Fred Somkin

May 12, 1924 — February 1, 2009

Born in Detroit, Michigan, Fred Somkin received instruction at the Yeshiva school there, earned his B.A. degree in English from Wayne State University (1946) and his LL.B. degree from Columbus Law School (now Catholic University Law School in Washington, D.C.) in 1952. He had served in the U.S. Army during World War II and in its reserves as a sergeant from 1949-53. From 1952-59 he practiced law in Washington, where he became a member of the bar of the Supreme Court of the U.S. He served as counsel for the penultimate capital defendant in Washington.

Through his legal practice Fred met Bodil Hammergaard, a Danish woman who served as an apprentice to Frank Lloyd Wright (1950-54). They married in 1959, and she designed their home on Cornell Walk in Ithaca. Bodil predeceased him in 2000 and they had no children.

While completing his Ph.D. degree in American History at Cornell (1967), Fred taught history at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, from 1963-68, when he joined the Cornell faculty as Associate Professor of History. His specialty was American cultural and intellectual history, and his courses included “The American Dream,” “Law and Authority in American Life,” “Crime and Punishment,” “The Jewish Immigrant Experience,” and undergraduate seminars on a variety of topics.

His best-known work, which remains an influential classic, is *Unquiet Eagle: Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Freedom, 1815-1860* (Cornell University Press, 1967), an exploration of American concerns about the meaning of democracy, prosperity, national security, and occasions rich with symbolic significance, such as Lafayette’s triumphal return visit to the United States in 1824-25. Fred’s ultimate concern in this beautifully written book is the quest for a sense of national identity. He quoted from a symptomatic committee report in 1845 that sought for the young country “a distinctive name, one that would express the American ‘nationality’ more meaningfully than the United States.” Hence its recommendation: The Republic of Allegania. The committee’s purpose, of course, was to eliminate or smooth over the growing estrangement between North and South and strengthen the Union.

The range of Fred’s reading and erudition astonished his friends. He could identify the source of quotations from literature and historical figures that sounded familiar to others who nonetheless could not place them. In a notable essay that appeared in the *Journal of American History* (1981), “How Vanzetti Said Goodbye,” he employed
his deep knowledge of American literature to demonstrate the likely influence of Walt Whitman’s poetry on a
famous prison statement made by the Italian-American anarchist Bartolomeo Vanzetti in 1927, and to show more
broadly that “Vanzetti’s prose took a marked impress from Whitman’s words.”

That kind of literary detective work appeared early and often in Fred’s scholarship. It began with “Tocqueville as
a Source for Edwin Arlington Robinson’s ‘Man Against the Sky’,” and in 1963 occurred again in “Scripture Notes
to Lincoln’s Second Inaugural,” which appeared in Civil War History in 1981.

During the later phase of his career at Cornell, Fred’s special focus became the world of Jewish-American theater
and music that thrived in New York City during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. That led to his
last major publication, “Zion’s Harp by the East River: Jewish-American Popular Songs in Columbus’s Golden
Land,” which appeared in Perspectives in American History (1985). His research interests during the 1990s reached
back to his legal training and activity on behalf of civil liberties during the 1950s. For his final project he turned
to the doctrine of self-defense in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century, which from a
cultural perspective was a hitherto undeveloped field of inquiry. After examining more than 400 cases of self-
defense during the early republic, he focused on a notorious manslaughter episode that occurred in Massachusetts
in 1806, a court case in which the defendant, whose trial was tainted by partisanship, was eventually cleared. That
case became the basis for many other self-defense decisions during the half-century that followed.

Fred retired from teaching at Cornell in 1994. During his later years, he shared a close friendship with a kindred
spirit, Rabbi Eli Silberstein of Ithaca. They met weekly to study the Talmud, a practice they both loved, and to
share stories about their similar backgrounds as Yeshiva students. Fred is remembered for his love of music and
poetry along with ‘Yiddishkeit’ and lively storytelling. The history of American humor had engaged him as a
professional interest, and close friends recall with affection his own delight in jokes and anecdotes that revealed
the foibles of his students, his colleagues, and himself.

Michael Kammen, Chairperson; R. Laurence Moore, Richard Polenberg