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Greenville Diary: A Norther Rabbi Confronts the Deep South, 1966-1970

Abstract

Despite my long involvement in writing Jewish history, I never imagined that my late father, Rabbi Abraham Ruderman, might become the subject of my study of the past. This all changed some four years ago when he died in Jerusalem at the age of eighty-nine. Among his belonging was a filing cabinet filled with old sermons and a set of personal diaries that contained entries over a span of close to seventy years. I filled my suitcases with as much as I could carry, and since then, his writings, especially the worn diaries, composed in old hardcover school composition booklets, have been my constant companions.

Disciplines

History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies | United States History

Greenville Diary

A Northern Rabbi Confronts the Deep South, 1966–70

DAVID B. RUDERMAN

With the exception of a few of us . . . most rabbis are not Southerners. . . . In addition to having a different outlook, they are, of course, labeled “Yankees.” They are also dreamers, perhaps as unrealistic and romantic in their own right as is the South itself. They want to change things; they perceive themselves in Protestant robes and prophetic roles. . . . They want to say that the black man must come out of the dungeons of oppression. . . . They want freedom and justice for all . . . but these damn rabbinic Yankees come to disturb the waters of unreality. They come to rudely transform the status quo—which is not really a status quo anyway, as the South is always changing. But who likes to be reminded of it constantly, especially by an unrealistic dreamer, the self-appointed or HUC-appointed, prophet? And especially if he has come from the North, where they think that they know everything and how to solve every problem and they can impose their standards on us in Dixie.

Rabbi Jack D. Spiro, 1979¹

DESPITE MY LONG involvement in writing Jewish history, I never imagined that my late father, Rabbi Abraham Ruderman, might become the subject of my study of the past. This all changed some four years ago when he died in Jerusalem at the age of eighty-nine. Among his belongings was a filing cabinet filled with old sermons and a set of personal diaries that contained entries over a span of close to seventy years. I filled my suitcases with as much as I could carry, and since then, his writings, especially the worn diaries, composed in old fashioned hardcover school composition booklets, have been my constant companions.

1. Jack D. Spiro, “Rabbi in the South: A Personal View,” *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry*, ed. Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky (Waltham, Mass., and Charlottesville, Va., 1979), 42.

I have often wondered what prompted my father to record his personal experiences over so long a time. He began during his college years at Boston University in the early 1930s; his last entry records his horrible suffering only two months before dying of cancer. As in the case of other diarists, it is not clear whether the author expected his entries to be read.² I always had a vague recollection that these diaries existed but he never publicized their existence nor was there any special pleading on his part that I preserve them for posterity or share them with his grandchildren as a kind of ethical legacy. Instead, he seemed to be fulfilling an inner psychological need by writing to himself. He even seemed to fear, especially in the early years of his writing, that his private reflections might be perused by others, and thus, on several occasions, he chose to write in Hebrew, hoping that the privacy of his own personal space would not be violated. Given the fact that the diary was not written for public consumption, it appears to be a relatively honest appraisal of the self, to the extent than any text can be deemed as such.

Abraham Ruderman was born in Malden, Massachusetts, in 1911, the youngest son of an Orthodox family of eight children. His older brother, Samuel Ruderman, pursued a career in the conservative rabbinate, serving as the rabbi of a successful congregation in Fall River, Massachusetts for over twenty-five years. Owing in part to the often tense relations between the two brothers, Abraham opted to study for the rabbinate at the Jewish Institute of Religion rather than follow his brother to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He was ordained in 1941 and entered the army air force as a chaplain, serving posts in Texas and in Greenland and Labrador. Following the completion of his service in the armed forces, he was rabbi of congregations in St. Albans and Croton-on-Hudson in New York, Muskegon, Michigan, Elmont, New York, and Poughkeepsie, New York. Each of the congregations he served was relatively small and was located in a small community.³ Despite his abun-

2. I once reflected on this very point in considering the autobiography/diary of Abraham Yagel, a sixteenth-century Italian Jew. See my *A Valley of Vision: The Heavenly Journey of Abraham Ben Hananiah Yagel* (Philadelphia, 1990), especially 23–27.

3. One of the pioneers in the study of “small town” Jews and their rabbis is Lee Shai Weissbach, who summarizes a significant part of this new work with an ample bibliography in his “Rabbinic Leadership in Small-Town America,” based on a talk he gave at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in November 2001 and soon to be published in a volume edited by Jack Wertheimer, tentatively entitled *Jewish Religious Leadership in the Modern Era*. My thanks to Professor Weissbach for sharing his essay with me prior to publication. See also the classic work of Ewa Morawska, *Insecure Prosperity: Small-Town Jews in Industrial America, 1890–1940* (Princeton, N.J., 1996).

dance of good will, his generous spirit, and his devotion to Judaism, he lacked the political instincts and diplomatic skills necessary to deal with the challenges of powerful and demanding boards. Coming with high expectations of long-term success, he usually parted company with each of these congregations after four or five years, because of his own dissatisfaction with them or theirs with him.

In early 1966, his contract was up for renewal at Vassar Temple in Poughkeepsie. There were clear signs of opposition to his remaining rabbi from a powerful segment of the congregational board. After a heated debate between his ardent followers and his equally persistent opponents, he lost a very close vote which virtually split the congregation in half.⁴ At the age of fifty-five, he and my mother pondered their future once again. This time, given his advancing age, their choices were more limited. Faced with the option to serve a Long Island congregation with a long history of rabbinic instability, they decided to consider one other possibility: that of a congregation in the deep South, the Hebrew Union Temple of Greenville, Mississippi. They were motivated to make such a radical change in their lives solely because, if my father wanted to remain a congregational rabbi, there were no other good choices.

