THE HADASSAH
RESEARCH INSTITUTE
ON JEWISH WOMEN

JEWISH WOMEN 2000:
CONFERENCE PAPERS
FROM THE HRIJW
INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARLY
EXCHANGES 1997-1998

EDITED BY HELEN EPSTEIN

WORKING PAPER 6 / NOVEMBER 1999
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**CONTRIBUTORS** ......................................................... 1

**EDITOR'S NOTE** ...................................................... 7
by Helen Epstein

**JEWISH WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES.** .................. 13
by Riv-Ellen Prell

**WOMEN AND RESEARCH ON WOMEN IN ISRAEL.** ........ 21
by Hanna Herzog

**ITALY** .............................................................. 31
by Micaela Procaccia

**LATIN AMERICAN JEWS.** ........................................... 39
by Judith Laikin Elkin

**IRANIAN JEWISH DIASPORA WOMEN** ....................... 49
by G.B.

**JEWISH WOMEN IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA** .......... 59
by Ana Lebl

**BEING A JEWISH WOMAN IN FRENCH SOCIETY** ............. 65
by Regine Azria

**SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH WOMEN** ............................. 71
by Sally Frankental

**MIZRAHI WOMEN IN ISRAEL: THE DOUBLE ERASURE** ... 79
by Pnina Motzafl-Haller

**JEWISH WOMEN IN MEXICO** ....................................... 97
by Paulette Kershewovich

**ISRAELI WOMEN AND HEALTH** .................................. 109
by Susan Sered

**REPORT FROM LITHUANIA** ...................................... 117
by Basia Nikiforova

**CANADIAN, JEWISH AND FEMALE.** ............................ 123
by Norma Baumel Joseph

**HOMING PIGEON: A SEPHARDIC JEW** .......................... 129
Ruth Knfä Setton

*continued*
# TABLE OF CONTENTS, continued

**THE MOTHERS OF PASTEUR STREET:**
THE STRUGGLE FOR PLURALISM IN ARGENTINA ........ 137
*by Edna Aizenberg*

**IRANIAN JEWISH WOMEN DISCOVER THE POWER**
**OF WORDS ................................................. 145**
*by Farideh Dayanim Goldin*

**TESHUVAH AMONG FRENCH JEWISH WOMEN .......... 161**
*by Laurence Podesver*

**JEWISH WOMEN IN CHILE ............................ 169**
*by Marjorie Agosín*

**ISRAELI WOMEN: COLLECTIVISM**
**AND INDIVIDUALISM .................................... 173**
*by Eetta Prince Gibson*

**HUNGARY .................................................. 183**
*by Katalin Taliyga*

**BOOKENDS ................................................ 187**
*by Pamela S. Nadell*

**JEWISH WOMEN IN BRITAIN .......................... 191**
*by Marlena Schmool*

**GENDER AND LITERACY AMONG YOUNG ORTHODOX**
**JEWISH WOMEN ........................................ 199**
*By Tamar El-Or*

**JEWISH WOMEN IN LATVIA ........................... 233**
*By Ruta Marjasa*
MARJORIE AGOSIN was born in Bethesda, Maryland in 1955 and grew up in Santiago, Chile. She is a professor at Wellesley College, the author of 10 poetry collections and editor of 12 anthologies including *The House of Memory: Jewish Women Writers of Latin America and Passion, Memory and Identity: Jewish Women Writers in Latin America*. She has also written two memoirs: *A Cross and a Star: A Memoir of a Jewish Girl in Chile, Always From Somewhere Else: My Jewish Father and Uncertain Travelers: Conversations with Jewish Women Immigrants to America*, published by the University Press of New England in the Brandeis Series on Jewish Women.

EDNA AIZENBERG was born in Argentina in 1945 and currently lives in New York where she is Professor of Spanish and Chair of Hispanic Studies at Marymount Manhattan College. She describes herself as mestiza, with Israeli, Argentine, Venezuelan and North American strands in her family tree and wandering biography. Edna is the author of books on Borges and Latin American Jewish writers, and is an activist on behalf of Jewish rights in Latin America.

REGINE AZRIA was born in Paris, France in 1948 and studied Sociology at the Sorbonne in Paris and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Currently she works at the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* where she is a member of the *Centre d’Etudes Interdisciplinaires des Faits Religieux*. Azria is Assistant Editor of the Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions and gives regular seminars and courses at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* (Paris), at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland) and at the *Institut Catholique de Paris*. In addition, Azria is the author of numerous publications about Jewish identity.

G.B.

G.B. is a professor at a college in New England. Please contact the HRIJW for more information.
JUDITH LAIKIN ELKIN is an associate of the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan and founding president of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association. She is the author of numerous books and articles on Latin American Jews and has edited the semiannual journal Latin American Jewish Studies for the past seventeen years. A former United States Foreign Services Officer, she has taught history and political science at Wayne State University, Ohio State University and Albion College, and also wrote a column of foreign news analysis for the Detroit Free Press and Toledo Blade.

TAMAR EL-OR was born in Tel Aviv in 1955 and has lived there ever since. She is an associate professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Hebrew University Jerusalem. She studies the intersection of gender, religion and knowledge. Her first book, published in English in 1994, is Educated and Ignorant: on Ultra Orthodox Women and their World. Her second, forthcoming book is Next Passover: Women and Literacy among the Religious Zionists.

HELEN EPSTEIN was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1947 and grew up in New York City. She has worked as a cultural journalist, translator for the Czech, editor, journalism professor, lecturer, and author. Her books Children of the Holocaust, Music Talks, and Where She Came From: A Daughter's Search for her Mother's History have been widely translated. She is currently an affiliate of Harvard’s Center for European Studies and the HRIJW.

SALLY FRANKENTAL was born in 1943 and teaches in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town, and the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies. Her current research interest is transnational migration and the related fields of ethnic identity formation and citizenship issues. She recently completed a study of Israelis in South Africa, which she is preparing for publication.

FARIDEH GOLDIN was born in 1953 in Shiraz, Iran and emigrated to the United States on July 4, 1975. She attended Pahlavi University, then graduated from Old Dominion University. She returned later for a graduate degree in Humanities and in Women's Studies and is currently working on a second graduate degree in creative writing. She is working on a memoir of Jewish life in Iran, from the perspective of a child living in a Jewish ghetto, that includes stories from the oral tradition of Shirazi Jews.

HANNA HERZOG was born in Tel Aviv in 1955 and has lived on the same street ever since. She is Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Tel Aviv University, specializing in political sociology, political communication and sociology of gender. Her books include Political Ethnicity: Image and Reality (Hebrew); Realistic Women: Women in Israeli Local Politics; and Gendering Politics: Women in Israel (English). She is currently completing a study of Israeli-Palestinian women and the peace movement in Israel, and is a member of the Israeli Women’s Network, Women and Mothers for Peace, and Bat-Shalom.
NORMA BAUMEL JOSEPH is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religion at Concordia University in Montréal, Convener of the Chair in Quebec and Canadian Jewish Studies and Director of the M.A. in Judaic Studies and Director of M.A. in Judaic Studies. Her teaching and research areas include women and Judaism, Jewish law and ethics, and women and religion. Founding member of the Canadian Coalition of Jewish Women for the Get, Dr. Joseph successfully persuaded the Canadian Federal Government to pass a law in 1990 that would protect Jewish women in difficult divorce situations and aid them in their pursuit of a Jewish divorce. Following the Canadian achievement, Dr. Joseph helped form and presided over the International Coalition for Agunah Rights, for women whose husbands refuse to consent to a Jewish divorce.

PAULETTE KERSHENOVICH was born in Mexico City in 1972, left when she was eight years old, lived in the United States until she was 16, and then returned to Mexico where she graduated from the U.S. International University with a B.A. in International Relations. She is currently a doctoral student in Contemporary Jewry and the Women's Studies program at the Faculty of Political Science of Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Her dissertation will be on Jewish women and their role in the Mexican community. She has lived in Israel for the past four years.

SUSANNA KEVAL was born in 1955 in Bratislava, then Czechoslovakia. Since 1968, she has lived in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, where she finished school, did her M.A. in cultural anthropology and Ph.D. in sociology. She is affiliated with the Interdisciplinary Center for Gender Studies at the University of Frankfurt, where she does research on Jewish women's studies. In addition, she is editor-in-chief of the Frankfurt Jewish Community Magazine.

ANA LEBL was born in 1959 and grew up in Belgrade, where the former Yugoslavia's largest Jewish population (1,500 people) was centered. As an active member of that community and through working with the Jewish Historical Museum, she developed a strong Jewish identity. In 1987, she married and moved to Split (then Yugoslavia; now Croatia) joining the Jewish community of about 100. She received her B.A. in Near Eastern Archaeology from the University of Belgrade and her M. Litt. degree in Maritime Archaeology from St. Andrew’s University in Scotland. She now works as a Coordinator of Cultural, Educational and Religious Activities in the Jewish Community of Split, is a member of the Jewish Women's Section of her community and of the Jewish Women's Union of Croatia. Ana has two daughters.
TOBE LEVIN FREIFRAU VON GLEICHEN was born in 1948 and raised in West Long Branch, N.J. She studied at the University of Paris II and has a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Cornell University. She teaches for the University of Maryland European Division and Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main. Twice a recipient of National Endowment for the Humanities summer grants, she edits *Feminist Europa Review of Books* (not published in English) and chairs FORWARD Germany, society against female genital mutilation. She teaches Feminist Literary Criticism, Gender in Jewish American and African-American Literature and Women’s Holocaust Memoirs. She is the author of numerous articles and books.

RUTA MARJASA was born in 1927 in Riga, the capital of Latvia. She graduated Latvia State University in 1950 and worked in her specialty as a lawyer. From 1984-1989 she was involved in literary, social and political work connected with the Jewish Cultural Society, foundation of the Cultural Association of the Ethnic Minorities of Latvia, the People’s Front for Latvia and the fight for Latvia’s independence. Since 1990, she has been elected to the Latvian Parliament three times and is currently a Member of the Latvian Parliament. She is also a Member of the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) of the Council of Europe and a Member of the Executive Commission of the Israeli Forum. Ms. Marjasa has written a book dedicated to her father entitled *The Past, The Present and The Dream*, and many articles.

PNINA MOTZAFI-HALLER was born in Migdal HaEmek, Israel in 1955 and earned her doctorate at Brandeis University in 1988. An anthropologist concerned with issues of rural development in Africa, the intersection of gender, class and ethnicity and the politics of knowledge in Israel and Africa, she has published essays on these topics. She is presently completing a book titled *Social Space and the Politics of Difference in Botswana*.

