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: A Home in Richmond and Galveston

## BOOKS



# A Home in Richmond and Galveston

*First-person accounts look at Jewish stories in the South*

### The Civil War Diary of Emma Mordecai

Edited and with an introduction by Dianne Ashton with Melissa R. Klapper (NYU Press)

More than 160 years ago, Emma Mordecai, an educated Jewish woman from a prosperous, slave-holding family in Richmond, Va., took quill to paper and described her daily life during the final year of the Civil War.

Following the death of her mother, Mordecai and her family rented out their Richmond home to the Confederate army. In her 50s and unmarried, she moved to a small farm owned by her Christian sister-in-law, Rosina, in Rosewood, just outside the city.

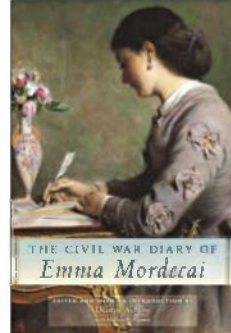
Her diary spans from April 1864 to May 1865 and is a rare and revealing personal testimony of an observant Jewish woman who lived in the heart of the Confederacy.

Indeed, Mordecai was a minority among a minority. Jews made up less than 1 percent of the South then, a total of some 25,000 Jews. But even among that community, she was a rarity—a religious single woman in a Jewish population where most inter-married or assimilated.

Dianne Ashton, professor emeritus

of philosophy and world religion at Rowan University, had spent years researching and writing about Mordecai. However, she had not completed the manuscript before her death in 2022.

Enter Melissa Klapper, a history professor at Rowan and director of the school's women and gender studies program.



Klapper and Ashton met when Klapper was in graduate school. Ashton became first her mentor and later her friend and colleague. After Ashton's death, Klapper felt compelled to complete and publish Ashton's vital and fascinating work.

And it is a fascinating read. The diary, with its extensive, 80-page introduction detailing Southern Jewish life, will engage lay readers as well as scholars.

Mordecai wrote about her everyday comings and goings, from strolls through the countryside to updates

on family and vivid descriptions of the broader context of wartime life. She visited wounded Confederate soldiers, endured food rationing and looked after others during fierce battles nearby. In one entry, she wrote about placing flowers she found on a walk in the woods in pots, then hearing "heavy firing in the direction of the city. The servants say they have heard it when at work in the field. The enemy seem to be making an attack on all sides. I still feel undismayed & pray God to enable us to endure...with fortitude."

In her first entry, on Thursday, April 18, 1864, Mordecai wrote that she returned to Richmond, where she, accompanied by Rosina's grown daughter, spent Passover with the family of another cousin. They were observant Jews and lived in walking distance of Beth Shalom synagogue.

Her relatives spanned both sides of the Civil War, but Mordecai, like almost all her siblings, supported slavery. While Jews today will find her defense of slavery in the diary distressing and inconsistent with core Jewish values and beliefs, Klapper cautioned that we must understand Mordecai's views in the context of her times. "She's a good example of the messiness of history," Klapper said in an interview. "She is both a staunch defender of Judaism and also



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a slave owner who really believed in the Confederacy.”

After the war, Mordecai continued to live at Rosewood with family. She remained active in Richmond's Jewish life, founding Beth Shalom's Sunday school, where she served as its superintendent.

Her diary was preserved by her relatives, who donated the surviving pages to the University of North Carolina.

The Civil War is extensively documented, with scores of diaries written by women, men and soldiers. Yet Mordecai's diary stands out, Klapper said, for its remarkable balance of daily life and broader reflections on the war. And notably, her vivid, honest writing reveals a deep commitment to her Jewish faith.

—Penny Schwartz

Penny Schwartz is a journalist who writes about Jewish subjects and the arts for a variety of publications.

### Melting Point: Family, Memory, and the Search for a Promised Land

By Rachel Cockerell (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

Exiled from country after country due to antisemitism, Jews wandered all over the globe for centuries. That is, until the State of Israel was declared the homeland of the Jewish people in 1948.

But before there was Israel, there were other ideas for a Jewish homeland. In her unique debut book, *Melting Point*, British journalist Rachel Cockerell digs through newspaper accounts, letters, memoirs, speeches, documents and interviews to describe the development of the Zionist movement and the seeds that led to today's Jewish state. And among the items she unearths are the plans that began in 1907 to create a homeland for the Jews in Galveston, Tex.

Cockerell is the great-granddaughter of David Jochelman, one of the Zionist leaders behind the Galveston Plan and a close friend of Israel



Zangwill, a British author and associate of Theodor Herzl. She had originally planned to write a book about her family. Before starting her research, Cockerell had known little about her great-grandfather and had not realized his significance to the history of modern Zionism. She did not even know “who” Galveston was.