After attending my graduation from college in New York, my parents made their first trip to Greenville in June 1966. They were clearly uneasy with the notion of living in the South. As my father readily admitted in his first diary entry related to Greenville, they were filled with northern prejudice toward the South; they even felt sorry for rabbis who were obliged to serve southern congregations. But their preliminary visit convinced them otherwise. People seemed so pleasant and hospitable and so “hungry for Judaism and leadership,” as my father put it. Most importantly, the economic terms were far superior to what he would have been offered elsewhere. If they needed any more rationalization for their decision to accept Greenville’s offer, it was that Greenville was not like the rest of Mississippi. It was Hodding Carter’s town and also that of another famous southern liberal, William Percy. As “an oasis of liberalism,” Greenville was different: “the city was integrated and their problems are on the road to solution.”⁵

4. In my father’s personal letters I was able to find an exchange between him and the president of Vassar Temple discussing quite candidly the leadership’s complaints about his performance as rabbi and his vigorous response.

5. See the appendix, “Excerpts from Abraham Ruderman’s Diary, 1966–70,” below, 655. Hodding Carter, the award-winning writer, editor, and publisher of Greenville’s newspaper, the *Delta Democrat-Times*, and his friend and colleague William Percy are both discussed in Ann Waldron, *Hodding Carter, The Reconstruc-*

My parents remained on a “high” during the first few months. They were wined and dined and treated to the finest of “southern hospitality.” They also were elated at synagogue attendance both in Greenville itself and in the small neighboring town of Rolling Fork, which my father visited monthly to serve a small community of fourteen families. For my father, the reception of his holiday services and sermons was exhilarating. He had finally found a congregation fully appreciative of his considerable talents. By the end of the first month, he would proclaim, “How we regretted leaving Poughkeepsie and how glad we are now that we left.”⁶

Only a month later, however, he came to realize the darker side of the rabbinate he was about to encounter. By early November he noted how overwhelming the problem of mixed marriages was in this town, and how casually parents accepted the inevitable—even church marriages and the education of their grandchildren in the Christian faith. He already was speculating on the reasons for the ready acceptance of intermarriage among his congregants: “Perhaps it is due to a lack of confidence in the worth of their religion. Perhaps there is a secret desire on the part of the parents to let their children escape from Judaism and merge into the majority religion.” He hoped that he might facilitate a greater conviction among his congregants about the worth of Judaism, a “reasonable and enlightened faith” as he called it.⁷

At about this same time, he experienced his first taste of race relations in Greenville. My father had long been deeply engaged in interfaith and civic activities in all the congregations he served. Like his rabbinic colleagues in other southern communities, this often was manifest in his affiliation in the ministerial association and in the Rotary Club where, in overwhelmingly Christian forums, he virtually represented the Jewish community.⁸ By late November or early December 1966, he had already

tion of a Racist (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993). On Percy in particular, see especially 64–66. My father’s comments about the uniqueness of Greenville echoed almost precisely the sentiments of Nicholas von Hoffman, who visited the city in 1964 and credited Greenville’s difference to the legacy of Percy and Carter. See von Hoffman, “Mississippi Ends at Greenville,” *New York Post*, August 4, 1965. For more on the reporting of the DDT in relation to other Mississippi newspapers, see Susan Weill, *In a Madhouse’s Din: Civil Rights Coverage by Mississippi’s Daily Press, 1948–1968* (Westport, Conn., 2002).

6. See appendix, 656.

7. See appendix, 656. Compare Sidney Goldstein, “Mixed Marriages in the Deep South,” *Jews in the South*, ed. Leonard Dinnerstein and May Dale Palsson (Baton Rouge, La., 1973), 283–87.

8. Compare Rabbi Charles Mantinband’s similar affiliations in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in Clive Webb, “Big Struggle in A Small Town: Charles Mantinband

addressed both local organizations. In his first address to Rotary, he initially tried to win over his audience by referring to the pleasantness of life in the South but he immediately added: "It would be dishonest of me not to say that some aspects of Mississippi are hard to digest. I am after all a Yankee, born and educated in Boston and imbued with a spirit of justice and equity, derived not only from my passion for our democratic way of life but deeply rooted in the principles and values enunciated in Holy Scriptures. Any criticism I have to make must be given an opportunity to jell, and be viewed from the stance of a longer period of residence than three months."⁹

He acknowledged the advice he had already received that it was necessary to live in the South a long time before being in a position to judge it fairly. But despite such admonitions, my father had no patience in shaping his moral judgments: "It is questionable," he quickly added, "whether we shall ever choose to throw in our lot with certain undesirable aspects which longtime natives also reject." What he meant by long time natives with whose opinion he could identify were the editors of the *Delta Democrat Times*, founded by Hodding Carter and later run by his son Hodding Carter III.¹⁰ Citing extensively from several recent editorials in the *DDT* (which my father labeled "a moral insecticide") excoriating racial discrimination in the state, he embraced a formidable ally in his fight against "bigotry, hatred, violence and narrow-mindedness." Fully ignoring the cautionary advice that newcomers should be patient with southern ways

of Hattiesburg, Mississippi," *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights*, ed. Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1997), 228; and those of Rabbi Perry Nussbaum in Jackson, Mississippi, in Gary Philip Zola, "What Price Amos? Perry Nussbaum's Career in Jackson, Mississippi," in the same volume, 238, 240–41, 256. Rabbi William Fineshriber of Memphis, Tennessee, Rabbi Sidney Wolf of Corpus Christi, Texas, Rabbi Herbert Berger of Durham, North Carolina, Rabbi Jacob Rothschild of Atlanta, Georgia, Rabbi Malcolm Stern of Norfolk, Virginia, and undoubtedly many others all found membership in Rotary an important affiliation for advancing their communal leadership. See *The Quiet Voices*, index, Rotary Club.

9. I cite from the typewritten text in my father's file of sermons, simply entitled "Rotary Address." One of the few talks my father actually wrote out, it is also accompanied by a preliminary outline which bears the date 1966. In the text itself, he mentions that he had been in town for only three months, which would indicate he gave the address sometime in November 1966. In the editorials from the *DDT* he cites (see n. 11 below), the last one is dated November 25, which suggests that his address took place shortly thereafter.