PAMELA S. NADELL was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1951. She is a professor of history and Director of the Jewish Studies Program at American University in Washington, D.C. She is the author of numerous articles and the book *Conservative Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook*. Her most recent work, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women’s Ordination 1889-1985*, was a finalist for the 1998 National Jewish Book Award in Women’s Studies.
BASIA NIKIFOROVA was born in 1945, the first Jewish child born after the war in Volkovysk (Belarus). Her parents, who had lived out the war as Jewish partisans in the forests, moved the family to Grodno, where she finished secondary school. She is a graduate of the Philosophy Department in Moscow State University and taught ethics at Grodno Medical Institute before realizing her dream of moving to Vilnius. Only in 1990 did her father tell her about Lithuanian collaboration with the Nazis and that Latvian collaborationists murdered her mother’s family. This information changed her scientific interests. Moving from the abstract idea of religious and ethnic tolerance, she began to focus on Christian-Jewish relations, and sources of anti-Semitism in the Eastern Europe, receiving grants from Harvard University and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. During 1997-1998 she was Fellow of the Center for Study of World Religions at Harvard University and Maria Salit-Gitelson Tell Fellow of YIVO. Her subject of research was “Religious and National Tolerance / Intolerance in Lithuania: The Case of Lithuanian’s Jews in the Twentieth Century.”

LAURENCE PODSELER is a researcher at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris at the Jewish Research Center. After many years dedicated to South American anthropology concerning Amerindians in Amazonia, she turned to Jewish culture and to the socio-anthropology of the Lubavitch community as well as a study of a Parisian suburb with an important Jewish population. Both fields focus on returning to religion as a new tendency of French Jews in the context of immigration and cultural change in France. She is a member of the editorial board of Pardes and the author of numerous publications.

RIV-ELLEN PRELL, an anthropologist, is Associate Professor of American Studies and an adjunct member of the faculties of Jewish Studies and Women’s Studies at the University of Minnesota. She is the author of the forthcoming Fighting to Become Americans: Jewish Women and Men in Conflict in the 20th Century; Prayer and Community: the Havurah in American Life; and co-editor of Interpreting Women’s Lives: Personal Narratives and Feminist Theory. Prell has published a number of articles on American Judaism in the late twentieth century, how gender shapes our understanding of American Jewish culture and Jewish/Black relations in the United States. She has served on the editorial boards of the Encyclopedia of Jewish Women in America and the feminist journal SIGNS. She teaches about American Jewish women, Jews and popular culture and religion and culture.

EETA PRINCE-GIBSON, an Israel-based academic and writer, is working on her doctorate through the Hebrew University on women settlers in the West Band and Gaza.
MICAELEA PROCACCIA
oversees religious archives in
the Archival Department of
the Italian Ministry of Culture.
She holds a doctoral degree in
“Lettere” (History and Italian
Literature) with a specialization
in Paleography. She also holds
post-graduate diplomas from
The School of the Vatican Secret
Archive and the School of the
State Sarchive in Rome. She is
a member of the Council of
Jewish Cultural Heritage Italian
Foundation and the Scientific
Committee of the Centro
bibliografico dell’Unione delle
Comunità ebraiche Italiane.
She is the author of several essays
on the history of Jews in Italy
and the author of texts and
screenplays for videos about Jews
in Rome and the Shoah in Italy.

MARLENA SCHMOOL was born in Leeds, Yorkshire in 1941.
She was educated at the Leeds
Talmud Torah, the Allerton High
School for Girls, the University
of Birmingham and the London
School of Economics. She has
been involved in “Jewish”
research all her adult life and
has served as Research Director,
Jewish Board of Deputies since
1986. Politically incorrect as it
may be, the most important fact
in her life, she writes, is “to see
my children, Barak 30 and Osnat
27 as fulfilled in their lives as I
feel in mine.”

SUSAN SERED was born in New Jersey in 1955 and has lived
in Israel for the past twenty
years. She received her Ph.D.
from Hebrew University in 1986.
She is Associate Professor at
Bar Ilan University, currently on
sabbatical at Harvard University.
Sered is a founding member
of the Israel Association for
the Advancement of Women’s
Health. Her publications include
Women as Ritual Experts: The
Religious World of Elderly Jewish
Women in Jerusalem; Priestess,
Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions
Dominated by Women; and
Women of the Sacred Groves:
Divine Priestesses of Okinawa, all
published by Oxford University
Press. Her forthcoming book,
What Makes Women Sick: Gender,
Illness and Authority in Israeli
Society was written while she was
Scholar-in-Residence at the HRIJW,
will be published by UPNE.

RUTH KNAFO SETTON
was born in Safi, Morocco in
1951. She is the descendant of
Kabbalists, visionaries, artists,
musicians and martyrs, including
Maklouf Knafo, one of the
legendary fifty nisrafim, the
Jewish martyrs of Oufann who
chose death by fire rather than
conversion to Islam in 1790;
as well as of the Cabessa family,
residents of Toledo who fled Spain
during the Inquisition. Her novel,
The Road to Fez, is forthcoming
by Counterpoint Press. She is the
recipient of fellowships from the
NEA, PEN, and the Pennsylvania
A Council on the Arts. Her work
has appeared in many journals
and anthologies, including
Mediterraneans, /m, CrossConnect,
International Quarterly, Tikun,
Lilith, Bridges, and Sephardic-
American Voices: Two Hundred
Years of a Literary Legacy. She
teaches at Lafayette College.

KATALIN TALYIGAS was born in 1942 in La Paz, Bolivia
and grew up in the United States
and in Hungary. She is currently
Secretary General of the
Hungarian Jewish Social Support
Foundation and Senior Lecturer
at the Eötvös Loránd Science
University in Budapest, where
she received her doctorate in
Sociology in 1986. She has
worked in both Hungary and
Bolivia, managing many social
work projects and writing a long
list of articles, particularly on
refugees, the care of the elderly,
and managing social care. She
was responsible for establishing
social work education at a
university level in Hungary.
FOR SEVERAL MONTHS NOW, I have been editing the papers of 24 women working in different fields and in different places throughout the world. These women also come from very different parts of the Jewish community and work in a variety of settings: some are academics; some are writers; some are social workers. All originally presented papers in 1997 and 1998 at the Hadassah Research Institute on Jewish Women located at Brandeis University. Reading their work, thinking about their ideas, and sometimes struggling to translate them into English has been an unexpectedly absorbing experience for me and I’ve wondered what it is, exactly, that I find so rewarding. I’ve concluded that spending time in the company of an international, interdisciplinary group of Jewish women begins to fill a most basic and persistent need in me: the need of human beings to see themselves sympathetically represented and reflected in their culture.

As a Jewish woman growing up in post-war America, I rarely saw any semblance of my reflection in the mainstream culture. Although I grew up in the middle of New York City where almost everybody in my immediate world was Jewish, representations of Jews were absent from the museums I visited, the movies I saw, or the books I read in school. Except for The Diary of Anne Frank, which I consider problematic reading for a young Jewish girl, there was no Jewish heroine in the books of my childhood. I identified with active, adventurous girls like Jo March, Nancy Drew or Cherry Ames and liked reading about the dramatic lives of European and English queens. I didn’t then notice that none of the women I was reading about were Jewish, or that Archie and Veronica seemed to have no Jewish friends; that there were no Jewish Mouseketeers; or that there were no Jewish girls in American Girl or Seventeen.

I was in my forties and listening to West Indian writer Jamaica Kincaid speaking at the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston, when I suddenly perceived their absence (like Pnina Motzafi-Haller in her essay about mizrahi women in Israel, I applied the insight of an African-American woman to my own life). Jamaica Kincaid had done a brilliant and audacious thing: invited to choose her favorite painting at the museum and speak to a large audience about the reasons for her choice, she had beamed an old snapshot of her mother on the museum’s large screen and talked about it.
All of us in the audience, of course, had been accustomed to viewing the parade of art history on such a screen – from the Greeks to the Renaissance masters to the Impressionists and Abstract Expressionists. We were accustomed to oil portraits and elaborately framed photographs. The effect of Kinkaid’s snapshot was shocking and made the author’s point more forcefully than her words: Had we ever seen the image of an ordinary West Indian woman on the walls of a museum? Had we ever contemplated her face? Her body? Her surroundings? Her life? How did we ascribe value to this snapshot when it was viewed in a private photo album, in a newspaper, or here, in the context of other portraits in the museum? We had all read or at least heard of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, but what about the invisible woman? In this case, what about an entire sub-culture usually hidden by the majority African-American minority culture?

I viewed many of these working papers as such snapshots that raised some of these and many other questions.

In addition to experiencing a kind of invisibility as a Jewish girl in America, I also felt an invisibility in the Jewish community as the daughter of Czech Jews (of *ashkenazi* descent on my mother’s side; *sephardi* on my father’s). We lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where there were many Jewish refugees from Central Europe but where the definition of Jewish culture was determined by people who, like the majority of American Jews, were of Russian and Polish descent.

This particular group, I later learned, had jettisoned their working-class, Yiddish-speaking parents (as well as their working-class culture) in the Bronx, or Brooklyn, or Queens, or the Lower East Side. They were West Siders now, middle-class, highly educated, new Jews, who frequented the American – not Yiddish-language – theater and Lincoln Center, collected art, read the cultural sections of the *Times* and the *New Yorker*. The men worked as professionals; the women were delighted to be full-time homemakers in the image of Betty Crocker. Most were political liberals who had flirted with Communism or Socialism in college; they had friends or acquaintances who were blacklisted and were deeply affected by McCarthyism. They had also been deeply affected by the events of the second world war and were in every way invested in a prototypically 1950s American mainstream lifestyle.
My family entered this Upper West Side Jewish milieu towards the end of 1948 like creatures from another planet. My parents were both Holocaust survivors and political exiles from Communism. They had grown up middle-class, did not speak Yiddish, had never seen a bagel, and were not especially interested in Israel. Although they had no sympathy for McCarthyism, they were staunch anti-Communists who regarded Stalin as another version of Hitler. During the 1950s, they struggled to earn money and to adjust to America. Like many Jewish (and other) refugee women, my mother supported the family. My father – a former Olympic water polo player and sometimes officer of the Organization of Czech Sportsmen in-Exile-in-the Western World – was mostly unemployed until I was ten years old.

