

Graduate Student Profiles



In 2009, **Annegret Oehme** was reading material for a research paper about medieval German literature, when a footnote about old Yiddish literature caught her attention. “Once I learned more about Yiddish literature, I considered pursuing a Ph.D. with that as a central topic. Now, Oehme is the newest graduate of the Carolina-Duke Graduate Program in German Studies. Her doctoral research traces the story of a knight of King Arthur, called Wigalois, across different cultures and languages in order to show how this is a shared German-Yiddish narrative. Publish Date: Fall 2016



For years, **Samuel Joseph Kessler** was a “regular” at the Center. In addition to participating in dozens of lunch seminars and community lectures each semester, he also served as the student representative on the Center’s advisory board for two years and managed the Jewish Studies Graduate Student Network events held last October. In May 2016, he graduated with his Ph.D. from the department of Religious Studies and a graduate certificate in Jewish Studies. This academic year, he is a postdoctoral fellow in Judaic Studies at Virginia Polytechnic and State University. Publish Date: Fall 2016



Sarah Workman’s first semester at Carolina found her, begrudgingly, in a fantasy literature class. She enrolled in the course simply to meet a requirement for a 20th Century American Literature credit, but as it turns out, the class laid the foundation for her dissertation. Workman’s project examines how enchantment mediates history in contemporary Jewish American literature. She is exploring fantasy genres, magic, a return to the folkloric, whimsical nature of Yiddish storytelling, and how these elements frame the reader’s relationship to the past. Publish Date: Fall 2015



Emma Woelk: A study abroad program offering the opportunity to work in a German science lab seemed the ideal experience for Emma Woelk, then a junior at Vassar College who intended to build a science career. Instead, the program served as a wake-up call that changed the course of her life. “I soon realized that what really interested me was not a science workbench, but German culture and history,” said Woelk. In May 2015, she became the first graduate student to complete the Carolina-Duke Graduate Program in German Studies and the first to earn the Graduate Student Certificate in Jewish Studies at Carolina. Publish Date: Spring 2015



Guy Shalev, having grown up in a middle-class suburb of Tel Aviv, says he never met any Palestinians. The homogenous secular Ashkenazi Jewish environment in which he had grown up was not unusual given Israel's segregated education system and communities. "Toward the end of my military service, I started questioning the world around me and I had an urge to explore my surroundings firsthand," said Shalev.

Publish Date: Fall 2014



By Samuel Kessler: "For anyone who spends even a little time in Jewish studies, one quickly learns that the National Library in Jerusalem is full of characters and an endless number of anecdotes about them. What I came to the NLI to find is contained in 82 folders spread over three boxes. To start my work each morning I sit at a desk and am handed a folder—I began with number one and will end with number 82. The excitement of this life is in the minutia: I never quite know what I will find when I open each new folder." Publish Date: Fall 2014



Anna Kushkova: When Anna Kushkova, of St. Petersburg, Russia, arrived at Carolina to begin her Ph.D. program in Anthropology, she already had more than a decade of career experience, much of which was focused on studies of Jewish communities in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova. Publish Date: Fall 2013



Naomi Graber: This May, Naomi Graber will earn the doctorate in musicology that has been her dream since attending a conservatory summer camp when she was 15. She came to the Carolina Department of Music in 2007 with the initial interest in studying Mozart. In the course of a research project, however, she stumbled across a new subject, which has evolved into her dissertation on the American works of the Jewish-German composer Kurt Weill, who fled Nazi Germany in 1933. The decision to focus on the acclaimed composer of *The Threepenny Opera* took even Graber by surprise. "I knew 'Mack the Knife,' and that was it," she admits. "But I started listening to his work more and fell in love with it."

Publish Date: Spring 2013



Patrick Tobin was drawn to Carolina in order to work with Christopher Browning, the Frank Porter Graham Distinguished Professor of History, who is one of the preminent scholars on the Holocaust. "I honestly didn't know a lot about North Carolina before applying, but I knew about Professor Browning. I'd read his book, *Ordinary Men*, as an undergraduate and it wholly reshaped my interests. Prior to that, I'd been learning ancient Greek and preparing for some kind of future in Classics. But Professor Browning's book got me interested in Holocaust studies, so I dropped Greek for German and began to pursue UNC."

Publish Date: Spring 2013



Stephanie Gaskill: While pursuing her Master's degree in History, Stephanie Gaskill became fascinated by the role religion plays in foreign policy decisions. Now in the Religious Studies department, Gaskill focuses on America's religious history. "Carolina's program was a perfect fit for me because I am able to work with two incredible faculty members who are experts in my two main areas of interest." Publish Date: Spring 2012



Carrie Duncan: From conducting archaeological digs in Israel and Jordan, to deciphering ancient inscriptions, to teaching undergraduates to read Biblical Hebrew, Carrie Duncan is exploring cultural identities in the Middle East and sharing her work with Carolina's students. "One of the things I've loved the most has been the opportunity to bring Judaism and Jewish Studies to a group and culture that is not often exposed to it." Publish Date: Winter 2011



Ria Van Ryn: Sociology student Ria Van Ryn started teaching eighth grade Muslim and Jewish students as part of her research efforts on minority identity. The project evolved from teaching them about each other's traditions and values, until ultimately one day the young students met face to face for a day that none would ever forget. "The day of the workshop was one of the most fulfilling of my life. The kids were all so excited, and it was just amazing to see how quickly they connected. I've had nothing but positive reactions from the school communities as well as others around the country who want to learn more about the program."

