

Obituaries

Howard M. Sachar, GWU scholar and 'trailblazer' of Jewish history, dies at 90

By **Ellie Silverman** May 18

Howard M. Sachar, a George Washington University scholar who combined a vivid narrative sweep with compelling portraits of major political and military players in more than a dozen books on modern Jewish history, died April 18 at his home in Kensington, Md. He was 90.

The cause was chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, said his son, Daniel Sachar.

Dr. Sachar, a second-generation historian whose most prominent works included the two-volume "A History of Israel" and "A History of the Jews in the Modern World," was considered one of the leading scholars in his field.

Harvard historian Derek Penslar called Dr. Sachar a "trailblazer" for his early books, including "The Course of Modern Jewish History," published in 1958.

"At the time, the field of Jewish history was very undeveloped in the English-speaking world," Penslar said in an interview. "He produced this modern expansive overview of the modern Jewish experience, and it was used in classes for decades."

The first volume of Dr. Sachar's "A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time" appeared in 1976 and chronicled advances toward Jewish statehood, beginning with the Zionist movement early in the 20th century.

"Though written in the controlled, even tone of the historian, the work, particularly in its accounts of the wars of survival, has enormous tension," novelist Meyer Levin [wrote](#) in a New York Times review.

Dr. Sachar's second volume of "A History of Israel," published in 1987, covered the years following the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and examined the rising ethnic, religious and ideological tensions of modern Israel.

He described hostility with the Arab world as a "brooding presence in Israel's life, so integral a feature of the nation's waking and sleeping hours that it was incorporated into its very collective unconscious." Yet he held Israel's political leaders responsible for policies that led to strained relations with their neighbors.

In an interview, Stanford historian Steven J. Zipperstein praised the political understanding and descriptive scenes in Dr. Sachar's 1992 book, "A History of the Jews in America," but noted that his approach "felt somewhat old-fashioned" because of its relative neglect of the role of women and the strength of religious belief.

"In some ways, he talked past the historical profession," Zipperstein said. "He craned his neck as I see it, to reach the larger public."

Dr. Sachar evoked the medieval world of Muslim-controlled Cordoba, Spain, in his 1994 book, "Farewell España: The World of the Sephardim Remembered."

"It was a city, a realm, that proved uniquely congenial to its Jews," he wrote.

"Sachar's genius, well-displayed in this and his previous histories, is that of a synthesizer," historian David L. Ruderman [wrote](#) in a Washington Post review of "Farewell España." "Having absorbed large dosages of specialized research, he fuses this material with personal accounts of his own travels, his own interviews and his own contemporary evaluations of the past in constant juxtaposition with the present."

Howard Morley Sachar was born Feb. 10, 1928, in St. Louis and grew up in Champaign, Ill. His father, Abram L. Sachar, was a history professor at the University of Illinois and national director of the Hillel Foundation, a Jewish student organization. In 1948, he became the founding president of Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass.

Dr. Sachar graduated in 1947 from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania and obtained a master's degree and a doctorate in history at Harvard University in 1950 and 1953, respectively.

Among his early positions, Dr. Sachar was director of the Hillel Foundation at the University of California at Los Angeles and Stanford University. From 1961 to 1964, he led a student program in Jerusalem for Brandeis.

He joined George Washington University's faculty in 1965 and retired in 2004.

Survivors include his wife of 53 years, Eliana Steimatzky Sachar of Kensington; three children, Daniel Sachar of Miami, Sharon Sachar-Porag of Ramat Hasharon, Israel, and Michele Sachar of New York; a brother; and eight grandchildren.

Dr. Sachar published 16 books, lectured at more than 150 colleges and twice received the National Jewish Book Award. He was also the editor in chief of the 39-volume "The Rise of Israel: A Documentary History."

In many ways, the culmination of Dr. Sachar's lifetime of study can be found in his 831-page "A History of the Jews in the Modern World" (2005), tracing Jewish life since the 18th century.

He "relates an immensely complex story with precision and learning," Zipperstein [wrote](#) in the New York Times. "It convincingly demonstrates how this small people has exerted an uncannily large influence, but an influence that is frequently a byproduct of the wider world's often grossly exaggerated preoccupation with Jews and Judaism."

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 **6 Comments**

Ellie Silverman is a metro reporter covering crime and courts. She has previously contributed to the Seattle Times, McClatchy, the Hill and the Capital Gazette. Ellie graduated from the University of Maryland, where she reported for The Diamondback and conducted the independent student newspaper's first Ouija board interview.

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