All this is to say that, as I was growing up, I felt as invisible in the Jewish community as I did in the American one. And when I had finished growing up, although I was counted as an American Jew, I still did not feel like American Jewish culture included me. G.B. could have been describing the Epsteins when she writes “Iranian Jews do not easily mesh with the majority Jewish culture. Those who live in North America feel marginalized: their experience has been that American Jews know nothing about them... The Iranian Jewish diaspora is triggering a re-examination of hegemonic notions of American Jewish identity. Iranian Jews with their own ethnic and cultural tradition are challenging the American Jewish culture that was brought from Eastern Europe and that is presumed to apply to all arriving Jews regardless of their background. This ashkenazi standard for Jews is similar to the WASP standard for assimilation to North American society.”

The issue of cultural hegemony is addressed in an even more dramatic way by South African Sally Frankental: “It is a truism to note that all Jewish communities, in all times and places, reflect the context in which they are located,” she writes. “In the South African case, the segregationist policies of the colonial authorities, the Boer republics, and the Union, followed by the apartheid system of the past fifty years, form the inescapable frame for all who live in South Africa... the disproportionate numbers who arrived from one region, Lithuania, gave the community an unusual degree of homogeneity relative to other diaspora communities. This was reflected in the virtual absence of Hasidism (until the 1970s), in the particular form of Yiddish
spoken, and in a variety of foods and customs particular to Lithuanian Jewry. In addition, the east Europeans’ lack of exposure to Reform Judaism meant that Reform or Progressive Judaism was established in South Africa only in 1933, far later than in most diaspora communities.” All this, of course, shaped the lives of South African Jewish women.

In reading these papers, I was struck by how many kinds of Jewish women there are, how profoundly we are influenced by our country of origin and the continuity or discontinuity of Jewish life within its borders, and by our experience of such factors as entitlement, dislocation, prejudice and outsider status. History, particularly this century’s history, has not treated all Jewish women equally. In writing their papers, some authors – like Katalin Talygas of Hungary – was reconnecting to and reconstructing the history of Jews in their country for the first time. Others, like Micaela Procaccia, who lives in Rome, is steeped in her history and writes with the surety of long immersion in the past: “In the year 1537, a Roman Jewish working class girl named Lariccia cried for days because of an unwanted match,” begins her paper. “The day before the qiddushin, or betrothal, a washerwoman named Clemenza heard Lariccia saying to her father: “I do not like this man, nor do I desire him. I refuse him and reject him, nor do I want him.” She declared herself to be “the unhappiest of all women,” and on the next Shabbat, she told her father that she would not agree to let “the qiddushin become nisu’im.” Her father then hit her with the butt of a knife.”

The biographical section of this volume itself makes for fascinating reading – as much for the wide geographical spectrum represented as for the facts each woman deemed important to include. As different as each woman is, I find much in common with her. It was easy for me to enter into her world.

Although this first HRIJW collection of writing by Jewish women around the world is inevitably uneven and incomplete, it is a respectable beginning. The authors represented here are, in some countries, part of a larger scholarly and cultural project of researching and writing about women’s lives; in others, they are pioneers – the first of their kind. In some countries, they have been able to draw on a large body of data and literature; in others, they are themselves creating that data and literature. Ana Lebl from Split (now in Croatia) lives in an aging and relatively poor community of only 100 Jews
with scarce resources; Americans Riv-Ellen Prell and Pamela Nadell enjoy the support of Jewish Studies as well as Women's Studies departments at major American universities. Our Israeli and Latin American contributors bring both these realities into yet another perspective.

Some of the authors chose to spend time reworking their original presentations; others were content to have published what they originally presented. Many have struggled to express themselves in English – their second or third or fourth language. As a writer who has often had to communicate in foreign languages, I admire their pluck; as editor, I hope they forgive my journalistic bias, my many questions, and my inadvertent mistakes. Parts of all their work – even where it represents a starting point – moved and inspired me. I hope it will move and inspire you.

Helen Epstein
October, 1999
JEWISH WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

by Riv-Ellen Prell

The first conference of the International Research Institute on Jewish Women in 1997 coincided with a remarkable publishing event: the publication of The Encyclopedia of Jewish Women in America. This two-volume work edited by distinguished scholars and activists Professors Paula Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore is testimony to a transformation in both American and American Jewish life. It would have been unthinkable merely thirty years ago, unlikely two decades ago, and probably unmanageable ten years ago.

It was not a paucity of Jewish women and activism that proved a challenge to this undertaking; the Encyclopedia brims over with exciting historical figures. What has changed in recent decades is the recognition of the importance of documenting American Jewish women's lives and organizations, the expansion of Jewish women's participation in the secular and Jewish spheres of the nation, and the birth and growth of a scholarship that allow us to reflect on those processes.

Because the United States is an exceptionally important site of the second wave of feminism that developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it is not surprising that a Jewish feminism would shortly follow. The development of Jewish community life in the United States has positioned Jewish women to play leadership roles in the secular movement and to develop their own.

The massive East European Jewish immigration to the United States between 1890 and 1910 brought two and a half million ashkenazi Jews to the United States. They were preceded by a German Jewish immigration of about 50,000 Jews who left Central Europe between 1820 and 1870 and a far smaller sephardi immigration. While German Jews and their descendants prospered quickly in multiple regions of the United States, the far more numerous East European Jews stayed primarily in the East and in urban centers. They entered an economy hungry for skilled labor to work in the booming factories where Jews produced clothing, jewelry, and other items of an expanding consumer economy.¹

Through unionization that increased workers' wages and entrepreneurial opportunities to create small businesses, Jews were able to enter the middle class fairly rapidly compared to other European white ethnics who came to the United States at a comparable period. Indeed, by the mid-1970s, Jews were moving from a solid position in the middle class to the upper middle class. Jewish woman followed the pattern of American middle-class family life that prescribed taking them out of the labor force at marriage in some cases, or with the birth of their children in others. Because of their political liberalism and relative affluence, which afforded opportunities for education and membership in a variety of women's volunteer organizations, Jewish women were able to participate actively in movements for women's equality and to take advantage of career opportunities that feminist activism had created.

¹ For a general reference work on American Jewish mobility and demographics, see Calvin G. Goldscheider and Alan S. Zuckerman, The Transformation of the Jews, University of Chicago Press 1984
Second wave feminism grew in tandem with, and out of, the leftist student protests of the 1960s and early 1970s. These Jewish students grew up in homes in which achievement through higher education was one of the highest priorities. Sons born in the 1940s and 1950s entered professions to a far greater extent than their fathers who tended to be in business and white collar management. The daughters had many more years of education on average than their mothers.2

As the American college campus of the 1960s became the incubator of political transformation, it was not surprising that Jews, often only a generation or two away from socialism and anarchism, and still in the midst of liberalism, would be active participants in political movements. A feminism that spoke to equal opportunity for women and men would be especially appealing to a relatively privileged group of women who were given identical opportunities to their brothers, but whose career options were far more limited. The middle class Jewish trajectory, combined with the extraordinary opportunities opened by the women's movement, made it possible for American Jewish women to achieve remarkable success in the paid labor force. Since World War II, but particularly since the 1970s, Jewish women and men have begun to resemble one another in educational attainment and employment as they never have previously, according to the research of Israeli sociologists Harriet and Moshe Hartman.3 For example, in 1990 Jewish women born between 1954 and 1965 were slightly more likely to have received Bachelor of Arts degree as their highest degree than Jewish men (46.2 percent to 43.1 percent). In contrast, Jewish women born between 1946 and 1955 were slightly less likely to receive terminal Bachelor of Arts degrees than men (32 percent to 35 percent). Jewish women born between 1946 and 1965 had an average 16 years of education compared to 13 years of education for American white males and females of those ages. Only Jewish males had more education than Jewish women, slightly more than 16 years on average.

The only group of Americans consistently more educated and professionalized than Jewish women is Jewish men – though that gap, too, may be closing. The working lives of Jewish women who do not marry differ almost not at all from Jewish men in that they remain in the workforce employed full time. Jewish married women differ from Jewish men only after they have two children. Then, Jewish women often leave the work-force, returning after their children reach school age. They also continue to work longer than other white workers. Therefore, they comprise a highly educated and productive sector of the work-force.4

With American Jewish women currently employed to a far greater extent than in the 1950s, their ability and/or willingness to participate in Jewish communal life has been affected. A recent study commissioned by the Jewish women's organization, Hadassah, found that today's Jewish women were less likely to participate in Jewish activities than previously. Drawing on Sylvia Fishman's work, Amy Sales reported that 45% of young Jewish women who work full-time volunteer for non-Jewish causes, while 18% give their time to Jewish causes. Jewish women are somewhat more likely to volunteer their time than Jewish men, a fact that

---

2 For a discussion of Jewish mens' professionalization, see “The Economics of American Judaism” by Carmel Ullman Chiswick, Shofar, Vol. 13, No. 4. (Summer 1995)
3 All references are cited in the accompanying bibliography
has been true since the end of the second world war. Lynn Davidman and Shelley Tenenbaum, in their survey of the sociology of American Jewish women, come to a slightly different conclusion. Their analysis of a variety of studies reveals that Jewish women's paid labor does not affect their voluntarism: indeed, those who have part-time employment volunteer to a greater extent than those women not in the workforce.⁵

Another major change in the status of Jewish women has taken place in the religious sphere. Some Jewish denominations have allowed women to be ordained as rabbis and cantors, to count as adult Jews in order to read Torah, make the minyan, and serve as synagogue presidents and leaders. They have thus transformed a shrinking base of Jewish religious participants into a far stronger one. The improved education of both orthodox and non-orthodox young women will likely have a parallel effect. The Jewish community cannot exist without women's leadership and religious participation. That simple fact indicates the dramatic effect of feminism on American Judaism.

Judaism, as it is practiced in the United States, has been changed by feminism in another way. The turn toward spirituality, healing, innovative ritual, new music and the democratization of Jewish higher learning have been in large measure brought about by the efforts not simply of Jewish women, but of Jewish women committed to feminism. As American Jews approach the end of the twentieth century they are participants in a different religion than they were at mid century. Judaism continues to uniquely reformulate the trends of the dominant culture which have consistently had a major impact on how Jews practice their religion.⁶

Over the last three decades, the traditionalism of orthodox Jews has intensified and liberal Jews' synagogue affiliation is down (though not over the last decade according to recent surveys).⁷ At the same time, Jewish practice in the non-haredi Jewish religious institutions has, in a variety of forms, become more inclusive of women, and has allowed greater educational and leadership opportunities.