Publish Date: Spring 2011



Joseph Gindi: Upon learning that Professor Jonathan Boyarin had joined the Religious Studies department, Joseph Gindi started to seriously research graduate opportunities at Carolina. The more he learned, the more he became excited about studying with truly excellent scholars in American religion, anthropology of religion, and philosophy of religion. "The Center for Jewish Studies has been an important, perhaps even essential, part of my graduate experience at UNC. First, it has helped bring new faculty members to campus. And second, through its many events, the Center has enabled me to connect personally with scholars from across the vast field of Jewish Studies." Publish Date: Spring 2009



Richard Benson: The first ever meeting of the Jewish Studies Graduate Student Network brought together graduate students from across campus to connect through their shared interest in Jewish culture. At this first meeting were students from several departments, including History, German Languages and Literatures, Religious Studies and Communications Studies, who came together to discuss two chapters of Richard Benson dissertation which focused on the stories of Martin Buber. "The Graduate Student Network has allowed me to learn from students in diverse fields and has introduced me to a variety of questions that comprise the field of Jewish Studies. It has also taught me to make my own work accessible to people who don't specialize in German." Publish Date: Spring 2009

Annegret Oehme

Publication Date: Fall 2016

Destiny in a Footnote



In 2009, Annegret Oehme was reading material for a research paper about medieval German literature at the library at Freie Universität Berlin, when a footnote about old Yiddish literature caught her attention. A few weeks later she acquired “Introduction to Old Yiddish Literature” by Jean Baumgarten, which she promptly read from cover to cover.

“This book opened a whole new world to me, something that seemed like a white spot on a map, ready to be explored. And the material I study today is still as fascinating as the pages in Baumgarten’s book!” said Oehme. “Once I learned more about Yiddish literature, I considered pursuing a Ph.D. with that as a central topic. A colleague in Berlin suggested writing to Professor Ruth von Bernuth, who met with me for a coffee in Berlin. This meeting convinced me that I wanted to write a dissertation

under her supervision. It turned out that I had the right impression as Professor von Bernuth was the most dedicated advisor I could have hoped for. She pushed me to find my own path and my own scholarly voice.”

Oehme, of Zwickau, in Saxony, Germany, is the newest graduate of the Carolina-Duke Graduate Program in German Studies. Her doctoral research traces the story of a knight of King Arthur, called Wigalois, across different cultures and languages in order to show how this is a shared German-Yiddish narrative. In her dissertation, she explains how this story is not just a tale that was retold in Yiddish, but rather how the 16th century Yiddish adaptations of this story ensure the continued retelling in both languages.

Oehme has taken on numerous jobs while also pursuing her degree, including serving as a research assistant at the Duke University Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, where she processed Yiddish and German material; helping with translation of Hebrew epitaphs at the Jewish Cemetery in Zwickau, Germany; working as a teacher assistant for several undergraduate courses; and most recently, serving as a graduate student assistant for the Center’s Reconsidering Antisemitism conference.

“I loved working at the conference and seeing how the audience members, from all sorts of backgrounds, and scholars and journalists and teachers all connected over this topic in the talks and during the breaks. It was wonderful to see that happen,” said Oehme. “But my favorite job was being the teaching assistant for Professor Jonathan Hess’ class ‘German Culture and the Jewish Question’. Professor Hess shared so many tricks and tips for teaching a literature/culture class with us, his graduate student teaching assistants. I learned so much from this experience, especially in regard to engaging students in a larger lecture class. He generously shared stories from past classes and explained why he did things this way or the other, gave this or that assignment, and thus showed that a great teacher is not necessarily perfect right away. It is more important to learn from experience and care about the students and what they learn in the class.”

Oehme will put this knowledge into action starting this semester, as she begins her new position as a tenure-track assistant professor in the Department of Germanics at the University of Washington, Seattle.

“I am very excited about teaching a class on ‘The History of the German Language.’ This course allows me to draw on multiple facets of my research interests, tracing the development of German language and culture from the Middle Ages to the present day and discussing cultural exchanges and diversity.”

Samuel Joseph Kessler

Publication Date: Fall 2016

Moving On



For years, Samuel Joseph Kessler was a “regular” at the Center. In addition to participating in dozens of lunch seminars and community lectures each semester, he also served as the student representative on the Center’s advisory board for two years and managed the Jewish Studies Graduate Student Network events held last October. Now, it is time for Kessler to move on to new challenges and opportunities. In May 2016, he graduated with his Ph.D. from the department of Religious Studies and a graduate certificate in Jewish Studies. This academic year, he is a postdoctoral fellow in Judaic Studies at Virginia Polytechnic and State University.



“My ultimate career goal is to become a professor of Judaic Studies or Religious Studies,” said Kessler. “This academic year, I have been offered a postdoctoral position in Judaic Studies at Virginia Tech, which allows me to continue teaching in the field while also having time to publish articles, present at conferences, and begin the process of turning my dissertation into a book. Since my new position is in Judaic Studies, and I received my doctorate in a Religious Studies program, there is little doubt that the graduate certificate in Jewish Studies gave the search committee added confidence in my ability to teach and conduct research in the field of Jewish Studies.”

Kessler’s research specialty is religious transformation in Central European Jewry in the 19th century.

“I have long been fascinated by the 19th century, an era when many of the cultural norms and social values in Euro-America were reimagined. This century witnessed widespread economic industrialization in Europe and the United States, the construction of trans-continental railroads, and the mass migration of formerly rural populations into urban settings. The religious life of people, and especially of Jews and Christians, has long been fascinating to me. I chose the field of Central European Jewish history because it allowed me to bring together my interests in theology and ritual with research into the historical context of economic and social modernization.”