“Eventually I discovered that Galveston was not a person but a place, and the destination for 10,000 Jews in the years leading up to the First World War—sent there from Russia by my great-grandfather,” she writes. “None of my family knew about this: At some point the story of the Galveston Plan, and my great-grandfather's role in it, was lost down the generations.”

With that research, Cockerell has written a distinctive form of non-fiction narrative. Other than the author's introduction and afterword, the book is composed of primary sources. Using direct quotes from Jewish historical figures, newspaper articles, books of the time and more, Cockerell presents the history of modern Zionism in the making, interwoven with fascinating insights on the personalities who struggled to find a safe haven for the Jews.

Cockerell's spot-on juxtaposition and editing of direct quotes makes *Melting Point* an easy-to-read coda of significant personalities and events in Zionist history. Long-dead voices are retrieved to present a story with

novel-like vividness and detail.

Cockerell opens the book with rapturous descriptions of Herzl, including one from the *London Star*, which described him as “a tall, lithe man, with coal black hair, beard and mustaches, restless visionary eyes and a nervous mouth, twitching with half sad humor.” *The American Hebrew* called him “not only handsome, but regal.”

Yet when Herzl, then a successful Viennese journalist and playwright, published his Zionist manifesto, *The Jewish State*, in 1896, the effusive accolades were tempered. Herzl himself wrote that friends thought “I had gone out of my mind.”

*Melting Point* recounts the various practical steps Herzl—often with Zangwill's help—took in establishing



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a Zionist movement. These included convening the First Zionist Congress in 1897 and founding the Herzl Zionist Organization (a precursor to the World Zionist Organization), which he led until his death in 1904 at the age of 44, with chapters throughout Europe and the United States.

Herzl conducted a broad diplomatic effort with the leadership of Britain, Germany, Russia and the Ottoman Empire to issue a formal charter for a Jewish government in Palestine. But Palestine, then a dusty province of the Ottoman Empire, was not the only option under consideration. Herzl also pondered Argentina and East Africa.

In 1903, in the wake of a devastating pogrom in Kishinev, Herzl stunned delegates at the sixth Zionist Congress with the news that Britain had offered the Jews 5,000 square miles in East Africa. ("England Offers Jews a Country" was the headline in one 1903 *Chicago Tribune* article.) The "Uganda Plan," actually set in modern-day Kenya, was conceived for Britain's self-interest: to find customers for the new Uganda Railway, curb the flow of refugees to London and attract Jewish support for British colonial policy in South Africa.

The scheme collapsed because of lack of interest. But thanks to an energetic Texas rabbi, Henry Cohen, and the backing of Jacob Schiff, a wealthy financier, a new idea emerged: the Galveston Plan.

Zangwill, Herzl's enthusiastic supporter, had by the time of Herzl's death abandoned the search for a Jewish homeland in Palestine and instead founded his own group, the Jewish Territorialist Organization, with the help of Cockerell's great-grandfather, David Jochelman. They advocated for a Jewish homeland in whatever land might be available.



Theodor Herzl (left) and his close associate, Israel Zangwill

"If we cannot get the Holy Land," Zangwill wrote, "we can make another land Holy."

Nevertheless, Texas seemed an unlikely destination, and Galveston, a little-known port city, had been devastated by a storm in 1900. But the state was large, and Galveston could be a gateway to the rest of the country.

"Galveston greeted me with open arms," said Morris Waldman, who was sent there in 1906 to scout out the port city. He loved its long white beaches, bright sunshine, lush flowers and verdant plants. Ships carrying 10,000 Russian Jews, only a small drop of the 200,000 seeking to flee Russia and its pogroms, made the journey.

The Galveston Plan lasted from 1907 to 1914, aiming to help Jewish immigrants settle across "the Great American West." However, many newcomers were quickly disillusioned. One account described the city's streets as "overgrown with thorny bushes" and the homes as "miserable little Mexican shacks,

constructed of boards, covered with rusted tin."

Ultimately, the outbreak of World War I brought transatlantic travel to a halt, effectively ending the plan. Still, many American Jews today trace their roots to those who arrived through Galveston.

The last two sections of the book turn to Cockerell's family, who immigrated from Russia to New York City, London and Israel. The switch to a personal account is somewhat jarring but ultimately serves to underline the themes of the first part of the book: the Jewish need for safe haven, the scattering of Jews worldwide, Jewish identity and political divisions.

*Melting Point* poignantly reflects on the failed attempts that ultimately became the stepping stones toward the creation of Israel. Looking back at a time when Israel was still just a dream deepens our appreciation for the reality that exists today.

—Stewart Kampel

Stewart Kampel was a longtime editor at *The New York Times*.