Parallel to these transformations in religious practice has been a change in educational expectations for young Jewish women and girls. The recent North American Study of Conservative Synagogues and Their Members, 1995-1996 reported that there is now very little difference in the expectations of the bar or bat mitzva. Since bat mitzva in the Conservative movement is a relatively recent phenomenon, the equality in preparation and expectation is all the more remarkable.

The growth of Jewish day school education in the United States is also a critical feature in the increased Jewish education of women. Israel, too, continues to provide opportunities for young Jewish women to study intensively and to increase their competence in the study of traditional Jewish texts.

Overall, the profile of young Jewish adults who continue to identify with Judaism into the 21st century will be feature far greater learning than the majority of identified Jews at mid-century. As recently as the late 1950s, rabbis were decrying the domination of synagogues by women who lacked Jewish educations and could not be competent leaders. Not only was the level of men's Jewish education exaggerated then, but Jewish women's leadership persisted and women's educational opportunities have followed suit.

---
⁵ Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum in “Feminist Sociology and American Jews” in their book cited in the bibliography pp150-151
⁶ See Jack Wertheimer, A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America, Basic Books, 1993
Most research about American Jews since World War II has been fairly insensitive to gender differences. Scholars are just beginning to learn something about the ways that Jewish women participate in their Judaism. The available data suggest a deep commitment on the part of Jewish women to belief in God and Jewish practice. Understanding the meaning of Judaism to those Jewish women who identify religiously as well as those who understand themselves to be secular Jews will be an important avenue for research.

Jewish feminism has been powerfully tied to issues of sexuality within the American Jewish community. Jewish women have been in the forefront of developing a gay Jewish movement in the United States. Evelyn Torton Beck's collection, *Nice Jewish Girls*, as well as the publication of the journal *Bridges* have brought Jewish lesbians into the light of American Jewish organizational life. Debates about the halachic status of gay Jews and gay marriage suggest that American Jewish life and Judaism will continue to respond to and reassess Judaism in light of issues of sexuality well into the next century.

What is paradoxical about the relationship between feminism and Judaism is that the acute feminist critique of normative Jewish tradition has inspired so many women to participate more fully in Jewish life. While I’m not aware of a study of this phenomenon, I have found dozens of examples of women and gays who, though risking marginalization, have sought out Judaism as they have come to understand their difference from the dominant culture. The feminist and “queer” analysis of the patriarchal foundations of Judaism seems to have allowed some Jews to formulate a new identity and brought them to fuller participation and visibility within the Jewish community. A similar phenomenon may be observed within the large community of children of Holocaust survivors whose parents were marginalized and, at times, isolated from the mainstream Jewish community in the 1950s and 1960s. Daughters of survivors such as psychologist Eva Fogelman, authors Helen Epstein and Eva Hoffman, comedian Deb Filler and film historian Annette Insdorf have become prominent figures in their respective fields and in the international second-generation community.8

American Jewish women have a long history of participating in local and national organizations to confront problems facing the Jewish community. The National Council of Jewish women began with German Progressive women’s concerns for the safety of East European young immigrant women. Hadassah, founded in 1912, was established to support a national homeland, as was Pioneer Women, established in 1925. Sisterhood auxiliaries have proved critical to fund raising for synagogues. All of these organizations also acted to educate women, depending on the period, on a variety of subjects, both Jewish and non Jewish. They provided a critical foundation for women’s leadership in the Jewish community through organizations that created women’s spheres parallel to those of men.

The “Federation movement” centralized philanthropic activities and often competed for members with women’s organizations while maintaining their own gender parallel organizations. With the rise of second wave feminism, women began moving out of entirely female organizations but the American Jewish community has been very slow to move women into major leadership positions nationally. Jewish women’s organization have “grayed”nation wide. As older male Jewish organizations such as *B’nai B’rith* have lost members, so have traditional post-war Jewish women’s organizations. Hadassah and the

---

National Council of Jewish Women have devoted considerable energy to recruiting younger women and to reorganizing their structures and goals. They have aggressively supported feminist causes. The National Council of Jewish Women was responsible for supporting the Jewish Women’s Resource Center and Hadassah’s funding of the International Institute for Research on Jewish Women are two examples of ways in which these groups have responded to changes in women’s lives.

Because of the confluence between academic life, the baby boom, and Jewish women’s activism, there has been a significant increase in Jewish feminist scholarship. Historians, religious studies scholars, literary critics, sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural critics have participated in the revision of their own fields through research on Jewish women, as well as establishing a feminist foundation for Jewish studies as a secular scholarly effort.9 Jewish feminist scholarship often took its inspiration from Jewish feminist activism. The Jewish Woman in America, written by two historians and one literary critic, began as an effort to respond to a lack of information, role models or knowledge about the history of American Jewish women.

Rachel Adler’s critical work in feminist Jewish theology began in 1971 with her article “The Jew Who Wasn’t There,” one of the first efforts to find a language to talk about the place of women in Jewish law.10 In the 1990s, a younger generation of Jewish feminist scholars write with a scholarly perspective that allow them to rethink what has already become something of a canonized matriarchy of Jewish feminism. Laura Levitt and Myriad Peskowitz’s most recent collection, Judaism Since Gender, did just that by not only rethinking the study of Jews and Judaism through gender concepts, but revising some earlier feminist work as well. The multi-generational nature of that volume is one of its most interesting contributions.

This scholarly output, as well as the academic turn toward multiculturalism, has worked to develop a burgeoning field of Jewish women’s studies with courses offered throughout the United States.

What is perhaps most exciting about the study of American Jews, American Jewish culture and the impact of Jews on the shape of American culture is that it is wide open to scholarly pursuit. As feminist scholarship has turned from women to the study of gender, such issues as the impact of the construction of an American manhood and womanhood on the religious lives of American Jews, and the development of a secular, modern, and post-modern Jewish culture have become important areas to explore. With the exciting links that can be made between Jewish studies and cultural studies, feminist history and American Jewish history, the study of the construction of racial identity and understanding the impact of gender on Jews’ ascent into the dominant culture, a rich scholarship will only grow.

---

9 For reviews of the impact of feminism on various fields on Jewish scholarship, see Lynn Davidman and Shelley Tenenbaum eds. Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies; Judith Baskin ed. Women of the World; and Jewish Women in Historical Perspective

The growing importance of Yiddish and Eastern European immigrant culture in America to younger scholars and artists will lead to wonderful work on women and gender in that culture. Even in such seemingly well-mined areas as labor organization, political activism, and popular culture, we stand to learn a great deal about how “the project of assimilation,” as Paula Hyman described the phenomenon shaped American Jewish life.11

Another area of Jewish women's lives that is an increasingly important site of scholarship is their representation in the American mass media. In the burgeoning field of media studies, particularly in area of construction of identity, far too little has been written about Jews and Jewish women. Joyce Antler’s Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture is a welcome attempt at this conversation. The last decades have seen the publication of the first major studies of the role of Jews in Hollywood such as Neal Gabler’s How the Jews Invented Hollywood and Lary May's Screening Out the Past. As film historians note, Jewish subjects in film peaked in popularity in the 1920s. Not until the 1970s did Jews re-appear in any numbers and the role of Jewish women has been, with few exceptions, largely negative. Of equal, if not greater concern, than the treatment of women is the fact that the media shows virtually no examples of loving relationships between Jewish women and men. In the 1970s, such films as Goodbye Columbus and The Heartbreak Kid portrayed young Jewish women as unattractive and/or demanding partners.

Television has followed film in this regard. Even as a small number of Jewish characters appeared on network series in the 1980s and 1990s (in Seinfeld, Thirtysomething, and Northern Exposure), the male protagonists are always paired with non-Jewish girlfriends and wives. The media seem unable to present loving heterosexual or homosexual relations between Jews. Media Jews live in an eternal time warp of the 1920s when the melting-pot was the culture’s dominant trope, and marriage between Jews and others was its most popular theme.

Representation and image are powerful forms of communication in any culture, but particularly in a mass media-dominated one. The uncomfortable absence of Jews able to be Jewish with one another in media where so many Jews write, direct and produce is a worrisome matter for anyone concerned about the lives of Jewish women.

In virtually every arena, American Jewish women have succeeded in creating opportunities to pursue the Judaism they want, and the kind of family and work lives meaningful to them. But the ability to tell their own story – the story of American life as they have experience it – remains an important challenge.

On the other hand, Jewish women have been part of an incredible cultural renaissance of fiction, poetry, journalism, dance, art and music. It would be difficult if not foolhardy to list all of the Jewish women working as Jewish artists in the United States. The handful of identifiably Jewish artists prior to feminism and the explosion of talent in a context of expressing cultural identity speaks eloquently to the ability of Jewish women to represent themselves even while they are being mis-represented in the mass media.

11 Paula Hyman refers to the “project of assimilation” in her seminal work Gender and Assimilation: Roles and Representations of Women in Modern Jewish History. She suggests that assimilation as a sociological phenomenon differs from the project, which entails official policy. The host nation’s agreement to allow Jews to assimilate differed from Jewish leaders who wanted Jews to acculturate but not to abandon their unique identities as Jews through religion, philanthropy, and education. These processes were played out within the context of the Jews of western societies also joining the middle class. That class membership sharply differentiated the experiences of men and women. Thus, the project of assimilation is one in which gender and class are critical constituents to understand.
WORKS CITED IN THIS PAPER AND A PARTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY
ON JEWISH WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

This bibliography serves as an invitation to a sample of works in each field. It is biased toward books for
the sake of economy of space, and toward works of scholarship, rather than memo, and journalism. As
scholarly works, each has a fine bibliography. By excluding articles I have left out important work in each
field, but scholarship that is readily available in the works cited.

An annotated bibliography and guide to archival resources on the history of Jewish women in America is
available in the Encyclopedia of Jewish Women in America (volume II), and may be accessed through the
world wide web at www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/womens_studies.jewwom.jwmain.htm

Collections of scholarship by American Jewish Women on women and Judaism relevant to the United States:
Lynn Davidman and Shelley Tenenbaum, eds. Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies.


A cross-section of works in the social sciences on American Jewish women

Cohen, Steven M. 1980. “American Jewish Feminism: A Study in Conflicts & Compromises,”
American Behavioral Scientist. (July): 519-559.

Cohen, Steven M. 1988. American Assimilation or Jewish Revival? Bloomington:


Sylvia Barack Fishman. A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community.


Voices for Change: Future Directions for American Jewish Women. A report of the National Commission
on American Jewish Women.