Kessler chose to pursue his doctorate in Religious Studies at Carolina “because of the broad experience I would get as a teaching assistant and teaching fellow, as well as for the department’s focus on academic training.” Throughout all his years in the program, Kessler taught or served as a teaching assistant for a wide variety of courses at Carolina, including: “Religion and Science”; “Introduction to Religious Ethics”; “Philosophical Approaches to Religion”; “Introduction to Christian Traditions”; “Introduction to Early Judaism”; “Classic Jewish Texts”; “Judaism in Our Time”; “Introduction to the Hebrew Bible”; “History of Religion in America”; and “Heaven & Hell.”

“It is always my goal to create a classroom environment that is intellectually critical, culturally sensitive, and continually exciting,” added Kessler. “At the end of each class period, students should be able to point to the material we covered that day—be it texts, images, or songs—and understand it in a more subtle and complex way. Over the semester, my goal is for student writing to reflect new critical methodologies, new vocabularies, and a new contextual awareness. A clarifying example of the power and responsibility of being a teacher occurred three years ago when I was giving a guest lecture on medieval kabbalism for an introductory class on Judaism. I began the lecture by asking what we mean by ‘medieval’ and ‘the middle ages,’ and explaining that, when we tell European history, this is the period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the beginning of the Italian Renaissance. But of course, this is also the Golden Age of Islam, and a vibrant period in the history of Orthodox Christianity based in Constantinople. After the class, half a dozen students approached me and quietly thanked me for defining ‘middle ages’—they had never understood the term before. And a Muslim student approached and said she appreciated my reference to Islam, which was not having a ‘medieval’ period. These are the moments that make being a teacher of Jewish Studies so rewarding.”

Sarah Workman

Published Fall 2015

Exploring Contemporary Jewish American Literature



Sarah Workman's first semester at Carolina found her, begrudgingly, in a fantasy literature class with Professor Tyler Curtain. She enrolled in the course simply to meet a requirement for a 20th Century American Literature credit, but as it turns out, the class laid the foundation for her dissertation.

"Fantasy literature has a very particular relationship of defamiliarization—meaning the way that the writer describes certain objects or events so as to estrange perception so that the reader may experience them anew. Many of the writers I am looking at in my current project play with ideas of defamiliarization. Had it not been for this class and Dr. Curtain, I have no idea what my dissertation would look like."

Workman's project examines how enchantment mediates history in contemporary Jewish American literature (written from the 1990s to the present). She is exploring fantasy genres, magic, a return to the folkloric, whimsical nature of Yiddish storytelling, and how these elements frame the reader's relationship to the past. For example, Workman looks at how Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish*

Policemen's Union (2007) uses science fiction tropes to reimagine Jewish history from the space of Sitka, Alaska, a Jewish enclave for post-Holocaust refugees.

"I always knew I wanted to go to graduate school but it wasn't until after working at a think tank in Washington, D.C. with policy wonks that I realized how much I identified with being a reader, in a professional sense, and how much I missed reading and studying literature," said Workman, a graduate student in the department of English and Comparative Literature. "I spent a year in Israel after I graduated with my B.A. from Cornell and I started reading a lot of Israeli literature. This is the point when I decided to apply to graduate school, and I went on to earn my master's at Georgetown before heading to Carolina for my Ph.D."

Workman was recently selected to receive the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies Graduate Fellowship for 2015-2016. This fellowship enables a student to focus full time on his or her scholarship, improving quality and shortening the time required to complete a Ph.D. degree.

"The grant allows me to *not* teach for two semesters and focus entirely on my project and make timely progress toward my degree. It also shows that my project is fundable outside of an English department, allowing me to position myself as someone who does Jewish American Literature on the job market," said Workman. "While teaching is incredibly rewarding, it is also time consuming, so having a fully-funded break from teaching allows me ample time to focus on my own research."

That said, Workman will miss leading classroom discussions this year.

"Working in the classroom with undergraduates is very important to me," added Workman. "I enjoy working especially with first year students because of their eagerness to improve their writing when they show up on day one. Teaching has so many immediate benefits because the students are there, right in front of you, and I find it challenging and rewarding to create course content that will speak to these students while also defining what kind of an instructor I want to be."

The Center has awarded full-year, dissertation completion fellowships for the past four years, however, in order to support the ever-increasing number of graduate students working in the field of Jewish Studies, the Center needs new sources of private support to create future grant awards. To learn how you can help, please contact Shontel Grumhaus at the Arts and Sciences Foundation at 919-962-6182 or shontel_jung@unc.edu.

From 2013-2015, Sarah Workman was also the co-facilitator, with Professor Maria DeGuzman, of the Jewish-Hispano/a, -Latino/a, and -Latin American Literature and Cultural Production Working Group. The group is comprised of faculty and graduate students from departments across Carolina (including Religious Studies, Women's Studies, English & Comparative Literature, Romance Languages, and Communications), and meets several times each semester to discuss recent scholarship and materials related to Jewish Hispanidad.

Emma Woelk

Published Spring 2015

A study abroad program offering the opportunity to work in a German science lab seemed the ideal experience for Emma Woelk, then a junior at Vassar College who intended to build a science career. Instead, the program served as a wake-up call that changed the course of her life.



“I soon realized that what really interested me was not a science workbench, but German culture and history,” said Woelk. “I ended up switching things around, to graduate with a major in German and a minor in biology.”

Woelk began studying the German language in junior high school in Austin, Texas. After Vassar, she eventually made her way to Carolina, where she was impressed by the faculty and the interdisciplinary research opportunities.

“I was excited about studying not just in the German department, but also in other departments, such as History, and with the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies and at Duke University. I knew that I’d be able to study in Germany and also have extensive teaching experiences.”