10. In June 1966, only several months earlier, Hodding Carter III had been named editor and associate publisher of the *DDT*. See Waldron, *Hodding Carter*, 316.

before criticizing them, he claimed a moral mandate to speak out by echoing the positions of Hodding Carter's newspaper: "It would be well for all of us to take to heart the advice given by the *DDT*. I come to your state fired with a prophet's passion for justice, love of fellowman and a desire to serve. Now that I have settled in Mississippi my motto shall not be 'my state right or wrong,' but rather 'my state when it is right, and when it is wrong, I shall do everything in my power to set it right.' I think this is the way of Rotary."¹¹ One wonders how his fellow Rotarians reacted to this brash, impetuous prophet of the North who in the course of only three months presumed to understand clearly and pronounce unequivocally what was right and what was wrong with their neighborhoods and their lives.

By the time he had delivered his "inaugural" speech at Rotary, he had also attended his second meeting of the ministerial association. When a motion to discuss whether to integrate the organization was raised, my father was startled to discover that his "northern" ideas about race relations were generally not shared by his supposedly learned clerical colleagues. One after another stood up to denounce the idea of integrating the association. This in turn provoked my father to challenge their basic assumptions, which included the belief in a biblical basis for segregation, the notion that a minister should simply follow his flock, and that color was a standard for judging human character. When he expressed astonishment over the fact that educated leaders such as clergy could openly espouse bigoted positions, he soon came to realize how certain of his colleagues had proudly found their calling with little recourse to formal education. He listened in silence to the litany of complaints voiced about the white civil rights workers who had "invaded" Mississippi, their moral improprieties, and "even the nuns [who] became pregnant while working for civil rights." In so hostile an atmosphere, he refrained from stating what was really on his mind: "How I was aching to tell them about a man who taught his people to hate and to believe that they were superior to all other races and nations, how the inevitable result of such indoctrination was the gas chamber."¹²

11. Accompanying the text of this Rotary address were copies of six *DDT* editorials which provided the basis of his remarks. They include, in the order they were cited: "No One Bothers to Vote," November 21, 1966; "Sickening Spectacle in Grenada," September 14, 1966; "Inside Programs or Outside Intervention," September 28, 1966; "The Common Enemies," September 16, 1966; "Heroes with Feet of Clay," November 3, 1966; "Only a First Step," November 25, 1966.

12. See appendix, 658. There is already an extensive literature on the experience of southern rabbis dealing with race relations. I found the following particu-

A month passed before my father reported about the next meeting of the ministerial association. This time he appears to have won his only victory in Greenville's race relations struggles, forged by a strategic compromise on his part. It was clear from the start that a majority vote for integration was not possible in light of the sentiments articulated around the table. My father took the floor to voice his opinion that integration was the only right moral course but that since this was not presently realizable, the ministers should agree on a limited number of meetings with the black ministers, to test the waters and perhaps to forge alliances for the future. My father's proposal was accepted and a series of meetings between the two communities of preachers eventually emerged. Several days later my father continued to sound a general note of optimism and satisfaction as he reported on the Hanukkah celebration in the Jewish community: "There seems to be much satisfaction with our presence. What greater joy can come to a person than to be wanted and needed so genuinely as these people seem to want and need us."¹³

By the beginning of the new year 1967, however, his mood had changed. He was again preoccupied with the challenge of mixed marriages. The phenomenon was so widespread that "almost every family had a cousin or two of mixed marriage." Never having performed a mixed marriage, my father was in a quandary. He was soon pressured by prominent families who insisted that their children be married in the temple. Civil marriage was not an option, since the families insisted that a full religious ceremony take place if the children were not to seek and be welcomed into the church. Trying to persuade the non-Jewish partners to consider a course on Judaism and eventual conversion did not seem to

larly relevant in contextualizing my father's experiences: Malcolm Stern, "The Role of the Rabbi in the South," in *Turn to the South*, 21–32; the essays in *The Quiet Voices*, especially Bauman's historiographical introduction, and the aforementioned essays by Webb and Zola; Seth Forman, *Blacks in the Jewish Mind: A Crisis of Liberalism* (New York, 1998), especially the chapter "The Liberal Jew, the Southern Jew, and Desegregation in the South, 1945–64," 24–54; Samuel Proctor, Louis Schmier, Malcolm Stern, eds., *Jews of the South* (Macon, Ga., 1984); Dinnerstein and Palsson, *Jews in the South*, especially the essays by Theodore Lowi, Marvin Braiterman, and Alan Krause, the latter based on the author's rabbinic dissertation on southern rabbis and civil rights; and most recently, Clive Webb, *Fight against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights* (Athens, Ga., 2001), especially the long chapter on rabbis, 169–216. Most relevant among the published memoirs of the period is Edward Cohen's *The Peddler's Grandson: Growing Up Jewish in Mississippi* (Jackson, Miss., 1999) and David Orlansky's 1999 video documentary, *Delta Jews*. On the general context of the civil rights struggle in Mississippi, see John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, Ill., and Chicago, 1994).

13. See appendix, 658.

work either. Without any satisfactory option, my father chose, in the case of a forthcoming marriage of a prominent congregational family, simply to be out of town. It was not difficult for the family to find another rabbi to officiate and to sanctify the union. He had not really addressed the problem head-on; he had merely relieved himself of the embarrassment of participating in a ceremony he considered to be inauthentic.¹⁴

An entire year passed without incident, or at least none was recorded in the diary. By this time my father had launched his unique albeit partial solution to addressing the abysmal problems of poverty within Greenville's black community. He wrote directly to his rabbinic colleagues throughout the nation and publicized his effort through the newsletter of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, appealing to them to send large quantities of clothing, new and used, which he would personally distribute among the needy. His persistence soon paid off. One of the first loads of clothing came from the congregation of Rabbi Sidney Brooks of Omaha, Nebraska; a much larger collection of 3,670 pounds of used clothing soon followed from his colleague Albert Minda in Minneapolis, Minnesota.¹⁵ Through his clothing campaign, he interacted directly with the clergy of the Delta ministry and with the leaders of the Head Start program in town. They apparently appreciated his genuine interest in their work, and he felt comfortable engaging them in open dialogue despite the unspoken social codes of separation which still marked the black and white communities.¹⁶

By March 1968, about a year and half after his rosy arrival, his congregation voted to renew my father for only two more years. As he put it, "the new contract was accompanied by the usual recriminations on the part of a few, especially those with non-Jewish wives. There is a general desire on the part of the vast majority that we remain." But it was clear from this minimalist contract that my father's refusal to perform mixed marriages and his constant and conspicuous engagement with the black community had ruffled feathers and eventually would undermine his future altogether in this affluent but insecure Jewish community.