A cross-section of works in literature on Jewish women in the United States:
Joyce Antler. America and I. Boston: Beacon Press


Janet Handler Burstain. Writing Mothers, Writing Daughters: Tracing the Maternal in Stories by American

A cross-section of works in history on Jewish women in the United States:

Dianne Ashton. Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America.


Women and Judaism in the United States


Popular Culture

WOMEN AND RESEARCH ON WOMEN IN ISRAEL

by Hanna Herzog

A survey of the situation of women and research on women in Israel always generates a dilemma: do we report that the glass is half-full or half-empty?

The dilemma can be encapsulated by these two events. The newspaper Ha'aretz published a series of articles that evaluated Israel’s universities. It was surprising and gratifying to find that one of the criteria for excellence was the existence of gender studies in these institutions. The writer awarded high marks to those universities offering frameworks for feminist studies and research. But the article did not mention the low percentage of women full professors at all of them.

As this series was running, a conference was held at the Hebrew University marking the retirement of the sociologist Moshe Lissak, an Israel Prize laureate. The vast majority of the participants were men. The only session at which most of the discussants were women was one devoted to the effect of the army on the status of women in Israel. It was gratifying that this important topic had not been ignored. But, once again, I noted that women had been relegated to a special category of their own, as though problems that affect women have no bearing on the rest of the society.

My attention to this tendency intensified in the two sessions of the same conference that were devoted to the book Troubles in Utopia, which deals with the changes that have occurred in Israeli society over the past 50 years. The panelists reassessed the book, and there was some criticism of the authors for omitting various “troubles.” No one mentioned women in this connection. So even though I, the only woman on both panels, had been invited to discuss the book's theoretical underpinnings, I found myself protesting its complete omission of the place of women in the Zionist utopia, not to mention its failure to address the adversities endured by women in Israeli society.

Born in 1955, I belong to the generation raised in Israel to believe in the myth of equality between the sexes. As a youngster, I belonged to a pioneer youth movement, and before being drafted into the army I attended a kibbutz program sponsored by the movement, aimed at preparing us for our future egalitarian way of life. While on the kibbutz, I never paused to wonder why my girlfriends and I had to work in the kitchen, the sewing workshop, or the children's house. When I served in the Navy, I took for granted my military role of secretary and maker of tea. As I began my university studies, I still believed that anyone who set her mind to it could achieve anything. It was only as my studies progressed and I began to build a career that I encountered the practical problem of gender inequality on the one hand, and the theory of feminism on the other. I suppose that my life-story is not so different from that of many women elsewhere, just as the story of research in Israel resembles the road taken by feminist research in the United States and other countries.

In order to understand and evaluate the status of women in Israel, it is useful to trace the development of Israeli feminist scholarship. The grounding of Israeli feminist knowledge still awaits a comprehensive socio-historical study. Still, we can sketch its evolution through several crude stages:
The first is characterized by the absence of women, by curricula that omitted women and in many cases by the absence of women researchers and lecturers. Research, conducted largely by men dealt with a social world that was largely about men. The male world was perceived as self-evident and as representative of society. The national literary canon consisted mainly of male writers and poets. Sociology and history recounted the history of Zionism and its construction of a new society without mentioning women’s contributions to it. There was no mention of Israel’s “first wave” of feminism, the struggle waged by women for their rights in the 1920s, including the establishment of women’s political party. The history and sociology books merely noted that women had been enfranchised. The formative role of women in the pre-state era, the Yishuv, was ignored, as was the role of women in laying the foundation stones for democracy and the welfare state. As in other countries, much research was based exclusively on all-male samples. For example, a study conducted in the early 1960s on expectations of social mobility and career choices among urban youth in Israel sampled only boys.¹

The conspiracy of silence in research was supported by the myth of equality embodied in the image of the smiling woman soldier and the pioneer woman holding the hoe and in the existence of two equal rights laws. They are the Women’s Status Law, enacted in 1951, and the Security Service Law of 1949 that made military service for women compulsory. These two laws were welcomed at the time, although in retrospect we understand that in them, women were not perceived as civil equals but above all as mothers.² At the same time, this basic attitude explains why already in the late 1950s, Israel was a leader in the introduction of social laws that protected women as mothers. For example, working mothers were guaranteed paid maternity leave, women could not be fired during the first year after childbirth, and a system of day-care centers was established. Wife and mother comprised the major components of the role for women in Israeli society. Because this was taken for granted, no one questioned it or questioned whether or how it affected women’s status. With the absence of studies on women, the myth of equality could be accepted and celebrated.

The second stage in the evolution of feminist scholarship may be characterized by the principle, “add women and stir.” Literature departments began teaching works by women writers and poets. The sex variable was introduced into field studies in the social sciences. Findings began to show the differences between the sexes (e.g. income distribution in Israel).³

Curricula began to address gender roles and gender differences. Until then, sociology had focused on organizations and power structures, frameworks controlled by the dominant male-set rules of the game, in which women are manifestly marginal. The life experience of women was barely addressed, other than in connection with the family.⁴ Although research in this period was still based primarily on male models, it finally moved women from invisibility to visibility. It is interesting that the problem of women in the


⁴ The pioneer of family research was Yonina Talmon-Garber, who already in the mid-1950s published articles on the family, especially with reference to the kibbutz.
kibbutz was one of the first to attract scholarly attention. As the ideology of equality failed to materialize, the dispute over gender inequality surfaced in a plethora of studies about kibbutz women and women in the moshav.5

Rivka Bar-Yosef, together with her student Ilana Shelach, put the place of women in Israel on the Israeli sociological agenda when their article “Stratification in Israel” was published in a reader on strata in Israel.6 The article is striking for the absence of a critical tone. On the contrary, it goes a long way toward emphasizing the dimension of equality in Israel and is positive in its evaluation of the direction of future developments. The researchers adduce three modes relating to women’s status: Similar and Equal, Dissimilar and Equal, and Dissimilar and Unequal. In Israel, they point out, the three modes coexist simultaneously: “The Similar and Equal type characterizes some of the basic laws, which define the primary rights and duties in the main areas of role activity: labor, the market, political activity, economic activity and education. The Dissimilar but Equal was seen as the basis for the welfare laws designed to ensure women against possible losses incurred by their ascribed biological roles.

The researchers noted that the laws pay little heed to problems caused “by the socially ascribed role of home-maker.” They assume that the two egalitarian modes are inherent in modern culture and stand in opposition to the third mode, which is traditional and characterizes the Jewish and Muslim religious legislative systems. The study reflects the dominant conception that prevailed among the public and in academia at the time of its writing: namely, that the processes of modernization, secularization, and integration in Israeli society would bring about the entrenchment of norms of equality for women, and that this would become integral to the life of even the traditionalist groups.

This attitude implies a deep acceptance of the equality myth, but at the same time a picture that goes beyond formal pronouncements begins to emerge. Its outlines are discernible in the studies of Yonina Talmon-Garber, who wrote about sex-role differentiation in an egalitarian society7, Dorit Padan, who examined inter-generational professional mobility among women,8 and Miriam Barad,9 who studied women in management roles. These studies not only made women visible, and thrust the situation of women onto the stage of social research; they also produced an awareness that the existing models did not deal with women, and that in many cases they did not explain the place and special problems of women.

---

It is not surprising that most of these studies dealt with women in the public sphere. This merely reveals both the general agenda of sociological research and the fundamental social and political structure under which women’s issues became relevant and role-defined. During this early stage, neither the scholars nor their theories were defined as “feminist” and none of them openly questioned the dominant methodology. They did, however, begin to challenge the dominant agenda of sociological studies and to call for additional studies on women.

In the third stage of feminist scholarship, women are portrayed as a subordinate group and their social experience is defined as problematic. The studies point to systematic discrimination as the central experience of women. The range of research is extended and, along with it, the theoretical perceptions that the researchers bring with them. The equality myth begins to fall apart. Izraeli, Freedman, and Shrift write about the trap in which women in Israel are caught, and in 1991 Barbara Swirski and Marilyn Safir expose the myth in their book, *Calling the Equality Bluff*.

Dafna Izraeli is a leader in this research. Her studies, beginning in the late 1970s, examine women’s status in the principal public spheres: law, politics, and especially the economy. At the center of her work is an analysis of the differential, unequal rights, positions, and rewards of women in Israeli society, compared to those of men. Her work suggests the central ambivalence of Israeli society toward women: “The conception of woman as a person entitled to equal opportunities and of woman as wife and mother in a patriarchal system of relations.” The most acute tension is generated by the clash between women’s civic entitlement as women and the expectations held of women as carriers of family roles.

The accumulated research shows a situation of inequality for women in all spheres of life: low representation in politics, income a third lower than that of men, and a heavy concentration of women in “female” professions that are not as well rewarded as male professions in terms of salary, prestige and power. Increasingly, the picture that emerges is of women’s secondary place in society and marginality in the public sphere.

It is noteworthy that this period marks the onset of the second feminist wave in Israel. Two professors at the University of Haifa, philosopher Marcia Freedman and psychologist Marilyn Safir – both from the United States – taught a seminar that engendered a radical movement critical of women’s suppression in a male-dominated society. The movement was called *Nilahem* (meaning “we will fight” and a Hebrew acronym for “Women for a Renewed Society”). At the same time, various other groups cropped up around Israel. In the general elections of 1973, Marcia Freedman was elected to the Knesset on the Civil Rights Movement list headed by Shulamit Aloni. Concurrently, an anthology translated from the English was published that contained texts by leading American and European feminists. Shulamit Aloni published

---


her book, Women as Human Beings, and in Haifa the first shelter for battered women was opened.\textsuperscript{15} In 1977, a women's party was established, a first feminist publishing group was set up (The Second Sex), and a lesbian group was formed (Aleph). The feminist periodical Noga was founded in 1980. The feminist awakening and pressure by the UN in connection with the Decade of Women brought about the creation in Israel of the first Prime Minister’s Committee to examine the status of women. During the 1980s and the 1990s numerous grassroots movements sprang up, such as the Israeli Women’s Network and Woman to Woman.\textsuperscript{16}

Although the feminists have found a voice, the status of women in Israeli society remains low. Inequality is blatant. It is especially blatant when seen vis-à-vis the myth of equality but also when compared to other Western countries and to the early achievements of Israeli women, such as paid maternity leave from work, a ban on firing women in the first year after childbirth, a ramified system of day-care centers, and even a woman heading the government.