As a graduate student in the Carolina-Duke Graduate Program in German Studies, she has taught the first 2 ½ years of German language courses, a recitation section for a course on Germany history and culture after 1945, and a Jewish languages summer course for the Duke in Berlin program.

Woelk’s research focuses on Yiddish in post-war Germany, which has led her to New York City for intensive Yiddish language instruction, to Berlin to study Yiddish-language performances in post-war Germany, and even to Buenos Aires, to learn about an actress who worked in both Yiddish- and Spanish-language theater and film. Research and travel grants from the Center helped make these trips a possibility.

“I am exploring how, during the Cold War era, both East and West Germany used Yiddish in the arts as a way to establish its own culture and to distinguish itself from the ‘other’ Germany,” said Woelk. “I had been drawn to German-Jewish literature, but I didn’t enter graduate school thinking of this research topic. My interest in East Germany, and the intersection of history and literature, led me to discuss research topics with Professor von Bernuth. She recalled seeing Yiddish performances in Protestant churches when she was growing up in East Germany and this seed led me to begin studying Yiddish and to pursue the topic for my dissertation.”

Woelk, who is fluent in German and “working on” her Yiddish and Spanish, will graduate from Carolina in May with a Certificate in Jewish Studies* along with her Ph.D. from the Carolina-Duke Graduate Program in German Studies. She has just accepted a tenure-track faculty position at Saint Edwards University in Austin, Texas, where she will continue her teaching and research, which will evolve to include the early 20th century.

“I am thrilled to go into teaching. I personally have gained so much out of knowing a foreign language—it’s exciting to give that opportunity to others and to see how students will apply their language skills to various majors and careers,” added Woelk. “I believe that learning other languages stimulates their thinking, and allows them to contemplate other cultures and to learn to be flexible.”

** Carolina’s Jewish studies certificate program for graduate students is the first of its kind at any college or university in North Carolina. The program is available to degree seeking graduate students studying in the humanities and social sciences at Carolina. It includes opportunities for graduate students to explore Jewish languages, culture, literature and history in both their coursework and research endeavors. This May, two graduate students will be awarded the Certificate, Emma and Elissa Sampson.*

Emma Woelk recently coordinated the Center’s first lecture event geared specifically to graduate students—Andrew Bush, of Vassar College, visited Chapel Hill in October.

“I hope to see these events continue not only so graduate students help shape the intellectual environment but also so they bring in speakers who will be particularly relevant to our studies and our lives. For example, Professor Bush, who works in both Hispanic Studies and Jewish Studies, spoke to us about how to balance multiple research interests long term, as we move forward with our careers.”

Guy Shalev

Published Fall 2014



Having grown up in a middle-class suburb of Tel Aviv, Guy Shalev says he never met any Palestinians. The homogenous secular Ashkenazi Jewish environment in which he had grown up was not unusual given Israel's segregated education system and communities.

"Toward the end of my military service, I started questioning the world around me and I had an urge to explore my surroundings firsthand," said Shalev. "I found anthropology to be a way to cross these boundaries to really communicate with people and gain an in-depth systematic understanding of the conflicted reality in which I was raised."

After earning undergraduate and graduate degrees in Israel, Shalev developed a commitment to an anthropological study in healthcare settings. This directed him to the medical anthropology Ph.D. program at Carolina.

"UNC faculty strengths in critical medical anthropology, science and technology studies, and political anthropology, as well as my participation in the Duke-UNC graduate certificate program in Middle East studies, have enabled me to formulate my new research that reflects my interest in the experiences of Palestinian physicians in the Israeli health system."

Shalev's doctoral thesis is titled *Doctors with Borders*. With Palestinians comprising about 12 percent of physicians working in Israel, the country's public health system is one of the few arenas in which Arab and Jewish citizens work side-by-side. While the Israeli medical sphere is often presented as scientific and neutral, Shalev says that suspicion and hostility still mark everyday encounters.

"My ethnographic research explores how Palestinian medical professionals interact with Jewish patients, colleagues and state institutions as they navigate the medical system as a workplace," said Shalev. "Receiving the Silver Fellowship will allow me to carry out my 12-month research plan that includes ethnographic fieldwork in four main sites: hospitals, community clinics, medical schools and formal political activity. Through participant observations I aim to examine everyday practices and I will shadow physicians as they interact with colleagues and patients. In addition to ethnographic research, I also will engage in an analysis of Israeli Hebrew-language printed, digital and social media representations of Palestinian doctors, especially during times of tension.

Shalev, a graduate student in Carolina's Anthropology department, plans to complete his Ph.D. in 2017. He holds an M.A. in Sociology and Anthropology and a B.A. in Psychology and Sociology-Anthropology from The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Last year, his Master's thesis won the Israeli Sociological Society's Best MA Thesis Award and the Society for the Anthropology of Religion's Student Paper Prize.

Sam Kessler

Archival Work at the National Library of Israel, Jerusalem

WRITTEN BY SAMUEL J. KESSLER, *graduate student, Department of Religious Studies*



For anyone who spends even a little time in Jewish studies, one quickly learns that the National Library in Jerusalem is full of characters and an endless number of anecdotes about them. At conferences and after seminars, at Shabbat dinners and morning coffee breaks, it seems nearly impossible for anyone who has been to, or spent time around, the NLI to resist exchanging such tales.

Which meant, for me at least, that walking into the NLI building for the first time this summer came with a certain amount of historical trepidation and a heavy dose of humility. Is my work really worth being given a desk in such a place?

Of course, though the NLI does function in some ways like a summer camp for scholars—“Oh, it’s been a whole year, we must do lunch!”—in the end, after we’ve all put away our bags and found space at a table, what each of us settles down to do bears striking resemblance: bend our heads low and work.