14. See appendix, 659–60.

15. Sidney H. Brooks (1920–99) served as rabbi of Temple Israel of Omaha, Nebraska, from 1952 to 1985. He was known as a champion for social justice and was most active in ecumenical and civic organizations in Omaha. Albert Minda (1895–1977) served as the rabbi of Temple Israel of Minneapolis, Minnesota, from 1922 to 1963. He was also active in interfaith and civic organizations including the Urban League and United Fund. He had already officially retired from the pulpit when he responded favorably to my father's request to collect clothing for the Greenville poor.

16. See appendix, 660–61.

His activities on behalf of civil rights continued unabated in the following months. He reports with mixed emotion on a joint meeting between white and black ministers in May 1968 where seemingly insoluble problems of welfare and education for poor blacks were raised but hardly acted upon. Half a year later he faced the most painful dilemma of his Greenville career on behalf of civil rights. The board of the Mid Delta Educational Association, an organization solely dedicated to fighting for better conditions for the city's blacks, invited him to join their ranks. It was a clear recognition of his public image in the community. As he fully understood, his massive clothing drive had endeared him to the leadership of the MDEA. At the same time, identifying so openly with the cause of blacks was something his own Jewish congregation could not countenance, or as he put it, "Identifying with Negroes is not a popular pastime in Mississippi."

In a long diary entry he complained bitterly about the neglect of the aged, black population on the part of the city council and board of supervisors of Greenville. It was one thing to collect clothes for the poor; it was another to take on city hall. He also pointed fingers at members of the Jewish community who followed the lead of the white majority in calling for "no obvious help, association or fraternization with Negroes." He mentioned the fear engendered by two synagogue bombings in Mississippi during the preceding year. What he probably referred to was the bombing of the synagogue in Jackson followed by the bombing of Rabbi Perry Nussbaum's house a short time later. My father knew Nussbaum personally and certainly knew of the personal pain Nussbaum had suffered because of his well-publicized activities on behalf of civil rights.¹⁷ Despite the genuine anxiety the rabbi's affiliation with MDEA would certainly generate among Greenville's Jews, my father remained stubbornly defiant:

There is the misplaced fear that if we lay low and do what the Christians want us to do, they will leave us alone. In truth, our frightened Jews would have us toe the line of the KKK. Not the Torah and God

17. Temple Beth Israel of Jackson, Mississippi, was bombed on September 18, 1967. Eight weeks later, Rabbi Perry Nussbaum's home was bombed on November 21, 1967. See Webb, *Fight Against Fear*, 192, and, especially, Jack Nelson, *Terror in the Night: The Klan's Campaign against the Jews* (New York, 1993). My father mentioned in his diary in an entry for April 24, 1969, that he had driven down to Jackson with my mother to pick up Rabbi and Mrs. Nussbaum to attend a rabbinic symposium for Christian clergy in Meridian, Mississippi.

is our lawmaker and guide to our behavior but the hateful bigots. I shall never enslave others or become enslaved to the lowest common denominator in our society . . . I shall serve on the MDEA board and do everything in my power to improve the lot of the needy in the community. . . . As to the argument that I am jeopardizing my congregation and my family by my action, the fact remains I am giving them the worst kind of example of living in fear which would be worse than the risk of bodily harm. . . . How can we expect to want to live in a place ridden by fear and hooliganism.¹⁸

While my family was never harmed, and the Jewish community experienced no physical abuse during his tenure, his actions surely precipitated the feeling that Rabbi Ruderman was a loose cannon unrestrained in his public activities and reckless in his public pronouncements. In the subsequent months, he continued to visit the poor black neighborhoods of Greenville. Several diary entries describe his utter disgust regarding the circumstances he observed, particularly the unsanitary conditions under which young children were living, abandoned by fathers and neglected by mothers unable to cope with them. My father was good at fixing things, at solving individual problems of plumbing, carpentry, mattresses, and footwear. But he clearly lacked the means to contend with the overwhelming problems of poverty. And his frustration could occasionally become anger at the victims themselves and their seeming lack of motivation in improving their own status. In one poignant case, he laments the seemingly unending pregnancies of a woman incapable of sustaining her large family. He is appalled by her ostensible indifference and apathy regarding her plight. In a condescending and insulting tone, he asks scornfully: "Is there any difference between them [the woman and her large family] and the alley cats who also bear litters of cats, soon abandon them to shift for themselves?"¹⁹

By January 1970, it was becoming clearer that the rabbi was beginning to wear out his welcome. My father wrote: "The time has come when the congregation drags out all its peevs against the rabbi and the game of who can find more fault with the rabbi is played," a game my father knew all too well from previous experience. He still continued to believe that the best of the congregation were behind him but "the little ones with their personal peevs were the most vocal." "The biggest objection," he

18. See appendix, 663.

19. See appendix, 664.

continues, “is that I am too concerned with the Negroes and that I am apt to derogate Mississippi without meaning to do so.”²⁰

A month later, things became even worse. The entry for February 9, 1970, is surprisingly written in Hebrew, a strategy my father had not employed for years since his youth, when he was fond of speaking about his romances in the “secret” language of his rabbinic studies. But apparently the utter frustration and rage he felt at his rejection by the congregation and his ultimate failure to win over hearts and minds provoked his highly charged and despondent language hidden to all but himself:

The situation is bad in the city. Several members of the congregation forbade me to continue this charity work. Who would believe such a thing that Jews would feel so insecure to be petrified by common people [*‘ame ha-‘arets*] who complained about this situation. Various people complained to the board of the Temple. I have considered many times to change our place. Why should we remain so far from our family and children? . . . I can enjoy free movement far from this terrible life . . . we would return to civilization and we would enjoy several more years before making *aliyah* to Israel.²¹

