

BALTIMORE Jewish Times

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Taboo Topic

Jewish voices will be heard at a revisiting of the pain and upheaval of Baltimore's 1968 riots.

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Associate Editor

One person talks about how his family lost its business, a pharmacy on North Avenue, and its home, the apartment above it, to a firebomb.

Another person relates how the century-old family business, a furniture and housewares store on Gay Street, never recovered from the repeated lootings and subsequently closed.

A third person tells how the owner of a jewelry repair shop on North Avenue, a Holocaust survivor who remembered *Kristallnacht*, removed all the items in her store at the first hint of trouble.

In April 1968, Baltimore was one of more than 100 cities across the country that experienced rioting by the African-American community following the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the renowned civil rights leader. For five days, from April 6 to 10, Baltimore went through a cataclysmic event. In the end, after the U.S. National Guard had restored order, homes and livelihoods were destroyed,

six people were dead and 5,700 people were arrested on charges of looting and curfew violation.

"There were no winners. Everyone lost," said Jessica Elfenbein, associate provost for university engagement and professor of history and community studies at the University of Baltimore.

As the 40th anniversary of the riots approached, Dr. Elfenbein decided it was time to take a hard look. So from April 3 to 5, a conference, "Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth," will take place at the University of Baltimore, in midtown Baltimore. A variety of panels, discussions and "dialogue groups" — not to mention film debuts and art exhibits — will be held.

The academic said she expects 400 to 500 people to attend the event.

Dr. Elfenbein, who is not from Baltimore, arrived at UB in 1995. But after attending two major conferences here on Baltimore history, she could not help noticing that the riots were rarely raised.

"One conference touched on it but didn't deal with the specifics. I realized that the riots were the 800-pound elephant in the room. No one talked

about it," said Dr. Elfenbein, who lives with her family in Mount Washington and worships at Temple Oheb Shalom.

The upcoming conference is two years in the planning, which Dr. Elfenbein, the lead organizer, said was needed to set an agenda, round up speakers and facilitate the oral history project that will become part of the historical record long after the conference is over.

While the university administration backed her effort thoroughly, not everyone was so encouraging. "A couple of people on the outside said, 'You don't want to take on that subject, open that wound,'" she said.

"Covering riots is a tricky business," she added. "The community is still in pain and you have to be very sensitive. No one is trying to blame. The idea is, how do you move forward?"

As a historian, Dr. Elfenbein looks at the Baltimore riots through the prism of the events of the time. Even before Dr. King's assassination, some in the African-American community had

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been expressing its discontent.

Watts, a Los Angeles neighborhood, erupted in riots in 1966. Likewise in Detroit and Newark the next year. As a result of the latter, the U.S. Congress created the Kerner Commission, whose task was to report on race issues in those two cities. That group also came up with guidelines for policing and public safety, which helped during the 1968 riots.

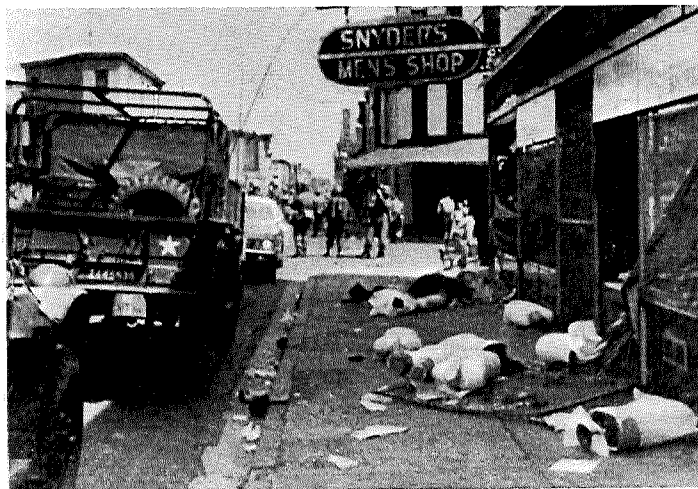
To prepare for the upcoming conference here, Dr. Elfenbein and a group that included Deborah Weiner, research historian and family history coordinator at the Jewish Museum of Maryland, took a tour earlier this month of Newark, N.J., to view that city's riot sites.

Dr. Weiner has been an adviser to the project here and is helping to develop the research agenda.

"Because the 1968 riots had a powerful impact on the Jewish community of Baltimore, we've been very interested in the conference program," said Avi Decter, director of the Jewish Museum of Maryland.

Unlike the Newark riots, in Baltimore the upheavals were spread over a wide area in East and West Baltimore, with 12 commercial districts the hardest hit, according to Dr. Elfenbein. Her elaborate conference Web site has maps of each and a driving tour.

At the time, many Jews in those areas were small retail owners. For some area Jews, the perception



(Above) "Remains - Several clothing dummies lie on sidewalk in the 800 block of North Gay Street yesterday after looters swarmed through the area most of the day. Army trucks and soldiers with weapons at the ready are patrolling in the background. The area was one of the hardest hit by looters during the riot-filled day." April 8, 1968



(Right) "Real Victim - Property owners and tenants alike, both colored and white, have become innocent victims of violence which has rocked Baltimore in the the last few days. Here grocer Carl Krieger weeps outside of his store at North Avenue and Chester Street after troopers have routed looters." April 9, 1968

that Jewish-owned businesses were singled out by rioters remains.

"There are still people where 1968 marks the divide between the time they would come to town and the time when they won't cross the city line," noted

Mr. Decter. "That's not a universal experience, but if even a few people hold that attitude, it suggests how profound the effect was."

After the riots, the Baltimore Jewish Council, an agency of the Associated Jewish Community

Federation of Baltimore, conducted a study of the 12 districts to determine if anti-Semitism had played a part.

"They found it had not," Dr. Elfenbein said. "Rather, Jewish merchants were disproportionately represented" in those commercial areas that sustained the most damage.

Nonetheless, Dr. Elfenbein said she is taking steps to ensure that the conference does not devolve into a Jews vs. blacks confrontation.

For starters, the event is being called a "public gathering," not "scholarly."

"It is a deliberate attempt to start a civic dialogue between the people involved," said Dr. Elfenbein. "We will touch on the Jewish perspective in the discussions on how lives were affected and the response of the faith communities, including Jews. But black businesses were also hit."

In her preparations, she is struck by the riots

seeming "more about white vs. black, and the long tentacles of racism as experienced by the African-American community."

Pausing, she added, "We will have to think of rules of engagement to keep the conference civil and not have it break down."

Mr. Decter added that the Jewish Museum might follow up on the conference with a program of its own. "It's not a comfortable subject. It's a hot subject but one that is so historically important that we think it needs attention," he said.

As far as Dr. Elfenbein knows, the University of Baltimore conference appears to be the first, if not the only, event to deal with the topic extensively.

"There have been modest efforts in other cities. The Newark Historical Society did something. So did Detroit's, But from what we understand, nothing like this is going on elsewhere. What we are doing is unique," said Dr. Elfenbein. □

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- For more on the April 3 to April 5 University of Baltimore conference, "Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth," visit ubalt.edu/baltimore68. The Web site has registration, preliminary agenda, oral histories conducted by students in UB historian Elizabeth Nix's civil rights history course, maps of the 12 commercial districts with demographic overlays, historical photographs and an almost hour-by-hour account of events.
 - Dr. Elfenbein can be reached at 410-837-5340.
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PHOTO: LOUIS ROSENSTOCK

Jessica Elfenbein, a history professor at the University of Baltimore, is organizing a conference this spring on the 1968 riots in Baltimore.