The archives room where I spend most of each day is in the basement at the back. To get there one must go past the café—which always smells deliciously of baked bread and coffee—and down a long corridor lined with offices that open into more offices, their stacks of book seeming to stay upright only by leaning precariously against other books, like an peculiarly designed game of office-wide Jenga. As you pass you see computers from the early ’90s half hidden by piles of papers in unendingly cluttered rooms. You see men and women hunched over keyboards or scraps of manuscript. Through another set of doors is the microfilm room, where faded letters in a dozen languages reflect off eyeglasses and crinkled foreheads. Behind them, hidden from all who work in the spacious reading rooms two floors above, are the rows of desks for the archive, and the revolving cast of workers who ferry back and forth from locked rooms the folders and boxes that—without fanfare or individuality—contain within them the delightful richness of history.

What I came to the NLI to find is contained in 82 folders spread over three boxes. To start my work each morning I sit at a desk and am handed a folder—I began with number one and will end with number 82.

The excitement of this life is in the minutia: I never quite know what I will find when I open each new folder. Sometimes it is only a single letter, scribbled on the back of a nondescript piece of paper, mostly illegible from the moment of its creation more than 150 years ago and still so today. Sometimes all I find are empty envelopes, their contents lost in the vicissitudes of time.

But more often I open a folder and a small glimpse of the world of the past appears like magic dust spread out on the table before me: dozens of letters between adoring brothers, or between a son and his father, or a husband and wife; newspaper clippings from Vienna at the height of the Austro-Prussian war; the record of a synagogue’s kindergarten fieldtrip. These are the little hints about past lives that I look so much forward to when I begin each day. They are the basic ingredients of history, the part that never lets me forget that I’m not writing about volcanoes or asteroids, but about people.

Anna Kushkova

Published: Fall 2013



When Anna Kushkova, of St. Petersburg, Russia, arrived at Carolina to begin her Ph.D. program in Anthropology, she already had more than a decade of career experience, much of which was focused on research studies of Jewish communities in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova.

Kushkova has changed her scholarly focus several times during her academic career, having started as a linguist who then moved into the study of literatures and then to ethnography and anthropology. She has studied at six different universities and taught at four institutions in both Russia and the United States.

“I guess I was always intuitively looking for a research field that would include living human experiences rather than written sources only. Anthropology happily combined all my interests,” said Kushkova. “Jewish culture has fascinated me since I was in my teens, yet it didn’t become an academic focus until just a few years ago. In 2005 I became a research fellow for field expeditions studying contemporary Jewish life in small but vibrant Jewish communities.”

At Carolina, she is utilizing both her coursework and her research projects to further explore key aspects of this unique field experience. UNC was on the top of her list when Kushkova was applying for graduate schools in the U.S. “I visited the campus in fall 2009 and immediately fell in love with the place. Everyone I met was extremely friendly and helpful and my faculty advisors revealed to me just how much I could learn at Carolina from the Departments of Anthropology and Religious Studies. The day I received the acceptance letter from UNC was a true holiday for me!”

Now, just a few years later, Kushkova is the second graduate student to be awarded the Silver Fellowship from the Center. The Rhonda A. and Robert Hillel Silver Graduate Fellowship provides funding for Ph.D. students who are nearing the completion of their program of study, and allows students to spend an entire academic year focusing on research and writing for their dissertations.

This year Kushkova is conducting anthropological interviews in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova, seeking to describe Jewish economic practices under socialism, as yet another aspect of Jewish collective identity. Her project will compare how Jews in different environments (e.g. large cities, small provincial towns) with varying sized Jewish populations and unique economic influences functioned under the restrictions and realities of socialism.

“My field research is going to be 14 months long — from early in summer 2013 through the end of summer 2014 — and will take place in several different geographic places. In order to draw valid comparisons, I will need to talk to a large number of people in each of these settings. It is impossible to imagine that a project like this could be done without private support. I am extremely grateful to the Center and the Silver family for providing this crucial support for my research.”

In total, Kushkova plans to record about 60 full-length interviews, plus additional shorter interviews. She conducts the interviews in her native Russian, but she is also fluent in English and German and speaks French, Yiddish and “a sprinkling of other languages, especially Slavic languages,” Kushkova noted.

Once this project and her graduate studies are completed, Kushkova will seek an academic position in the United States. “I hope to find a place which, like Carolina, brings together people of various interests and backgrounds eager to get engaged in cultural, as well as academic, discussions,” added Kushkova.

Naomi Graber

Published: Spring 2013



When Naomi Graber first learned that there were new sources of information related to her dissertation topic, she had mixed feelings. The information certainly piqued her interest, but she was, after all, nearly done with the intensive project. Ultimately, the opportunity to review these new materials at the American Film Institute, even if it meant having to suddenly revise sections of her dissertation, was simply too important to overlook. So in late January 2013, Graber made hasty arrangements for an “emergency research trip” to Los Angeles, not knowing what she might find.

Graber, the inaugural recipient of the Rhonda A. and Robert Hillel Silver Graduate Fellowship, will graduate this spring with a Ph.D. in musicology. After attending Brandeis University as an undergraduate, she came to the Carolina Department of Music in 2007 with the initial interest in studying Mozart. In the course of a research project, however, she stumbled across a new subject, which has evolved into her dissertation on the American works of the Jewish-German composer Kurt Weill, who fled Nazi Germany in 1933.

The decision to focus on Kurt Weill, the acclaimed composer of *The Threepenny Opera*, took even Graber by surprise. “I knew ‘Mack the Knife,’ and that was it,” she admits. “But I started listening to his work more and fell in love with it.” Through research trips that have taken Graber across the country, she has sought to understand how Weill’s Jewish-German background shaped his views on — and ultimately the music he created in—the United States.

