

## Remembering Eli N. Evans

*By Sofia Lesnewski for Facing South, September 2022*

The story of the Durham cigarette rollers was told most famously by Eli N. Evans in his 1971 book “The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South.” A blend of autobiography, storytelling, and history, the book served as an introduction to the Jewish South for many readers. Evans died on July 26 in New York City of complications from COVID-19. He was 85.

Evans was the son of Emanuel J. “Mutt” Evans, a New Jersey native who moved to North Carolina to attend UNC-Chapel Hill. The elder Evans married Sara Nachamson, a student at Duke University in Durham; her family owned the United Dollar Store chain, which Evans took over. He went on to be elected the city’s first Jewish mayor and served a then-record six terms, from 1951 to 1963. Subjected to antisemitism during his campaign, he won with the strong backing of Durham’s Black voters and went on to oversee the desegregation of the city’s schools, public agencies, and police and fire departments. When a Durham County judge tried to force the Evanses to segregate the lunch counter at their family’s store in Durham — then the only integrated one in the city — they refused. Instead, they removed the seats and raised the counter to elbow height to exploit a technicality in state law allowing Blacks and whites to eat together as long as they were standing up.

Eli Evans was the first Jewish student to serve as the student body president at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and he went on to serve in the U.S. Navy and attend Yale Law School. He worked as an aide to progressive North Carolina Gov. Terry Sanford and as a White House speech writer before writing the book that would launch his career as a man of letters. In addition to “The Provincials,” Evans also wrote a biography of Jewish Confederate Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin and “The Lonely Days Were Sundays: Reflections of a Jewish Southerner.” He went on to work in philanthropy with the Carnegie Corporation and the Charles H. Revson Foundation.

“Around the synagogue, children could hear old men tell visitors the story of the Jews and the Dukes, the true white Anglo-Saxons, the only aristocracy Durham had,” Evans wrote in “The Provincials,” which he updated in 1997. “The story appealed to the Jewish immigrants — how the sons of old Washington Duke brought the Jews down to roll cigarettes and conquer America right from the streets of our home town.”