It can be said that the inequality between men and women is not diminishing, the glass ceiling has yet to be broken, the feminization of poverty continues, and women’s representation in politics at all levels does not exceed 10 percent. The percentage of women in the current Knesset is the same as it was in the First Knesset, nearly 50 years ago. Violence against women still exists, as well as sexual harassment on the job, including (or perhaps primarily) in the army. Legislation that infringes on the rights of women as human beings continues to be enacted, especially in the realm of personal status. For example, marital status is decided according to religious laws that imposes a different legal status on men and women. Advertising is rife with sexism, and the “health basket” of the State Health Law that was promulgated a few years ago shows a lack of consideration for women’s special needs such as breast mammography for women of all ages.

Feminism as a social movement was received in Israel with great reservations. It was perceived as an American import, alien to the Israeli spirit. Worse, the demands of feminism were seen as a threat to the collective solidarity of Israel. They were seen as undermining women’s readiness to accept the dominant agenda, which in Israel revolves around the security discourse and the centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict. To this day, successful women make a point of emphasizing that they are not feminists. At the same time, developments in research and in the society paved the way for the next stage of research on women in Israel.

The fourth stage of feminist scholarship can be characterized as one of defiance toward the existing literature on the grounds that it omits women’s accomplishments and women’s experience. Ofra Greenberg and Hanna Herzog exposed women’s roles in the nation-building process;\textsuperscript{17} and analyzed women’s struggle for political equality.\textsuperscript{18} Shulamit Reinharz contributed to the growing literature her study on Manya Shohat.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15} Aloni, Shulamit Women As Human Beings. (Jerusalem:Mabat 1976).
\textsuperscript{17} Greenberg, Ofra, and Hanna Herzog. 1978. A Voluntary Women’s Organization in a Society in the Making – Wizo Contribution to Israeli Society. Tel-Aviv: Institute of Social Research, Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology (in Hebrew).
Deborah Bernstein tried to solve the puzzle of why women failed to achieve equality in the Yishuv period, despite a continuous struggle at a time when the Labor Movement inscribed sexual equality on its banner.20 A subsequent collection of articles edited by Bernstein relates the untold story of women as social actors in the nation-building process. Moreover, it is not only women's experience in the public sphere which has begun to be told; the intimate experience of individual women, expressed in letters and diaries, is also coming to light. While the Israeli academic community began paying attention to women's social status in the 1960s, women activists had begun to write about themselves as social actors much earlier.21 In fact, as Bernstein and others have documented, they had been struggling with their situation as early as the beginning of the Yishuv period. The perceptions of women written in their own terms reveals a rich world. It also gives rise to criticism of research methodology that did not make room for that world, spotlights spheres of life that were not previously studied, and calls for a re-examination of terms and the social structure.22

This takes us to the fifth stage, now unfolding, of feminist research in Israel. Considerable energy is being directed to exposing the gendered structure of Israeli society: the centrality of the army and its implications for the gendered structure23, and the influence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on reinforcing male culture while anchoring women's life in the family.24 The potency of a patriarchal orientation that distorts the concept of citizenship is being discussed, and researchers are tracking the defiant routes of entry taken by women into the public discourse, such as Women in Black, who demand an end to the occupation; Mothers for Peace, who are calling for a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon; and, at the other end of the political spectrum, Women in Green, who recruit mothers on behalf of Greater Israel.25

Feminist research in Israel today addresses many themes: control not only by men over women but also of women over women; different forms of gendered relations and the rise of new family structures; multiculturalism; the experience of women in the Holocaust and the second generation of mothers and daughters; the impact of immigration on women and women's experience as natives of Israel. The psychology of women in Israel takes account of all these themes and of the burden of being wife and mother to men who go to war or do not return from war. How does one build female identity in a reality that is controlled by a pressing national agenda and at the same time fulfil the yearning to be a woman in one's own right?

There an impressive growth of gender studies in the universities and colleges, including much interdisciplinary activity.26 The ability to enter fascinating fields of research is not bound up solely with

---

26 see, for example, the two special issues of *Israel Social Studies Review* Volume 12, 1997 devoted to Feminist Theory and Research: Israeli Institutions and Society.)
academic developments. Social processes such as feminism among mizrahi Jews, or the shift of ultra-Orthodox circles from the social margins to the political, social and economic center are also dictating a research agenda. Changes in Israeli society and changes in the research situation are interdependent. There is also close interaction between feminist activity within academia and outside it – an interaction made possible by the increase in the number of feminist researchers. In Israel, a relatively small society, patterns of informal relations still flourish. Ties are maintained between women in feminist organizations, female politicians, and women in academia.

From the time of its founding in 1948, Israel has seen a constant rise in women’s education and in the entry of women to the labor market. Still, Israel remains a fundamentally gendered society. In contrast to various Western societies, where the tendency is to blur the boundaries between the private and the public, in Israel that dichotomy has shown a good deal of resilience and immunity to change. This is due in no small measure to the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict.

In many societies, the concept of national security has been used to define the social order necessary to ensure that national security. But invoking national security can be a mechanism not only for protecting citizens from external enemies but also, even primarily, for maintaining the social order. Among Israeli Jews, life in the shadow of the conflict has bolstered the standing of the army on the one hand and the importance of the family with its traditional patterns on the other. Army and security form the axis of masculine identity and are perceived as the male bastion; the universe of women revolves around family and domesticity. In nationalist societies women have the important role of reproducers of the collectivity: it is they who give birth to and educate the young generation. That role acquires even greater significance in conditions of a lengthy conflict.

As a new immigrant society, Israel did not succeed in creating an infrastructure of equality among its mosaic of ethnic communities. The failure of the men became the failure of women as well. To be a woman in a Jewish state posits as an existential issue the meaning of civil rights for every human being. It entails a profound commitment to understanding “the other.” The Jewishness of the state with its secular and religious diversity is in itself an impressive creation that merits discussion. However, we need not only mutual understanding between Jewish women and men within Israel, not only understanding among different ethnic groups and different religious streams in Judaism but also understanding with and of the country’s non-Jewish citizens for Israel claims to be a democratic as well as Jewish society.

---

Is there research on Arab women in Israel? Almost none. Palestinian women lack political representation and are the lowest stratum on all stratification scales. They are marginalized by the males of their own community as well as by the Jewish community. The social barriers between them and the Jewish community are heightened by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, by religious beliefs, and by socioeconomic gaps.

The past decade has afforded women new opportunities to act as a bridge between Jewish and non-Jewish citizens, in the form of cooperation in women's peace movements and efforts to produce an alternative agenda not wholly subordinate to war. The quilt of peace, which began to be woven with the Oslo accords, has begun to unravel even before the work was completed. If we can judge by the persistence of Women in Black and by the intersections that on Fridays are alive with the activity of mothers and women demonstrating for peace, then hope still exists. Now that the conspiracy of silence – and the silencing of women – has been broken, there is no turning back.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Ben-Eliezer, Uri. 1988. “Militarism, Status and Politics.” in *Sociology and Anthropology.* Tel Aviv: Tel-Aviv University.


ITALY

by Micaela Procaccia

In the year 1537, a Roman Jewish working class girl named Lariccia cried for days because of an unwanted match. The day before the qiddushin, or betrothal, a washerwoman named Clemenza heard Lariccia saying to her father: “I do not like this man, nor do I desire him. I refuse him and reject him, nor do I want him.” She declared herself to be “the unhappiest of all women,” and on the next Shabbat, she told her father that she would not agree to let “the qiddushin become nissu’in.” Her father then hit her with the butt of a knife.

The reason we know anything at all about Lariccia is because the entire story was reported before the Jewish notaries of Rome. Lariccia was not an orphan, nor had she been betrothed before she turned twelve – two factors that would have given her the legal right to claim an annulment. However, as Clemenza and others testified, Lariccia had been threatened by her father and her brothers. The groom, Angelo Galante, reported to the notaries that he had told Lariccia “Do not go through with the qiddushin,” to which she had replied, “I cannot do otherwise. I have been forced into it.”

It was not then and it is not now easy to force unwilling Jewish women to do something they do not wish to do. In this case and in many others, Jewish authorities in Rome justified ending engagements (not betrothals) of girls older than twelve if their fathers were alive. We do not know the end of Lariccia’s story, but the fact that Clemenza testified that she had heard the bride refusing the groom before the betrothal could certainly have been important information in obtaining the annulment.

The fact that Roman Jews gave depositions to Jewish as well as to Christian notaries (at least from the sixteenth century to 1640) provides us with a great deal of information not only about broken engagements (23 cases of about 560 matches registered) but about the everyday life of Jewish women as well as their engagement in the cultural and business world of their time.

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Italian Jewish women often acted as financial agents for their husbands, especially when they were travelling or after they died. Women had access to monetary funds and worked in a variety of financial roles. They served as merchants, moneylenders, brokers, experts in precious metals, partners in stores and medical healers. That they made and sold cosmetics is described in the very well-known letter written by Anna the Hebrew to Caterina Sforza in 1508, advising her on how to use them.

These women – not important or famous in any way but for the fact that their names are found in historical archives – sometimes faced critical events. In the archival series Tribunale criminale del Governatore di Roma (the Papal Criminal Court in the City of Rome) there are several reports of trials against Jews. In many of them Jewish women appear as witnesses but rarely as defendants. On the night of Purim in February of 1551, for example, some young Jewish men pretending to be guards of the Papal government had stolen money from a young man from Naples. One of the defendants was named Dattilo. His mother,
Caradona, solicited money from her relatives and friends, possibly to pay the fine or, more probably, to bribe the prison guards. Her niece gave her a golden necklace, her sister gave her money, another woman helped her pawn a jewel, and all helped in raising money from other people. From transcripts of the trial that took place in 1551, we can see a female network of solidarity that appears to have been organized to help a young Jewish man first to avoid prison and then to escape from it.

Although the notion of the Renaissance period as an age of female emancipation has proved to be a misleading one, one cannot skip over the fact that there were outstanding Jewish *grandes dames* living in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The life of the *marrana* Beatrice de Luna or Dona Gracia Nasi (1510-1569) contains a history of the *marrano* diaspora. Dona Gracia Nasi was born and grew up in Portugal, where she lived under her Christian name Beatrice de Luna. At 26, she became the widow of Francisco Mendes (another *marrano*) and the heir to his enormous wealth. She transferred the family's house of commerce to Antwerp, where she moved with her daughter and nephew. Francisco Mendes' brother Diogo lived in Antwerp with his wife, who was also her sister Brianda. After Diogo's death, life in Antwerp became dangerous for *marranos* so the two sisters fled to Venice, securing a promise of safe passage from the Republic and transferring all their money and assets there. There, taking the name Beatrice de Luna, she managed the family business but in 1546, the two sisters began to quarrel about money. Between 1549 and 1550, they both went to Ferrara where they lived at the court of Duke Ercole II until 1552, when they returned to Venice. But the Republic had also become a dangerous place for *marranos* and in 1553, Beatrice (who had reverted to her Jewish name Dona Gracia Nasi in Ferrara) fled to Constantinople. Brianda, who remained in Venice, was called up before the Council of Ten. Two years later, in 1555, Venice expelled its *marranos* and Brianda, too, fled to Constantinople where she was reunited with Dona Gracia Nasi.