For example, one of his unfinished works during the time period, a musical called “Ulysses Africanus,” used symbolism of Jews in Egypt and the Seder to tell a story of African Americans in the Reconstruction South. “Music can express something interviews, letters, and so on can’t,” Graber explains. “It can contradict interviews, and it can express multiple perspectives at once. In this case, you have African-American tropes, Jewish tropes, even hillbilly tropes.”

This May, Graber will earn the doctorate in musicology that has been her dream since attending a conservatory summer camp when she was 15. In previous years at Carolina, she’s served as a teaching assistant for all manner of courses, from *Music and War*, to *Ear Training*. This year, though, due to the support from the Silver Fellowship, she’s been able to focus entirely on her dissertation.

Freed to research and write, Graber was able to make her impromptu research trip to the American Film Institute this winter. Once there, she became one of the first scholars to look through newly released papers from the estate of pioneering filmmaker Fritz Lang.

He and Weill had collaborated on the 1938 social-problems film, “You and Me.” Weill’s influence on this film and other works on American screen and stage has long been overlooked. Thanks to Naomi Graber, this story can finally be told.

The Rhonda A. and Robert Hillel Silver, ’77 Graduate Fellowship supports a promising graduate student working in Jewish Studies in the advanced stages of his or her career at Carolina. This fellowship enables a student to focus full time on his or her scholarship, thereby improving quality and shortening the time required to complete a Ph.D. degree. Private support for graduate student fellowships and stipends for graduate student research and travel help nurture young scholars, create relevant scholarly works, train the next generation of leading teachers and researchers, and further Carolina’s commitment to student-focused research.

Patrick Tobin

Published: Spring 2013



Patrick Tobin was drawn to Carolina in order to work with Christopher Browning, the Frank Porter Graham Distinguished Professor of History, who is one of the preeminent scholars on the Holocaust.

“I honestly didn’t know a lot about North Carolina before applying, but I knew about Professor Browning. I’d read his book, *Ordinary Men*, as an undergraduate and it wholly reshaped my interests. Prior to that, I’d been learning ancient Greek and preparing for some kind of future in Classics. But Professor Browning’s book got me interested in Holocaust studies, so I dropped Greek for German and began to pursue UNC.”

The Michigan native received his B.A. from Kalamazoo College, his M.A. in history from Carolina and will graduate this May with a Ph.D. in history. In 2010–11, he received a prestigious Fulbright Fellowship, which allowed him to spend a year in Stuttgart, Germany, focusing on his research on how Germans came to terms with the Holocaust in the postwar era.

“Today, Germany is dotted with memorials and museums dedicated to victims of the Holocaust. My interest is to understand how this happened. How did the worst event in German history become central to modern Germany’s identity?” asked Tobin. “To try to understand this question, my dissertation has looked at the years after the war through 1960, when things were very different. Initially, there was very little discussion of the Holocaust, and Jews were often identified as just one group of a wide array of civilian victims in the war. Largely as a result, there were very few prosecutions of Holocaust perpetrators after the 1940s and many of these perpetrators were able to reintegrate into society. But my research shows that this began to change quite dramatically by the end of the 1950s. A massive trial — the subject of my dissertation — began in 1958 in Ulm, West Germany, and it targeted 10 Holocaust perpetrators. By the end of the decade, a central agency for Nazi crimes investigations opened, and in the 1960s, for the first time, the public began a sustained and ongoing discussion about the need to more seriously deal with the legacy of the Holocaust, judicially, politically, and culturally.”

Tobin has taught and helped teach several courses at Carolina, including *The World Since 1945*, *History of the Holocaust*, *History of the Middle Ages*, *Western Civilization* and *Global History of Warfare*.

“Teaching for me is a perfect complement to the research aspect of graduate school. While much of grad school has been about sitting quietly in an office or archive, toiling away on a project whose completion is years away, teaching is very much the opposite. It’s about engaging with students directly, sharing information, opening minds, and making new connections. There’s an immediate gratification and reward that you get from teaching. It works as something like a short-term fuel boost to push me along on my long-term research.”

Tobin, who has served as the Center’s graduate assistant for the past two years, plans to continue to work on Holocaust aftermath studies for the foreseeable future.

“This remains a growing field of study, as we try to understand not just how the Holocaust happened, but also how societies have responded to the legacy of the Holocaust. Looking forward, I’m interested in pushing myself beyond the boundaries of Germany to look at this broader question.”

Patrick Tobin, Professor Browning, and three other recent graduate students will lead this year’s Uhlman Family Seminar on New Directions in Holocaust Research, scheduled for April 13. Pre-registration is required.

Stephanie Gaskill

Published: Spring 2012



Stephanie Gaskill, a native of Toledo, Ohio, has dedicated the past year to researching black Protestants' attitudes toward Israel. A graduate student based in the Religious Studies department, Gaskill became interested in studying religion while she was completing her Master's degree in History. "I had started my graduate career intending to study diplomatic history, but found myself again and again gravitating toward topics that addressed religion. I am fascinated by the role religion has played (and continues to play) in foreign policy decisions."

This broader interest led her to pursue research on Christian Zionism, which in turn has broadened her interest in many other topics within American religious history. "This topic is interesting to me because it addresses the underlying relationship between African-Americans and Jews. Both historical scholarship and popular perception portray this relationship as one that has been on the decline since the 1960s because of social and political disagreements. But the role religion plays in interactions between African-Americans and Jews has often been overlooked. Viewing this relationship through the lens of religious history reveals an important point: neither African-Americans nor Jews are monolithic groups, and religious convictions help to account for the varying ways they can interact with one another. More specifically, black Protestants' support for Israel subverts the traditional notion that African-Americans have grown more antagonistic toward Jews and adds an important element to current discussions of black-Jewish relations."

