

Review of Richie Zweigenhaft's *Jews, Palestinians, and Friends: 45 Years at a Quaker College (Sort of a Memoir)*

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Zweigenhaft, Richie. *Jews, Palestinians, and Friends: 45 Years at a Quaker College (Sort of a Memoir)*. Half Court Press, 2020.

In exploring “the dramatic transition” Guilford College “made from an all-white conservative school to one that diversified its faculty, its student body, and its board of trustees, and became known as a liberal and progressive college,” Professor Zweigenhaft contributes to our understanding of how “the conflicts between Israel and Palestine” affected Guilford and higher education, 1974 to the present, while shedding light on the challenges confronting liberal arts colleges.¹ “What gives [memoirs] their power,” William Zinsser reminds us, “is the narrowness of their focus. Unlike autobiography, which spans an entire life, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. The memoir writer takes us back to some corner of his...past that was unusually intense...”² That corner for Zweigenhaft is being Jewish.

Zweigenhaft graduated from Wesleyan University in 1967, taking a Ph.D. in Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, while never in those years setting foot in a synagogue. He had no intention of applying for teaching jobs at religious schools. But given his experience working with Quakers during the anti-war movement in the late 1960s, Guilford seemed attractive. He was warned, however, about Guilford and Greensboro, one friend telling him: “you’re going to have a cross burned on your front lawn!” (4). Warnings aside, he, “Lisa (soon to be my wife), [and] Throckmorton (legendary first dog)” packed their bags for Greensboro, where being “one of the first two full-time tenure-track Guilford College faculty members to call ourselves Jewish” (9) would give him a unique perspective on the dramatic changes this insular institution was to experience.

Guilford soon added three more Jewish faculty members, “five real Jews in two years! What brought this about?” (10). What changed was that Guilford had begun to recruit nationally. The doors had opened, and “although Jews did not exactly flood in, or take over the place, they kept coming” (17). In 1981 the college hired “the first Jew in a senior administrative position” (19). By 2020 the college had hired enough Jews “for a minyan. For you gentiles out there, a minyan is the quorum of ten Jewish people over the age of 13 who are required for traditional public worship” (20).

The college also began to recruit internationally, the first of two Palestinians being hired in 1993. Such hiring led to an “increasingly diversified faculty at Guilford which included those who were outspoken in their criticism of Israel” (37). A divide between the Greensboro Jewish community and the college began to grow. By “2015 there were sharp divisions within the small Jewish student community on campus” (27). Events off and on the campus raised the temperature, one being the presidency of Jimmy Carter, many Jews coming “to see Carter as insufficiently supportive of Israel, and too accommodating to the Palestinians” (31). In the fall of 1982 Guilford held a panel discussion on Israel and Palestine, one that included no Palestinians. The panel’s views increased tensions between Guilford and the Jewish community, as “...the two Jews on the panel...were quite critical of Israel...” and “many in the audience from the Jewish community felt the panel had been one-sided and anti-Israel” (38). Another discussion in 1989, though it included for “the first time a Greensboro rabbi...on a panel with a Palestinian...only added to the negative image many in the local Jewish community had of Guilford.” (40). In 2005 the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions (BDS) movement roiled Guilford and campuses nation-wide.

Events on and off the campus, not unsurprisingly, affected Zweigenhaft. He had grown “up in a family that was devoted to Israel” (55). His “parents never called themselves Zionists, but they assumed that Israel could do no wrong” (53). Though he is “not sure when I became more critical of Israel, and more aware of the lives of Palestinians...” Zweigenhaft engaged in an “honest struggle with...Zionism and the ‘anguish and pessimism’ that now accompanies it” (57). He reached out to Jonathan Malino, a former colleague, a rabbi and son of a rabbi, who helped “me to figure out how my childhood belief in the early dreams of Israel (as exemplified by the kibbutzim, Israel’s socialist agrarian collectives) were in synch, or how out of synch, with the changing political realities...” (55).

The soul searching, the campus conflicts past and ongoing, though painful and divisive, have, Zweigenhaft believes, led to a better Guilford. Courses on “Judaism: Food, Film and Festival,” “Women and Gender in Islam,” and “War and Peace in the Middle East,” taught by Jewish and Palestinian faculty, now pepper the curriculum (79-80). During Zweigenhaft’s forty-five-year career, Jews and Palestinians became part

of the Guilford community as both faculty and students, making it “a much more vibrant place, a much better liberal arts school than it would have been without them” (80).

That’s one ending. A year later, Zweigenhaft added another. With declining enrollments, Guilford was in financial trouble when COVID-19 hit, but faculty and staff were shocked to learn how much debt had been taken on, with the Board of Trustees having used the school’s treasured “335 acres of woods as collateral for its loans” (82). The president resigned. A blinkered board, unworthy of a college built on Quaker values, hired a hatchet-wielding interim president who proposed that Guilford “eliminate 19 majors” and fire “another 27 faculty members, nearly a third of the faculty” (94). Thanks in part to Zweigenhaft’s efforts, however, Guilford’s AAUP chapter used social media to rally the community. Its Facebook group, “Save Guilford College,” raised money and hired lawyers to represent the faculty. It worked. The Board set aside the proposed terminations. The hatchet-wielder departed. Jim Hood, “a Guilford alumnus, a long-time member of the English department,” agreed to serve as interim president, implementing cost savings the faculty and staff had recommended while providing “the long-missing institutional acknowledgement that things had been mishandled” (107 and 109).

Though proud of the efforts that enabled Guilford to survive in the short-term, Zweigenhaft concludes: “Over the next decade, many schools will close, and Guilford may be one of them” (110). In an e-mail (April 1, 2022), he strikes, however, a cautiously optimistic note: “Guilford's new President...has gotten good reviews...People on campus are encouraged, though still wary, and both enrollment and fund-raising will be especially important over the next few years.”

Notes

¹ Richie Zweigenhaft, *Jews, Palestinians, and Friends: 45 Years at a Quaker College (Sort of a Memoir)*, 2nd edition, (Half Court Press: Greensboro, North Carolina, 2021), 9. All quotations from Professor Zweigenhaft’s book are from this edition and will be cited by page number in the text.

² William Zinsser, *On Writing Well The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* 30th Anniversary Edition, (HarperCollins: New York, 2006), 135.