The two sisters returned openly to Judaism in Constantinople and Dona Gracia Nasi became one of the most famous Jewish women of her time: a businesswoman, a patron of the arts, and a political leader. In Ferrara, she promoted the Jewish re-education of the many *marranos* refugees. She organized a two-year boycott of the Port of Ancona after the death by fire of 24 *marranos* of Ancona ordered by the Pope Paolo IV and was said to have fed at least 80 poor Jews at her table every day. Every Jew in the area of the Mediterranean was said to have known her name and called her "*Sehora.***"

There is another notable Jewish woman, Bienvenida Abravanel (c. 1473-1560) who lived in Ferrara at about the same time. She was the wife of Samuel Abravanel, daughter-in-law of the famous philosopher Isaac, and sister-in-law of Jehuda, one of the founders of Renaissance comedy. Bienvenida was so well-educated that she became the tutor of the young princess Eleonora, the daughter of Don Pedro da Toledo, the Spanish viceroy of Naples, who had lost his wife. Eleonora later married Cosimo I of the Medici family and became Duchess of Tuscany. In all her letters, she addressed Bienvenida as "*cara madre*” or “*dear mother.***"
Bienvenida is not, of course, the typical Jewish woman of this period but we know that Jewish girls in Rome were taught to read Hebrew prayers and that some of them were taught to read the Bible. There had been Jewish women scribes, women copying Hebrew manuscripts, in the fourteenth century and Anna d’Arpino seems to have functioned as any male *shaliach tzibbur* on Shabbat and holidays for at least two and a half years. She led other women in prayer and was paid for this work indirectly by an interest-free loan because payment for praying is forbidden by Jewish law. We know this from a document written by a Roman Jewish notary who also mentions the existence of a special synagogue for women – an institution also mentioned in *La Lozana andalusa*, a novel written by the Spanish priest Francisco Delicado (perhaps a *converso*) and published in Venice in the year 1530. This novel, based on the adventures in Rome of a Spanish prostitute who is probably a converted Jew, contains a description of the Jewish quarter in Rome.

Another rich source for information about Jewish women is the group of laws known as sumptuary laws. They were enacted by rabbis and regularly defied by ordinary Jews, and they let us know how Jewish women used to display their finery in public and how carefully they emulated popular fashion.

The first ghetto was established in Venice in 1516 but it was Pope Paolo IV in 1555 who launched the so-called “age of the ghettos” with the papal bull *Cum nimis absurdatum* (As it is absurd...), establishing the ghetto in Rome. “As it is absurd that Jews and Christians be permitted to live together,” the papal bull *Cum nimis absurdatum* sanctioned the end to relative Jewish freedom in Italy.

Southern Italy, under Spanish rule between 1492 and 1541, had expelled all its Jews. The idea of the ghetto was the result of a compromise: to keep Jews separate from Christians without expelling them as Spain had done, yet continuing to oppress them for refusing to accept Christ. Following Rome’s example, almost all the central and northern Italian territories soon had their own ghettos, and new ghettos continued to be established until the 18th century, one of the last in Piedmont in 1724.

The ghettos curtailed much of the freedom Jews had enjoyed in Italy but did not completely curtail the luxuries of Jewish life in Italy. For some, life in the Italian ghettos was scarcely tolerable. Yet, in 1608, Thomas Coryat, an English traveler in Venice, described “many Jewish women, whereof some were as beautiful as ever I saw and so gorgeous in their apparel... that some of the English Countesses do scarce exceed them.”

There were several notable Jewish women in the important cities such as Venice and Rome. At the turn of the seventeenth century, Sara Copio Sullam, who died in 1641, lived in the Venetian ghetto in San Gerolamo, writing literary and theological essays and exchanging letters with the famous Catholic poet Ansaldo Ceba, who tried unsuccessfully to convert her. A few years before Sara, the Roman poet Debora Ascarelli wrote Italian verses and translated Hebrew texts into Italian. A contemporary rabbi wrote a poem in which he called her an *ape ingegnosa* (ingenious bee) and the pride of her people.
In 1749, a young girl named Anna del Monte was forced to enter to Casa de’ Catecumens (House of the Cathecumens) in Rome and remained there for thirteen days. The Casa de’ Catecumens was founded by the new Jesuit order in 1541 to serve as a station for converting Jews. At the end of thirteen days. Anna was sent back to her family in the ghetto because it appeared impossible to convert her according to the Canonical Laws, that is without “evident and strong violence” (modica coactio, or “soft violence” was permitted). Her diary, published ten years ago, is one of the most interesting documents about forced conversions in Rome.

On September 20, 1870, the last Italian ghetto (the Roman Ghetto) was opened by the army of the new Italian kingdom. Vittorio Emmanuele II granted the Roman Jews the same civil rights as any other Italian citizen. The Jews of Piedmont and Sardinia had obtained those rights in 1848 and the Jews in other parts of Italy in 1861. Many Italian Jews had joined the Risorgimento, or independence movement. Although they represented about one per thousand of the Italian population, they represented three per thousand in Garibaldi’s army that conquered Sicily and the Kingdom of Naples in 1860. There were Jews in the short-lived Republic of Venice in 1848 and students of the Rabbinical College of Padova took up arms to defend the Republic against the Austrians. The Risorgimento meant emancipation for Jews. It conferred civil rights upon Jews and eventually offered them leading political positions.

Where were women in the new situation? Thanks to their long practice of independence, many Italian Jewish women joined movements for female emancipation and, together with Jewish men, socialist movements. Rabbis and Jewish men in general were threatened by this development. Jewish women had worked for centuries, but usually at home or in their husband’s banco (pawnshop). They had sometimes been literate – some had even written poems, essays and novels – but now they were going outside the ghetto to claim new rights and positions.

At the turn of the twentieth century and for about fifteen years into it, a debate on women’s place raged in Italian Jewish magazines. Jewish men tried to rein back their women, restricting them to the roles of wife and mother. Some of the men held women’s emancipation responsible for the decline in religiosity of Italian Jews. The most liberal men, remembering that Italian Jewish women had always been an autonomous sort, proposed the creation of Jewish women’s associations and schools to improve their culture. Of course, they never viewed this culture in the same terms as their own! One result of this debate and a victory for Italian women was the establishment of the bat mitzvah ceremony, which began to be celebrated in Italy in the middle of the nineteenth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, every Jewish girl in Italy could have a bat mitzvah. But this did not happen without years of controversy within the (orthodox) Italian Jewish community.

The societal changes brought about by the first world war put an end to discussions of women’s emancipation among Italian Jews. It was no longer possible to reduce any woman to an inferior position. In those years, an Italian Jewish woman completed her studies at the rabbinical college. Of course, she did not become a rabbi as this was not yet possible in an orthodox community. But the rabbis invented a degree for her. Her name is Lea Sestieri. She is one of our most prominent Bible scholars and she has been teaching for many years at a Vatican college.
In 1938, the Fascist laws against the Jews changed everything. A famous Italian Jewish writer Giacoma Limentani remembers that the day after the liberation of Rome all the surviving Roman Jews went to the Central Synagogue and stood in dead silence, looking at one another and trying to identify those who were missing. No one spoke in the ancient ghetto, where the Central Synagogue is located and usually one of the noisiest places in town.

During the Fascist period, Jewish women changed along with everyone else. They fought for their lives and their families’ lives. They saw friends and relatives taken away. Some took part in the Resistance. A high percentage of Italian Jews fought in the Partisans’ Brigades against the Fascist and Nazi armies in north and central Italy from 1944 on. Among them were several Jewish women.

Matilde Bassani, known as one of the most fearless members of the Resistance, acted as a spy for the O.S.S. Lia Corinaldi was the only woman member of the National Liberation Committee that directed the Resistance. Silvia Elfer, from Rome, was killed in error by an American soldier. Rita Rosani from Trieste, died with her weapon in hand.

It is also important to remember the women of the Rosselli family, one of the most important Jewish families in the history of Italy. They shared the destinty of Italy since the Risorgimento, when they were close to Giuseppe Mazzini, one of its primary leaders. During the Fascist period, the brothers Nello and Carlo Rosselli were leaders in the Resistance and founders of the Giustizia e libertà partisans’ brigade. They were murdered by Fascists in Paris but their mother and wives continued their work. Carlo’s daughter, Amelia, became well-known after the war as a writer and poet.

After the war, like all women in Europe, Italian Jewish women emerged more deeply aware of their abilities and strength. Ada Sereni, the widow of a Roman Jew who went to Palestine before the war, parachuted into Italy in 1944 and was captured by the Nazis, became the heart and soul of aliyah bet in Italy. She was involved in the events that inspired the novel Exodus.

During the fifties and beginning of the sixties, a new phenomenon appeared in Italian Jewish life: a series of strikes at the Jewish Primary School in Rome. The teachers – more than 90% of them women – demanded higher salaries, time for professional development, and re-organization of the school. Reports of the Council of the Jewish Community of Rome record the exasperation of members of the Council (all men) and their dismay at the leader of the strike, a Jewish woman who had asked the national trade unions to resolve the dispute. The teachers obtained what they asked for and, in a few years, the strike leader became headmistress of the school, one of the best primary schools in Rome. She was my mother.

Moving into the present, when a popular women’s magazine published the names of nine Italian women whom their readers would like to see as President of Italy, there were two Jewish women among them: Tullia Zevi and Nobel Prize-winner Rita Levi Montalcini.
The media have dubbed Tullia Zevi “the lady of Italian Jews” because of her great intelligence, charm and glamour. When she was a young girl, her family escaped the Fascists persecution by fleeing to Paris, London, and finally the United States where she lived until the end of the second world war. During that time, she played the harp under Leonard Bernstein's baton. She was one of the first reporters to attend the Nuremberg Trials and for many years worked as a journalist, including as correspondent for the Israeli newspaper Ma’ariv. For twelve years, she was President of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, during which time she became very well-known in Italy, respected by politicians, intellectuals, and the general public. She negotiated an important agreement with the Italian government. This agreement grants every Italian Jew the right to observe Jewish law while holding public office, while in the army, in hospital or in school. I myself do not work during Jewish holidays and my son can receive kosher food at his public primary school. The agreement also states that the Italian Ministry of Culture and the Union of Jewish Communities cooperate to preserve Jewish cultural heritage in Italy, and this is one of my tasks at the Ministry.