Gaskill was recently awarded a Graduate Student Research and Travel grant, made possible by generous private gifts to the Center. With this travel grant, Gaskill will be able to travel to Detroit to conduct several weeks of field research at Glenn Plummer's Ambassadors for Christ Church. "Plummer is unique in that he is an African-American minister who is very outspoken about his support for Israel. This support is especially intriguing given the fact that Plummer carries out his ministry in an area suffering greatly from the recession, raising questions about why he and his congregation in particular are devoted to supporting Israel. I hope to determine the reasons for this support and what it says about black-Jewish relations in America more broadly."

Carolina was Gaskill's top choice for graduate school. "This program is a perfect fit for me because I am able to work with two incredible faculty members who are experts in my two main areas of interest." Gaskill's two faculty advisors are Yaakov Ariel, an expert on Christian Zionism, and Laurie Maffly-Kipp, an expert on African-American religious history.

"I also cannot say enough about how much I appreciate my department as a whole. My professors and fellow graduate students are not only brilliant, but also unbelievably supportive, both inside and outside the classroom. I really cannot imagine myself anywhere else."

Gaskill, who holds a B.A. in History and English, and an M.A. in History, all from Bowling Green State University, expects to complete her Ph.D. program in 2015. She then plans to pursue a career as a professor at a small liberal arts college.

Carrie Duncan

Published: Winter 2011



For as long as Carrie Duncan (Ph.D. candidate, Religious Studies) can remember, she has been interested in multicultural interactions, particularly when these cultures occupy the same geographic space. As a child, she loved maps and has always been drawn to the Middle East and Jerusalem. “I am interested,” she says, “in how different groups negotiate their identities within larger cultural identities.” Now in her final year of a Ph.D. program in the Ancient Mediterranean Religions division of the Religious Studies Department, she has been able to pursue this fascination by conducting archaeological digs in Israel and Jordan, deciphering ancient inscriptions, and teaching undergraduates to read Biblical Hebrew. Across such diverse experiences, she has not only provided valuable research into Jewish life in the past, but also contributed significantly to Jewish life on today’s UNC campus.

Duncan first came to UNC after receiving an M.A. in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from Harvard University. She seized the opportunity to rejoin her undergraduate mentor, Professor Jodi Magness, who had joined UNC in the Religious Studies department. Duncan is currently completing her dissertation on gender and religious authority in Jewish Diaspora communities, which is being funded by a prestigious Charlotte W. Newcomb fellowship. She argues that religion permeated all facets of early society, so it makes an excellent “lens through which to view ancient cultures.” Her work, which draws on evidence from ancient synagogues and funerary plaques, is significant for making sense of how these communities organized themselves through the use of public images and language. Changing her focus to the future, her goal is to secure an academic position in Jewish Studies for the coming academic year.

In addition to her academic work, Duncan has contributed significantly to Jewish Studies on campus. She has taught numerous campus and online courses on the Hebrew Bible, Judaism and early Christianity, and has served multiple times as a teaching assistant in similar courses. Particularly since so many students come in with some background in these areas, Duncan loves being able to “get students to rediscover something so familiar in such a new context.” In her Biblical Hebrew course, for example, she is able to “open their eyes to complications in original texts that often get smoothed over in English.”

For Duncan, Jewish Studies has ultimately meant more than academic and teaching experiences. From 2007-2010, she worked at the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies as a graduate assistant and played an important role in building up the program and conducting outreach to fellow graduate students. Being able to highlight the interdisciplinary nature of Jewish Studies to fellow graduate students as well as undergraduates has helped Duncan in her own thinking and affirmed to her the value of Jewish Studies at UNC. As she says, “One of the things I’ve loved the most has been the opportunity to bring Judaism and Jewish Studies to a group and culture that is not often exposed to it.” Thanks to Duncan’s efforts over the past years, more students than ever at UNC have been able to share in this opportunity.

Ria Van Ryn

Published: Spring 2011



What seemed an otherwise unremarkable November day turned into a deeply meaningful, perhaps life-changing day for a group of middle school students, thanks to the efforts of one of Carolina's graduate students. The teens, from Benaim Shalom Jewish Day School in Greensboro and Al-Imam School in Raleigh, were meeting each other for the first time, after months of learning about each other's cultures and beliefs from Maria (RIA) Van Ryn, Ph.D. candidate in UNC's Sociology Department.

As the focus of her dissertation, Van Ryn met with the eighth graders at each school over the course of the fall semester, about once a week for 12 weeks. The first few classes were a basic overview of each tradition—teaching the Jewish kids about Islam and the Muslim kids about Judaism. Then they had several class periods on the shared values Van Ryn was focusing on: love/family, education, peace, and service. In all of these classes, Van Ryn would use a variety of teaching techniques—reading from texts (including the Torah and Qur'an), watching movie clips, doing interactive PowerPoint activities, skits, crafts, etc. Eventually, the students wrote letters to each other, sharing personal insights into their lives and cultures.

"I started studying Jewish and Islamic schools because my primary research interest is in minority identity, and I wanted to see how and why Jewish and Muslim families were using religious schools to perhaps counteract the heavy influence of Christianity in the American South," said Van Ryn. "Along the road, I realized I couldn't leave my dissertation kids without them meeting one another and knowing what I knew—that they had so many shared values and experiences. I felt that the earlier they were able to build relationships with one another, the easier interfaith understanding would be later in their lives." So she began efforts to arrange for the workshop and finally have the students met each other.