The end was in sight as he and my mother soon planned for their departure from Greenville. At the age of fifty-nine, he knew his chances of finding another pulpit were not promising, and he waited for months before learning that a modest job awaited him in the North. On May 29, 1970, coincidentally my own birthday, he closed his Greenville diary with the classical Hebrew expression: *Yeshu‘at Adonai ke-beref ‘ayin* [God’s redemption comes instantaneously] as he reported with great relief his appointment as the new rabbi of Hazleton, Pennsylvania.²²

There was only one other small reward for Rabbi Ruderman as he packed his bags in the summer months of 1970, fully cognizant of the fact that his uncompromising, sometimes impulsive, and often fearless behavior had ultimately brought him down. Just as he had entered the Greenville social environment with his address before the local Rotary Club in the fall of 1966, he was given the opportunity to offer some final reflections in the club bulletin he edited weeks before his departure. His talk still displayed the characteristic prophetic Ruderman style, but it was transparently different in tone from the defiant and angry mood of his

20. See appendix, 665.

21. See appendix, 665.

22. See appendix, 665.

earlier presentation. It was as if a somewhat more chastened, a somewhat more patient and mature voice had emerged in a rabbi who had experienced four years of the highs and lows of the Greenville rabbinate. His message was the same; his way of conveying that message was more subdued, less histrionic, and, consequently, more meaningful to those who heard and read him.

So memorable was this last address that it was noticed by Hodding Carter III, the editor of the *Delta Democrat-Times*, who wrote the following editorial on July 1, 1970, citing generously my father's own words. For my father this tribute by so distinguished a Greenvillian was reason to leave Greenville with his head held high:

Rabbi Abraham Ruderman is leaving Greenville this month to return to his native North. The rabbi's service here for the past four years has been an active one, although not always popular, even among his Jewish brethren at Hebrew Union Temple.

Perhaps that's because Greenville has these recent years been unpopular as she is being pushed and pulled into and out of the Twentieth Century at the same time.

During these past four years of change and non-change, the rabbi performed his calling as he saw it, and to those of us who aren't Jews, the import of his performance was that he pricked our consciences often, in only the way that a brusque, non-Southern "Outsider" could do, much in the manner that Judy Sims did when she reported for the *Democrat-Times* last year.²³

Both "came on strong" but both had plenty to say that we needed to hear, and, more importantly, to act upon. Among the rabbi's final public words to a Greenville audience is his farewell address in the June 25 issue of the Greenville Rotary Club bulletin, of which he was editor this past year.

In this address, Rabbi Ruderman "comes on softly" with the love of a father pleading for the salvation of his family. It's a plea for the world, a plea for Greenville, which we think worth printing:

As members of the human family we share much in common, the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man, our creation in God's image enabling us to create, to choose between right and wrong, and to grow in our appreciation of beauty. None may deny these basic truths. They constitute the foundation stone of our

23. I have not been able to identify her.

Judaeo-Christian civilization. They cannot be denied because they are the key to our survival as a human race.

We are confronted with a choice: either we live as brothers, as the children of one Father or we destroy ourselves in atomic war. Each of us constitutes a miniature world. If we can find peace in our hearts, enabling us to love our neighbor without regard to his creed or color, then, there is hope for the world. On the other hand, if we carry in our hearts the seeds of divisiveness, hatred, arrogance, smugness, and indifference to our neighbors, these traits will become reflected onto the world, for the world is made up of individuals who create an environment like themselves. . . .

A boy gifted with a keen curiosity about the world, each night upon the return of his father from work, would pump him for the answers to his many questions. One evening, in hope of diverting his son for a few hours, his father brought him a jigsaw puzzle, which when completed would have the map of the world. In a few minutes the son had finished the puzzle. "How did you manage to complete the puzzle so quickly?" asked the father. "It was easy," quipped the lad, "on the other side of the puzzle was a picture of a man. I put together the man and the whole world fell into place."²⁴

Appendix: Excerpts from Abraham Ruderman's diary, 1966–70

June 5, 1966 [first visit to Greenville]

What was it that won us for the south? We were filled with northern prejudice toward the south and their benighted attitude toward Negroes. When a colleague stated that he occupied a southern pulpit I felt sorry for him. Little did I realize that in one visit I would be won over and accept their lucrative offer. They kept repeating that Greenville is an oasis of liberalism in Mississippi. It has been molded by Hodding Carter and William Percy.²⁵ The city is integrated and their problems are on the road to solution. Perhaps the one factor that won us over was their eagerness to have us lead them. They seemed hungry for Judaism and leadership. They convinced us that we would be good for them. . . . God willing, we shall move on August 22.

September 4, 1966

After a month of packing and anticipation we have finally completed our first weeks in Greenville. . . . The week in Greenville was one long round

24. *DDT*, Wednesday, July 1, 1970, 4.

25. See above, note 5.

of dinners and drinking. Our hosts were anxious for us to feel southern hospitality to its fullest. Once we are settled we shall know how good it is to be settled in our home. Two weeks have passed and there are no signs of any furniture. . . . On Wednesday we were driven to Rolling Fork, a tiny community of 14 families proud and determined to preserve a semblance of their Judaism.²⁶ Their reception was warm and generous. While I did conduct services last Friday in the chapel, last night we held our first formal service. The synagogue was filled and the response was overwhelming. . . .

October 1, 1966

The exhilaration over our coming continues unabated. The holidays were the best received in all our lives. . . . The showering of gifts and food continues and invitations to dinner are without precedent. . . . It is likely that they are hungry for a more intensive kind of Judaism than was given them in the past. . . . How we regretted leaving Poughkeepsie and how glad we are now that we left.

November 5, 1966

There is one aspect of the community that frightens me, the large number of intermarriages and the matter-of-fact attitude on the part of the parents. If only greater efforts were made to convert the non-Jewish partner. Before marriage so much could be accomplished in the interest of a united marriage. Yet there is a strange notion that it would be an insult to the non-Jewish partners to ask them to convert. Perhaps it is due to a lack of confidence in the worth of their religion. Perhaps there is a secret desire on the part of the parents to let their children escape from Judaism and merge into the majority religion so as to spare their children the barbs and pitfalls of Judaism. If only we could impart a greater love and appreciation with all its blessings, advantages, and joys to our young. Then they would have conviction about the worth of Judaism and not hesitate to bring their partner into this reasonable and enlightened faith.

