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Photographs, Materials, Needed for
Southern Tier Jewish History Project

Your family photographs and treasured mementos could go into the annals of history.

How? By submitting them to the Southern Tier Jewish History Project, just started at the State University of New York at Binghamton by Lance J. Sussman, assistant professor of American Jewish History in the History Department.

Sussman, who has written a history of the Jews of Richmond, Indiana, has launched a similar project to study Jewish history in the Southern Tier.

A project of the Jewish Studies Program at the University, financial support for the endeavor comes from the Jacob and Rose Olum Foundation, the Selkowitz Foundation and the Horowitch Foundation. Charles Rosenthal of the Foundation of SUNY-Binghamton has been the principal fund-raiser.

Sussman's first goal is to mount an exhibit of photographs and documents, probably in fall 1989, and to write an accompanying catalogue as a permanent record of the exhibit.

His second goal is to compare the Jewish community with other ethnic groups in the region, and to determine whether patterns of life for Jews were atypical or conformed to nationwide trends. Jewish labor history will be an area of particular interest, Sussman said.

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Third, Sussman will study how Jews contributed to community life, as business, professional and civic leaders. The large population of Jewish faculty members and students at SUNY-Binghamton has had a noticeable impact on the local Jewish community as well, he added, a subject he'd like to document.

The first record of Jewish settlement is found in an 1851 edition of a magazine published in Philadelphia. "That was the age of the peddler," explains Sussman, who speculates that Jewish people were walking the roads and valleys in this region about the same time, an era when Binghamton was just emerging as a political entity.

The period of heaviest settlement, he adds, was from 1880 to 1920, when many Russian Jews were propelled into immigration by pogroms and fear of the draft. The post-World War II years were characterized by formal organization and increasing sophistication of the infrastructure of the Jewish community, and both reflect national trends, he noted.

Sussman says he'll start by exploring records of Jewish organizations in Broome County: the four temples, the Jewish Federation of Broome County and Jewish Community Center, and will include early immigration organizations in the Southern Tier. If time allows, he'll expand to other counties in the Southern Tier, to give a broader view of settlement patterns.

Sussman says he hopes to work closely with staff members of historical societies and agencies in the region. Sussman says he'll dovetail his project with upcoming anniversaries of the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish Federation.

While he expects that one or two SUNY-Binghamton students will gather photographs and conduct interviews, Sussman will need community volunteers as well. There are no specific qualifications, he says, except interest in the project.

"The first critical need is for good pictures. They can be from 1850, or they can be from 1950. They can be of family seders, bar mitzvahs, wedding pictures, or newspaper clippings of significant events. If we have a wealth of choices, it will be a much better situation." All photographs will be copied and returned.

To assist with the project or to submit materials, call Sussman at 777-4775.

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