"The day of the workshop was one of the most fulfilling of my life, much less career," said Van Ryn. "The kids were all so excited, and it was just amazing to see how quickly they connected. What's also been neat is to see the kids maintaining their connections—I've been to the schools for various reasons since then, and they're always eager to tell me that they've been chatting on Google and writing on one another's Facebook walls. I've had nothing but positive reactions from the school communities as well as others around the country that have learned about the program and want to know more."

Van Ryn finishes her doctoral studies this May, after a long journey toward her academic career. "I first learned about sociology when I took a class in college to fulfill a curricular requirement as an undergraduate. Immediately, I knew that this is how I wanted to approach religion, not from a sense of what is true and what isn't, but what people do with religion. So I declared a second major (the first was religion)," said Van Ryn. After my master's in religion, from Vanderbilt, I decided to switch gears a bit because I thought that a sociology background would give me the theoretical and methodological tools to do the kind of research I wanted to do. It has done that and more—I am thrilled with the way that sociology has opened up subfields to me that I wouldn't have had access to previously."

This fall, Van Ryn will join the Sociology Department at Yeshiva University in New York City as assistant professor. But this project has also made her realize that she wants to keep doing more hands-on work, so she's also looking into consulting for groups who want to do interfaith programming. One of the benefits of an academic job is the ability to balance teaching, which is her primary passion, with research and these kinds of community projects.

Joseph Gindi

Published: Spring 2010



The Carolina Center for Jewish Studies can take partial credit for graduate student Joseph Gindi's presence on campus. The Center was instrumental in bringing Jonathan Boyarin, the Leonard and Tobee Kaplan Distinguished Professor of Modern Jewish Thought, to campus in the fall of 2007. It is the classic case of having outstanding faculty attract outstanding graduate students.

"When I heard that Professor Boyarin had been hired in the Religious Studies Department, I was drawn to investigate UNC for doctoral work," said Gindi. "As I learned more about UNC, I became excited about the opportunities for studying at the Department of Religious Studies, where I could work with truly excellent scholars in American religion, anthropology of religion, and philosophy of religion."

Gindi is in his second year of graduate study at Carolina, currently working on a Master's thesis under Professor Boyarin's direction and serving as a Teaching Assistant.

"I was also drawn to UNC by the possibility of teaching throughout my graduate career," added Gindi. "I get much of my drive and inspiration from my students. I hope that the ideas they are exploring in my classroom will change their life as much as the ideas I have encountered in my studies have changed mine."

Gindi's scholarly focus is on American Judaism and Jewish culture. "In particular I am interested in the way Jewish religious concepts shape, and are shaped by, the broader cultural and political context in which American Jews create their Judaism," said Gindi. "I believe, or hope, that thinking critically about Jewish culture and identity in conversation with scholars asking similar questions about other social groups can help all of us build the kind of religions, identities, and communities that embody our best values."

Gindi has been an active member of the Jewish Studies Graduate Student Network since his arrival at Carolina, and he is a regular participant in the seminars and lectures hosted by the Center.

"The Center has been an important, perhaps even essential, part of my graduate experience at UNC. First, it has helped bring new faculty members to campus. And second, through its many events, the Center has enabled me to connect personally with scholars from across the vast field of Jewish studies, and created an opportunity for the community of Jewish studies scholars on campus (both faculty and graduate students) to gather and discuss important and innovative works in the field."

Gindi is the distinguished recipient of the Caroline H. and Thomas S. Royster Fellowship, which provides graduate students not only with financial support, but also with mentoring by senior faculty at the University. Funding opportunities such as this fellowship help academic departments recruit outstanding graduate students, such as Gindi, to Carolina.

Before coming to Carolina, he completed a dual Master of Arts degree program in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies and the Horstein Program for Jewish Professional Leadership at Brandeis University.

Richard Benson

Published: Spring 2009



Fall 2008 saw the official launch of the Jewish Studies Graduate Student Network, sponsored by the Center. The Network provides a forum for graduate students from across the campus to connect and communicate through their shared interest in Jewish culture. At this first meeting, students representing such disparate departments as History, Germanic Languages and Literatures, Religious Studies and Communication Studies, came together to discuss two chapters of Ph.D. candidate Richard Benson's dissertation, which focused on the stories of Martin Buber.

"The Graduate Student Network has allowed me to hear about the research of students who approach Jewish Studies from diverse fields, and to present my work to a broad scholarly audience," said Benson. "This has not only introduced me to the variety of questions that comprise the field of Jewish Studies, but it has also taught me to make my own work accessible to people who don't specialize in German."

Benson earned his Bachelor's degree in German Literature from New York University in 1999, and in the fall of 2003, he entered the program in German Literature at UNC as a Joseph E. Pogue Fellow. In 2006-2007, he participated in the UNC-CH/ Baden-Württemberg teaching exchange program at the University of Mannheim, where he taught English while conducting preliminary dissertation research. Thanks to a generous fellowship from the Stiftung Dialogik, Benson is spending this academic year finishing his dissertation, which explores German-Jewish struggles with identity and tradition in the writings of Karl Emil Franzos, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Martin Buber, Jakob Wassermann, and Theodor Herzl. Benson will complete his Ph.D. this spring, working under the guidance of Jonathan Hess and Jonathan Boyarin, the Leonard and Tobee Kaplan Distinguished Professor of Modern Jewish Culture.

Graduate students play an integral role in the success of a research university such as Carolina. The university needs to attract and retain preeminent faculty, and these faculty members expect to have graduate students of the highest quality with whom to work. Without competitive funding packages, the best graduate students will go elsewhere. Moreover, Carolina's reputation as a first class center for Jewish Studies is enhanced as Carolina graduate students go on to become Jewish Studies faculty members at other institutions.