November 7, 1966

I attended the second meeting of the ministers' meeting today. They first gave me an inkling of what I might expect. When a motion was made to raise the question of integration at the next meeting, there was little discussion. Today's meeting was a special meeting to discuss . . . the

26. At the time the documentary *Delta Jews* [note 12 above] was made in 1999, the congregation was forced to close.

Thanksgiving service. There some expressed themselves on the agenda of the coming meeting. They were firm and definitive. If the ministerial meeting integrates, they will resign. One man avowed that he is opposed to integration and will never affirm it, regardless of any federal action and any wave of the future. Another stated that he was a minister of a flock and that our people are opposed to integration and therefore we ought to go along. In answer to a question I raised as to sanction for segregation in the Bible, reference was made to the curse of Ham.²⁷ Another admitted that he doesn't seek support for segregation in the Bible but it is a social problem and we are not ready to solve it. When I questioned the validity of a minister following his flock rather than leading it, one protested that he had never preached except as his conscience dictated. When I suggested that there were other standards than color by which to judge our neighbor, it was argued that color was one of those standards. When the question was raised as to the eligibility of Negro ministers for membership in the ministerial association by virtue of their learning, seeming studies and characters, several admitted that they had never been to a seminary and they had received the call to preach. As I proceeded to question, the group of eight was anxious to impress me with the fact that the white civil rights workers on the Delta Ministry sponsored by the Council of Churches were all immoral, that one of them was discharged because of pregnancy and even the nuns became pregnant while working for civil rights. I acted surprised at these accusations as if it were the first time I had heard them. During the Selma march the *New York Times* was filled with similar accusations against the marchers including the immorality of the nuns. The last straw was reached when one expressed himself as inalterably opposed to integration; as long as he could be minister his church would never be integrated. One man went into a tirade against Eastland and proclaimed that he was voting for Walker.²⁸ It was obvious now why the politicians stand on such a low rung. They simply would never get elected unless they mouthed the deep rooted bigotry and prejudice of their constituents. How I was aching to

27. The reference is to Gn 9.24–25, Noah's curse of his son Ham. On this, see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, N.J., 2003).

28. The reference is to Mississippi Senator James Eastland (1904–86), a Democrat who was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1941 and held office until 1972. He was clearly a staunch opponent of civil rights, so it is not clear why the minister opposed him so strongly. In 1966, the unsuccessful Republican candidate for Eastland's Senate seat was Prentiss Walker (1917–98), who served as U.S. Representative in the 4th district between 1965 and 1967.

tell them about a man who taught his people to hate and to believe that they were superior to all other races and nations, how the inevitable result of such indoctrination was the gas chamber. How I wanted to tell them how they were averting the progress being made in making democracy acceptable in the unresolved state of the world where there is tossup whether we shall have democracy or communism.

December 7, 1966

Since I concluded my last writing with a statement about the ministerial meeting a word should be said about the third meeting I attended. It had been announced that the subject of integrating the ministers would be raised. It began with the announcement of one member that should the ministers integrate he would resign. This sentiment was echoed by several others. Then followed a plea to integrate and several "on the fence" expressions. Little progress was being made. People had their minds made up before coming. They were the products of a life time of conditioning. I took the floor. My first remarks were directed to those who threatened to resign. I recalled the boy on the block who had the only football and unless he was playing, he would withdraw together with his football from the game. Our aim should be a meeting of minds. We should emulate the Quakers who obtain the sense of the meeting by talking long enough to obtain a working agreement. I therefore proposed instead of integration we should compromise. This was said after a statement of what I believed on the basis of my northern training and colorblindness. Where I came from, people judged a man not by the color of his skin but by the character emanating from under the skin. I suggested therefore that we schedule a number of meetings to which we would invite the Negro ministers. Let's come together and communicate with each other. Let's discover each other and learn what we stand for and what we believe. This was accepted unanimously. It was also agreed that we meet in one of the churches for lunch and a program be drawn up for the entire year. Perhaps something good will yet emerge from the ministers.

December 10, 1966

Chanukah in Greenville. . . . Members have been most generous to us, the most generous we have ever encountered. There seems to be much satisfaction with our presence. What greater joy can come to a person than to be wanted and needed so genuinely as these people seem to want and need us.

December 12, 1966

One of the most successful congregational meetings I ever witnessed occurred last evening. . . . It is most gratifying to hear so many encomiums in such a short time. The test will come a year from now.

January 1, 1967

The problem of mixed marriages is an old one in Greenville. Almost every family has a cousin or two of mixed marriage. The sad part is that the children are reared in the Church and lost to Judaism. Faced with the resolve of a girl to marry a Methodist without conversion, what does one do? Never having performed a mixed marriage and having all kinds of pressure exerted to perform the marriage in the Temple, it is hard to know what to do. Dr. Freehof argues civil marriage.²⁹ They don't want that. The Temple alone is what they want. The possibility of my performing a civil marriage has been raised. Who am I deceiving? I might call in another rabbi but that would be as bad as though I were performing it. I have agreed that the groom make no decision yet but to continue his reading on Judaism. There doesn't seem to be much prospect of conversion. If I don't marry them in the Temple they will be married in the Church. The minister has no qualms about mixed marriage.

January 17, 1967

Of all the communities I have served, this has the largest number of mixed marriages. Such a situation might be considered tolerable if the non-Jewish partner would join the Jewish mate or at least raise the children as Jews. The number of Jewish partners with Christian children is appalling. At least a dozen children have been raised in the Church by their Christian mothers. To stand by supinely and watch one's children reared in a strange faith requires an indifference to one's faith that is hard to fathom. The scene is distressing enough to behold, yet a situation arises in which I am asked to become a partner in escorting a Jewish girl out of the fold. The non-Jewish member refuses to convert. The girl insists upon a full wedding on a date of her choosing. For a while I played with the idea of a civil marriage. Can a rabbi perform a civil marriage? It

29. Solomon Freehof (1892–1990) was rabbi of Congregation Rodef Shalom in Pittsburgh, Pa.. He served as head of the responsa committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis for many years. See his "Report on Mixed Marriages and Inter-marriage," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook* 57 (1947): 158–84.

would only serve as a solution to one's conscience, to one who has never participated in a mixed marriage. The situation was saved by the choice of date. No other date but mid-summer will do. At that time I shall plan conveniently to be outside the country where not even a mixed marriage can get me. Rabbi . . . has consented to officiate.

