

By 1925, names like Aronovitz, Shine, Weissman, Verkauf, Weber, Weiss, Simovitz, Segall, Katz, and Wolfson, were prominent on storefronts and industries throughout Ybor City and West Tampa (see Figure 1). In the first quarter of the 20th century, Tampa's geographical and economic development increased dramatically, in part to the intensification of commerce and industry throughout Ybor City. By 1920, some 34 years after Jewish immigrants first arrived in Ybor City, a total of 30 businesses were owned and operated by Jewish merchants. This economic expansion was short-lived however, and came to an end with the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent depression that began that year. The Great Depression of the 1930s clearly affected Tampa's cigar industry, as America's fondness for tobacco was quickly supplanted by more pressing concerns caused by high unemployment and rationing of food staples and supplies by the federal government.26

Forced to deal with the prospect of shutting down their businesses entirely, many merchants on Seventh Avenue attempted to combat financial deterioration by diversifying their existing shops or opening completely different kinds of businesses. For many, the idea of closing up their shops for an extensive period was an agonizing decision, one that was necessary if their families were to have any chance of making it through the difficult times ahead. Others managed for as long as they could, relocating their businesses to the downtown and West Tampa areas. From 1930-1940, business on Ybor's main shopping area, Seventh Avenue (La Gran Séptima Avenida), continued to undergo tremendous changes, often leading to old stores being taken over entirely by new ones. During the decade of the 30s, Florida's Jewish population would increase to approximately 25,000.27

From 1930 to 1940, business on Seventh Avenue continued to change as old shops were replaced with new ones, including Finman’s Kosher Market, Alma Fleischman’s Style Hat Shop, Dayan’s Linens, and Sam Haimovitz’s Active Lumber Company. As the United States neared entrance into World War II, those merchants who were able to “hang on” into the 1940s would experience a revitalization of commerce that would have a tremendous impact on Tampa and Ybor City. The war brought thousands of skilled workers and military personnel to Tampa. The city was fast becoming a major center for the shipbuilding industry. While building and repairing ships required a steady flow of trained workers, the opening of military bases such as Drew, Henderson and MacDill Army Air Fields also meant that thousands of servicemen and women would spend months and even years living in the Tampa area. Ybor City's close proximity to the bases and Port of Tampa meant that
One of the last remaining Jewish-owned stores on Ybor City's Seventh Avenue is Max Argintar Men's Wear, 1522 East 7th Avenue. (Photograph courtesy of the author.)

shipyard workers and GIs would venture into Ybor, spending large parts of their weekly salaries in restaurants, bars and stores on Seventh Avenue. In 1946, the Bobo family, one of the more prominent Sephardic Jewish families living in the area, opened the Blue Ribbon Supermarket; it remained a fixture on the Avenue until June of 2000 when the family retired the business and sold it to a development group. The building, however, never made it through further development, and was destroyed by fire shortly after being sold.

The 1950s and 1960s brought further change to Ybor City with a large percentage of established businesses moving out of the area. With their permanent departure or closing, and a decline in the number of new stores opening, the once vibrant city was beginning to show signs of physical deterioration. Clothing stores owned by the Poller's and Haber's left Ybor to relocate downtown, while the Weissman's Hallmark Emblems and Martin's Uniforms remained until the 1970s. Though Ybor City went through many periods of highs and lows, the close-knit atmosphere that had been such a part of its charm during the first half of the century would never be the same after the U.S. embargo on Cuba in 1960 ended the importation of Cuban tobacco and permanently stifled the cigar manufacturing industry. According to José Yglesias's article, "The Radical Latino Island in the Deep South," cigar makers could not make fine cigars without tobacco from the Vuelta Abajo area of Pinar del Rio in Cuba. The Vuelta Abajo was considered by cigar manufacturers as the finest area to grow tobacco, and once the land became unavailable, the industry began to decline steadily. Adding to the decline, manufacturers also moved from the production of hand-rolled cigars to machine-made, which cost half the price (about five cents each) and could be made more quickly. Unlike the fine cigars that had built Ybor's reputation world-wide, these cigars could be made with less labor and in far larger quantities.

As early as the 1950s, many of Ybor City's historic buildings and entire neighborhoods began to be demolished to make way for new roads, subsidized housing, and proposed large-scale development. Urban renewal in the 1960s further complicated Ybor's situation and shifted the composition of long-time residents living in the area. In 1910, Ybor City was largely inhabited by immigrants all under the age of 40, and by 1960, the majority of these men and women were growing older. Race was also a factor, as large percentages of African-Americans began moving into Ybor City after 1950. The demolition of many Ybor homes and businesses to make way for construction of U.S. Interstate 4 just north of the city's core business district further added to Ybor's economic decline.

