

WE REMEMBER OUR COLLEAGUES

ELKA KLEIN 1965–2005

Steven Fine and Gail Labovitz



Dr. Elka Klein, a promising scholar of medieval Jewish history, died of ovarian cancer on March 28, 2005. Klein was born in Chicago and raised in Berkeley, California, and Toronto, Canada; the family also spent a year living in the Congo while her father, noted scholar on African slavery Martin Klein, researched and taught. Klein received a B.A., summa cum laude, from Yale University in history in 1988, after which she studied at the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies in Jerusalem in 1988–89. She earned her doctorate under the direction of Thomas Bisson at Harvard University in 1996. From 1998 to 2001, she held the position of postdoctoral Dorot Fellow in the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University. She then joined the Department of Judaic Studies at the University of Cincinnati in 2001, and continued to teach there almost until the day of her untimely death.

Klein was a social historian, focusing on the history of the Jews in medieval Spain. Her dissertation and subsequent scholarly work began with a year of intense archival research in Barcelona. She drew upon her knowledge of rabbinic literature and Spanish archival materials to shed new light upon Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Iberia, stressing the influence of royal power on Jewish social history and demonstrating the striking interpenetration of Jewish

and Christian society in medieval Barcelona. Among her important claims, she argued that the organization of the Jewish community in Barcelona at this time closely paralleled the contemporaneous organization of the Christian community. Klein's research thus represents a significant challenge to older models of the history of Iberian Jewry that argued for the "ghettoization" of the community. Her book, *Community and King: Jews and Christian Society in Medieval Barcelona*, was awarded a publication grant by the Koret Foundation and will be published posthumously by the University of Michigan Press. In addition, she edited *Hebrew Deeds of the Catalan Jews (1117–1316)* (2004), a collection of eighteen *shetarot* that she discovered in the archives of Barcelona. These documents had been previously inaccessible to most scholars of Barcelonan history; their publication further demonstrates the unique qualifications and varied skills—in languages and in areas of historical knowledge—that Klein brought to her field. In January, 2005, Klein made the supreme effort of traveling to Barcelona for the public celebration of this volume, delivering what turned out to be her final public lecture on that occasion.

Klein published three articles during her brief career: "Protecting the Widow and the Orphan: A Case Study from 13th Century Barcelona" (*Mosaic* 14 [1993] 65–81); "Splitting Heirs: Patterns of Inheritance Among Barcelona's Jews" (*Jewish History* 16:1 [2002] 49–71); and "The Widow's Portion: Law, Custom and Marital Property among Medieval Catalan Jews" (*Viator* 31 [2000] 147–63). She also authored the article, "Barcelona," in *Medieval Jewish Civilization: An Encyclopedia* (2003); and served as section editor for "Medieval Jews and Judaism" for The On-line Reference Book for Medieval Studies (ORB; www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html). Moreover, she wrote several book reviews for H-Judaic, the Internet forum group for scholars in

Judaic studies, and was an active participant in its discussions. Her contributions of translated medieval texts and her own writings on Iberian Jewry to ORB and other online forums continue to enrich syllabi across the disciplines.

Klein was a regular and enthusiastic contributor to scholarly panels at the annual Association for Jewish Studies conference; at the 2003 AJS she organized a very well attended interdisciplinary roundtable discussion, "Integrating the Sephardi/Mizrahi Experience." She was also an active member of the Women's Caucus.

Klein was also known during her short career for her intense dedication to teaching and to her students. At a memorial service held at the University of Cincinnati in May 2005, Professor Gila Safran Naveh recalled "how only two weeks before she passed away, when I came to see her and share some Jewish humor from my humor course, I found her hospital bed covered with student papers, books she was reviewing, course lists she was scrutinizing for approval, syllabi she was modifying." On May 5, 2005, she was presented posthumously with the Edith C. Alexander Award for Distinguished Teaching by the University of Cincinnati; the award was accepted by her parents, Professors Suzanne and Martin Klein.

Klein is also survived by her husband, Yossi Francus, two children, Dina and Shaul Francus, and brother, Moses Klein. She will be sorely missed by students and colleagues around the world. May the memory of Elka Klein be a blessing to all.

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