January 25, 1968

My appeal to the rabbis for clothing for the poor is getting a response. Last Saturday a number of packages of used clothing arrived from Rabbi Sydney Brooks in Omaha, Nebraska. They were delivered to the Sacred Heart Church, a Catholic Negro church where there is much poverty. I also arranged . . . to have the left over clothing of the sale picked up by the Delta ministry. Hundreds of dresses and shoes will now be put to good use. I also heard from Minneapolis—Rabbi Minda's Temple—that a number of packages are due to arrive.³⁰ By a strange coincidence I met the secretary of the Head Start program who has indicated much need for clothing for her charges.

January 29, 1968

A reverend . . . came to see me today. He is the organizer of a group of Negro choruses which sing on television. He offered his service for the mental health telethon to be held on March 17. I have been appointed in charge of local talent. . . . He gave me an unusual insight into Negro thinking. He hasn't been offered a pulpit in Greenville because he has an M.A. and is too far above his people. They tend to gravitate toward unschooled preachers who will speak to their level. He had to terminate his work with STAR³¹ because he is too aggressive. Whenever he is in the car he waves to white people who invariably wave back. But they are reluctant to shake his hand out of fear of their neighbors. Negro intellectuals hesitate to participate in civil rights movements because they are under the assumption that their white employers would object to such participation. When a white person wants to communicate with a Negro they do so not directly but through another Negro. This is regarded as a more effective method. In short there is little communication between blacks and whites. He confirmed the large number of unmarried mothers in the area and attributed the condition to the fact that they didn't have the money for pills.

30. On Brooks and Minda, see note 15 above.

31. I could not identify this organization.

March 1, 1968

A whole month has passed and no entry. Where to begin? It seems that I shall be here for another two years. The new contract was accompanied by the usual recriminations on the part of a few, especially those with non-Jewish wives. There is a general desire on the part of the vast majority that we remain.

March 12, 1968

. . . The most gratifying incident of the past week is the arrival of 3,670 pounds of used clothing for the Head Start program in this area. Rabbi Minda of Minneapolis, Minnesota was responsible for the collection of this huge quantity of clothing. After being taken on a tour of the Head Start installations by Mr. Wareham, I was convinced that here was a worthy agency to distribute so much clothing to the needy. I had never seen such poverty. Must poverty be accompanied by filth and disease that thrives on filth? I suppose when people have no sheets on their beds and never wash the coverings there is apt to be a festering source for any disease. That is why so many of the children are washed upon their arrival at the school.

May 15, 1968

. . . Today I attended a ministerial meeting jointly with the Negro ministers. It was most gratifying. The Negroes were not very vocal. They were restrained. The only one who spoke was the president. Their subjects were raised: the Negro YMCA, the welfare payments, and the need for a compulsory education law. Mr. May has contributed the land and the cost of a building in the west side of town for a Negro YMCA. Even though the national policy is opposed to segregation they get around it by setting up a neighborhood facility in an all Negro part of town. The welfare checks have been eliminated with the increase in social security payments for the aged. The shoddy treatment of the Negro by the local welfare recipients cries out with shame. It is as if the poor have committed a crime in being poor requiring payments from the pockets of the white. . . . As for a compulsory education law, it seems to be dead at this session. The cost is too great. It doesn't matter if an entire generation goes without education and become the future recipients of welfare. Which is more costly? The costs of schools now or welfare later? For this, vision is necessary and that is a rare commodity in the mind of little politicians. When there is a new vision these people perish.

January 31, 1969

I have been wrestling with a problem of whether to accept an invitation to serve on the Board of Mid Delta Educational Association.³² To all intents and purposes I have done for the Home Corps, an adjunct of MDEA, more than any member of the board. The huge quantity of clothing from all parts of the country must have endeared me to MDEA. Then why the hesitation? Identifying with Negroes is not a popular pastime in Mississippi. While the leadership protests that much has been accomplished for the Negro in recent years, it is not due to their efforts. There is so far to go yet. The recent burning of the Weaver House³³ and the death of seven patients is a case in point. The white community knew about conditions there last November. The *DDT* carried a full page of pictures and description. Yet nothing was done. Even after the fire, no reference was made at the City Council and the Board of Supervisors washed their hands of the whole affair. As a result of a long talk with the mayor, I have learned that the governor's office will send a man to investigate the possibility of setting up a house for the aged. I don't understand why the County Poor House is not enlarged to accommodate more of the poor. After six years at the Hudson River State Hospital³⁴ where hundreds of the poor were kept, not for mental reasons, but by reason of old age and lack of a home and relatives, it is hard to believe that the aged would be so readily ignored. Thank God there are many individuals who are not satisfied with the status quo. Tonight a group will meet at the Catholic Church to discuss the situation. To return to MDEA, why should there be a problem? Perhaps it is because I have a vague suspicion that there are members of the congregation who would not be in favor of my work with Negroes. There is yet the unconscious fear of the bigoted white community which has set the pace for the Jews to follow: no obvious help, association or fraternization with Negroes. Any of this would give the impression that Negroes were not equal to the white man, although heartily denied by segments of the population, especially those who seek only to believe the white sheet. During the past year there have been two bombings of synagogues in Mississippi.³⁵ There is the misplaced

32. I have not been able to find information on the MDEA or its affiliate, the Home Corps. From the context, it is clear that it was an organization that worked primarily for the enhancement of black educational opportunities; a conspicuous leadership role on its board for a white rabbi was potentially controversial.

33. Apparently an old-age facility for Greenville's black community.

34. My father served as the Jewish chaplain of this mental hospital near Poughkeepsie, New York, during his tenure as rabbi of Vassar Temple.