Florida first approved urban renewal legislation in 1959, and in 1962 Tampa was the first city to reveal its plans for the creation of an urban renewal agency. While bulldozers began to tear down Ybor City in 1965, officials in the urban renewal office proclaimed that the city would become "a tourist attraction second to none in the
U.S.” In the end, 660 buildings housing 1,100 families were demolished at a cost of over 9.6 million dollars.32

Even through this difficult period, Jewish merchants never completely abandoned Ybor City, as evidenced by the arrival of families like the Waksman family who fled Cuba in 1961 and opened the Corona Brush factory in Ybor and the Dress Mart in downtown Tampa. The significance of Jewish merchants in Tampa was made clear by newspaper articles written shortly before the closing of Louis Wohl’s department store in 1977. After serving the community for nearly 80 years (open since 1897), Wohl’s supplied Tampa residents with a myriad of goods, from restaurant supplies and equipment to home furnishings. Lawrence Levy, an employee of Wohl’s since 1933, fondly recalled the days when “country boys” from as far away as Ocala would come to the store to buy supplies to make their moonshine. Levy recalled, “They’d come to our warehouse in a pickup truck with 15 or 20 100-pound sacks of sugar already piled on. Then they’d fill up the rest of the space with 5-gallon bottles.” Eventually, the government stepped in and ordered Wohl’s employees to record the license tag numbers of anyone purchasing five or more bottles at one time. Levy added, “that pretty well ended the business for us.”33

Through the revitalization of Ybor City in the 1980s and 1990s, a few Jewish businesses returned and tried their hand at retail again; unfortunately their efforts were short-lived as Ybor continued to undergo urbanization. Small shops could no longer compete with the “economic boom” that was occurring throughout downtown Tampa.

Although crowds of people filled Ybor’s cafes daily giving Tampa residents the false impression of the city’s return, nearly a third of Ybor’s 2,229 residents in 1980 lived below the poverty level. Nonetheless, one single Jewish family, the Argintars, has managed to remain on the Avenue since 1902. Argintar’s Men’s Wear has been a staple on Seventh Avenue (1414 7th Avenue) and continues to be the only store operated by a descendant of immigrants who fled Romania in the late 1890s. When asked about his family’s service to the community, Sammy Argintar, son of the late Max Argintar who originally founded the store in 1902, proudly replied, “We know about 70 percent of the people…we have been here, our business had been here since 1902. We’re the oldest business big or small.”

As Ybor City undergoes a rebirth and revitalization, as renovations and new construction transforms entire blocks, as new stores and restaurants open, and the clang of the streetcar returns after an absence of over 50 years, the only lasting remnants of the Jewish merchants are their names, which adorn many of the building facades on the Avenue. Who could have foreseen the impact and enduring presence that a small group of people from Russia, Romania, and Germany would have on the history of commerce and trade in Ybor City?34

ENDNOTES

Yael Greenberg-Pritzker received a Bachelor of Arts and a Masters of Arts in Applied Anthropology from the University of South Florida. She plans to pursue her Ph.D. in Anthropology, and teaches anthropology part-time at Hillsborough Community College. Her areas of interest include ethnography, immigrant history, ethnicity and identity. Most recently, she was awarded the Presidential Award from the Florida Historical Society for her paper "Southern Cultural Enclaves: Jewish Settlement in Ybor City, 1880-1924." Currently, she is writing and publishing articles which pertain to her work on the Jewish community of Ybor City.

The author wishes to thank Mr. Richard Bernardy for his assistance in preparation of illustrations and graphics for this article.

4. Ibid., 3.
8. Ibid., Green and Zerivitz, 15.
16. Ibid., 190.
17. Glenn L. Westfall, Key West: Cigar City U.S.A. (Key West: Historic Key West Preservation Board, 1985), 5, 17.
19. Ibid., Ybor City and the Jews.
21. Ybor City and the Jews; Centro Maccabeo Names, available at Mosaic Archives, Miami; Ibid., Green and Zerivitz, 16.
26. Heimovics and Zerivitz, 29; Westfall, 18; Ybor City and the Jews.
27. Ybor City and the Jews.
28. Ybor City and the Jews.
31. A.M. de Quesada, Images of America: Ybor City (Great Britain: Arcadia Publishing, 1999), 109; Ybor City and the Jews; Mormino and Pozzetta, 305.
32. Mormino and Pozzetta, 305-306.
34. Ybor City and the Jews; Mormino and Pozzetta, 312-313; Sammy Argintar, interview by Yael V. Greenberg-Pritzker, 29 March 2000.