35. See note 17 above.

fear that if we lay low and do what the Christians want us to do, they will leave us alone. In truth, our frightened Jews would have us toe the line of the KKK. Not the Torah and God is our lawmaker and guide to our behavior but the hateful bigots. I shall never enslave others or become enslaved to the lowest common denominator in our society. I shall proceed to do what is decent and humanitarian without fear of consequences. I shall serve on the MDEA board and do everything in my power to improve the lot of the needy in the community. This is my calling and that I shall do. Were I to do less I would be derelict to my duty and a hypocrite at best. As to the argument that I am jeopardizing my congregation and my family by my action, the fact remains I am giving them the worst kind of example of living in fear which would be worse than the risk of bodily harm. If I am not prepared to have my action become universal practice, in living in fear of being called a n[igger] l[over] and bringing down upon me the wrath of hoodlums, then I must act otherwise. When everyone will follow the dictates of conscience without fear, then each one would be making his just contribution to the growth of the state. So much money and effort is expended to draw people and industry to the community. How can we expect anyone to want to live in a place ridden by fear and hooliganism?

The other day I delivered a package of clothing to a family in Arcola, a mother and 10 children, living in a hovel of filth, disorder and disrepair. Piles of dirty clothing cluttered the room and there were kids with running noses everywhere, the older ones caring for the younger. When I proceeded to unpack the bundle the children gathered around to see what treasures I had brought. It turned out there were articles of clothing for every member of the family. One little girl was so excited to receive a new pair of shoes, she removed her shoes to try them on. Her feet were not only filthy but her foot was half way through the sock. Fortunately there were socks in the package and she received a complete outfit. A girl of about 13 I asked to write a letter of thanks to Rabbi [Edward] Zerín in Sharon.³⁶ It turned out that she didn't know her letters even if I were to dictate the letter and spell all the words. The girl was in the fifth grade. Fortunately a boy of ten, a member of the same family, was more proficient. The following day I received a letter of thanks from the mother, written in Negro English misspelled and ungrammatical and the assurance that she had written the donor. I can imagine the kind of food this family eats. There simply is no father.

36. Edward Zerín (1920–) served as rabbi in several congregations, and was apparently in Sharon, Massachusetts, at that time. Zerín wrote a number of books about interfaith relations and was a psychotherapist.

April 24, 1969

. . . This past week Mid Delta Education Association invited me to visit in several homes with the social worker. The first home we visited included a mother and six children in a two room hovel, no bath, no hot water, little furniture and *warot* [troubles]. The water had been shut off because of an unpaid bill of \$99. The children were carrying buckets of water from grandmother's house a few blocks away. The welfare check had been stolen from the mailbox and the furniture (fit for the dump) had been dispossessed because of non payment of a \$69 bill. I took the water bill and visited the mayor. To add to the problems, the shut off water lock had been broken. The mayor showed me the lock and indicated a loss to the city of \$7.50. After some light conversation the mayor turned to me and asked for a recommendation. He would do whatever I suggested. We agreed that I would pay for the lock and the woman would pay one month's water at \$3.60/m. I am pleased with the arrangement. The furniture was not fit to be returned. I shall return to see what more can be done for this unfortunate *shlemazal*.

Another home we visited included a mother and five children. The children were sleeping on the floor. They need a spring and three mattresses. Thanks to Carrie Simmons we obtained two mattresses for her and the rest from the Home Corps. When I returned to deliver some clothing I learned that the mother was pregnant again. The husband had been gone for several years but this was no deterrent from getting pregnant. I found three small children greatly underfed. She calculated that one more . . . could do no harm and wouldn't eat very much. She complained that she had not received food stamps. This was soon remedied. They seem to make no effort to change their status. They are satisfied with so little; they live only in the present and have no concern for the morrow. When they talk to children it is by way of grunts. A book is rarely seen around the house. When at 12:45 the children complained of being hungry she directed the older one to give them a piece of bread while she received the clothing I brought. When questioned about her pregnancy, then we saw shame felt but expressed as if it were a daily occurrence. It happens the child will be delivered by a mid-wife and will be added to the host of underprivileged children who inhabit the community. If they will start school at 6 they will attend for a few years in a sub-standard block school and then join the army of dropouts who will perpetuate the problem of poverty, unemployment and overpopulation. Is there any difference between them and the alley cats who also bear litters of cats, soon abandon them to shift for themselves?

June 10, 1969

There are things I must do which I am reluctant. One of them is giving the highest impression that I condone mixed marriage. When the mother of the groom makes it a point to invite me to the wedding it is hard to say no. To my surprise . . . [the Christian clergyman] turned out most obliging in that no mention was made of Jesus. I might have attributed this fact partially at least to having cultivated a relationship with him. He seemed so eager to please me. He didn't even require the couple to kneel. . . .

January 14, 1970

. . . As for the local picture, that time has come when the congregation drags out all its peevishness against the rabbi and the game of who can find more fault with the rabbi is played. A preliminary meeting of the board where no vote was taken revealed that the best leadership and the brains of the community are behind me. The little ones and their personal peevishness were the most vocal. The biggest objection is that I am too concerned with the Negroes and that I am apt to derogate Mississippi without meaning to do so. A few meetings are scheduled in the coming days to mend fences.

February 9, 1970

[Written in Hebrew in which he cries out about the plight of the blacks, especially the young innocent children. He continues to collect bundles of clothing for the poor.] The situation is bad in the city. Several members of the congregation forbade me to continue this charity work. Who would believe such a thing that Jews would feel so insecure to be petrified by common people who complained about this situation. Various people complained to the board of the Temple. I have considered many times to change our place. Why should we remain so far from our family and children? Both live in the North and why shouldn't we go after them? I can again enjoy free movement far from terrible life, country people [*ame ha-arets*] . . . we would return to civilization and we would enjoy several more years before making *aliyah* to Israel.

May 29, 1970

Yeshu'at Adonai ke-heref-ayin [God's redemption comes instantaneously]. . . . At a time when my spirits were at their extreme low, we got a telephone call from Hazleton [Pennsylvania] that we have been selected to the pulpit.