Rita Levi Montalcini won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1986 for her research on the nerve growth factor of the human brain. She is one of the most famous scientists in the world. In 1947, she began to work at Washington University in St. Louis and has taught at many Italian universities, serving as the Director of Neurobiological Research at the National Center for Research in Italy and as President of the Institute for the Italian Encyclopedia. She has written extensively both in the scientific and popular fields and is extremely popular in Italy, particularly among the young.

Another prominent Jewish woman is Clotilde Pontecorvo, who is Professor of Pedagogy at the University La Sapienza in Rome. She is a member of the National Council for Education at the Italian Ministry of Education and the author of several important books about schooling, education, and children. She is also a member of the Council of the Union of Jewish Communities in Italy.

Jewish women in Italy today are usually as well-educated as Jewish men. They are often involved in synagogue life, several women are members of the Councils of the Jewish Communities, and some of them even serve as their presidents. Six Jewish girls are among the eleven members of the Council of the Union of Young Jews. It would be accurate to say that today, Jewish women have no more problems than other Italian women and no more difficulties as Jews than their brothers. Perhaps Jewish mothers are often still more involved with their children than Jewish fathers; they come into more frequent contact with the schools and with the various problems their children face in contacts with other young people.

Italian Jews are nominally Orthodox although they often behave like Conservative Jews. This means that no women can become rabbis. However there are girls studying in the Collegio Rabinico (The Institute for Rabbinical Studies), and women both study and teach in the Experimental Course for University Degree in Jewish Studies created by the Union of Jewish Communities in Italy. There is no course offered on Jewish women on the university level in Italy but there are many on Jewish history.
I want to conclude with the example of a single woman who has become very well-known in the schools of Italy. Her name is Settimia Spizzichino and she is the only Jewish woman among one thousand and ninety-one Jews captured in Rome by the Nazis October 16, 1943. In the 1950s, when all the Italian survivors were still keeping silent about their wartime experience, Settimia began to go to schools every October to ask permission to tell her story. She never stopped telling it and, thanks to her, many Roman students and teachers learned about the Shoah. Today, almost every survivor in Italy has given talks about the war and often travelled with students to the camps. But Settimia, a working class woman born into a poor family, was the first. She is a well-known and beloved figure in Italy.

In conclusion, as I have tried to explain, Italian Jewish women have always been rather independent compared to the Christian women of their time. However, in the last few centuries, the composition of Italian Jewry has undergone a radical change. Jews from Eastern Europe and countries such as Syria, Lebanon and Iran have settled here in great numbers, particularly in Rome and Milan, bringing with them different attitudes and traditions, among them a more patriarchal tradition than Italian Jews.

We dare say that in the 2000-year-old Jewish community of Rome, the most ancient in Italy, we have had long experience in providing a haven for Jews (from France, from Germany, from Spain and Portugal), and we are moving towards a melting pot although we are not there yet. In the younger Jewish community of Milan, however, we are far from that. There the difficulties of maintaining a common cultural heritage without losing each immigrant group's specific identity are more daunting. To resolve these problems and to guarantee the future life of the longest continuous Jewish settlement in Europe is our challenge for the coming years.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


See M. Procaccia “Non dabara:” gli ebrei di Roma nei primi cinquanta anni del Cinquecento attraverso le fonti giudiziarie, Italia Judaica VI, Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali, Ufficio Centrale Beni Archivistici, Roma 1998, pp. 80-93


Ratto della signora Anna del Monte trattenuta a’Catecumeni tredici giorni dalli 6 alli 19 maggio anno 1749, G. Sermoneta editor, Roma 1989
LATIN AMERICAN JEWS

by Judith Laikin Elkin

One cannot discuss Latin American Jews without first noting that Catholicism, as interpreted by the Spanish and Portuguese and exported to their New World empires in the sixteenth century, was and is the most potent force shaping their lives. Having accomplished the spiritual conquest of the southern Americas, the Catholic Church served for the next three centuries as their chief instrument of governance, until national governments emerged in the nineteenth century. Even then, the Church maintained its position of ideological dominance, and remained politically and culturally intertwined with respective governments. Among the most conservative Catholic clergy worldwide, Latin church hierarchs maintain an ultramontane stance that rejects modernized teachings, including those that relate to the Jews.

Efforts to revise the historic teaching of contempt for the Jews, as formulated at Vatican II in the 1950s and reinforced in 1965 by Nostra Aetate, the Vatican statement on Jewish-Catholic relations, are not uniformly acknowledged by Latin American church hierarchies. Though gradations in practice exist between countries, CELAM (the Latin American bishops' conference) has never adopted these teachings. In fact, the conference has been stepping backward in its quadrennial pronouncements. In its most recent report, relations with Jews are subsumed under the heading “evangelism.” Though ecumenical efforts are underway in Chile and Brazil, prejudicial preaching against Jews remains strong in the Argentine church, and is omnipresent albeit quiescent in the Andean countries, Central America, and Mexico.

The teachings of the Church with respect to gender roles continue to prescribe socially and ecclesiastically enforced domination of women by men. These teachings are construed as central to the maintenance of a just society, with rebellion in the family equated with rebellion against the patria.1 Patriarchal culture in its coarsest mode translates as machismo – men's aggravated aggressiveness toward other men, combined with paternalistic protection/dominance of women. Marianismo, according to which women find their true nature in obedience, is the other side of machismo: women are socialized to experience their true nature through passivity and self-sacrifice. The dominant position of the male may have its roots in the long history of sexual exploitation of Native and African American women during the conquest and colonial periods.

This reciprocal pattern, though widespread, varies greatly in intensity. In Brazil and Mexico it is still in the ascendant, as described by any number of ethnographic studies. In Argentina and Chile, with fewer black women and “tame Indians” to exploit, machismo appears to be on the defensive. Even where it is seen as out of date, machismo continues to condition sexual relations, as we can attest in the United States.

Another element for contextualizing the lives of Latin American women is the widespread perception of the national polity as a larger edition of the family. The usual destiny of a Catholic Latina is as submissive wife and mother of many children. Historically, she could transcend this role only by taking a vow of sexual abstinence and seeking shelter in a convent, a view that fortunately has itself been transcended.

1 “Patriarchy is a hierarchical, militaristic social organization in which resources, property, status and privileges are allocated to persons in accordance with culturally defined gender roles.” Gerda Lerner, Why History Matters.
Traditionally, women – at least, women of good families – did not go out “into the street” to work or socialize. Women who entered politics or professions such as medicine, teaching, sciences, or government, were accepted in a limited sense as “social housekeepers,” their public activities seen as an extension of their role in private life. In the performance of their duties, women office holders and professionals are almost always subordinated when it comes to decision-making. Because of such major differences in cultural context, feminism in Latin America differs from feminism in the United States and will continue to do so. Latin Americans generally view women and men as biologically assigned to different spheres and therefore to different roles. Equality, for Latina feminists, does not equate to sameness but to concern for women’s needs commensurate with the traditional concern for the interests of men. Rather than demand the same treatment as men, Latin American women defend the proposition that differences between women and men are rooted in biology and that these differences, which are at the root of our lives, are a source of joy and wonder. They demand that these differences be taken into account in legislation, particularly with respect to women’s natural role as the bearers and caretakers of children. Until recently, Latin American women have not been attracted to the notion of gender as an historically constructed artifact.

This attitude began to change in the seventies, a period of extreme abuse of human rights. At first, a biological view of sex roles was a source of strength in organizing human rights actions: mothers and wives took to the streets to demonstrate for the release of imprisoned husbands and sons. The legitimacy of pressure by women such as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina issued from woman’s role as protector of the family, and society’s respect for that role. These women were not trying to change patriarchy, but to make their claim within it. The military broke the patriarchal bargain when, instead of giving female demonstrators the respect their role demanded, they arrested and abused them (the record was most egregious in Argentina, El Salvador, and throughout Central America).

Women who took to the street were treated like street women; female demonstrators who were arrested were routinely molested sexually. Loss of the male members of their families, compounded by abuse at the hands of the patriarchal state, aroused a more militant feminism and fomented a change in sexual relations. By going out on the street in public actions, women transformed traditional feminine consciousness. In Central America’s wars, the women who formed grassroots organizations to demand release of their relatives continued on to campaign for basic survival needs of their families, such as access to clean water, adequate food, and medical care. In doing so, they challenged the assumption that “women’s concerns” could be divorced from issues of violence by the male-dominated state.

The consciousness raising that resulted from militaristic abuse also catapulted many women into radical activities. Once integrated into radical groupings, including guerrilla bands, women found they had to oppose not only the repressive machinery of the state but the machismo of their comrades. Consequently, the ideological terrain changed dramatically.
The Jewish Population of Latin America

Some 430,400 persons who were identifiably Jewish were living in the Latin American republics in 1994. The largest number, 208,000 Jews, were in Argentina; 100,000 were living in Brazil; 40,800 were living in Mexico, and 23,600 in Uruguay. A secularized population of European origin was to be found in modern urban settings in each of these countries by the time of World War I, the period when a large number of European Jews were looking for new homes. In each of these countries, economies were being transformed from agrarian to industrial modes of production. Each of these republics had accomplished the formal separation of church and state, and each exhibited a nascent middle class, at least in a limited statistical sense of the term.

Other countries, such as Venezuela and Colombia, did not for the most part encourage immigration during the period of heaviest Jewish demand; nor did they separate church and state until much later. But in the mid-twentieth century, the process of industrialization attracted modernizing elements from abroad, and the size of Venezuela’s Jewish community rose to 20,000 in the 1980s. Colombia’s Jewry increased to 14,000 with that country’s prosperity, but diminished to less than half as the drug wars intensified. In Chile, early industrialization and religious tolerance brought into being a thriving community estimated in 1960 at 35,000; but this number dwindled to 15,000 as the nation was whipsawed by powerful competing forces of Left and Right. By 1995, the community had rebuilt its numbers to over 20,000.

Republics that today are the home of tiny Jewish communities are those that either failed to encourage, or actively discouraged, heterogeneous immigration. Nor have they for the most part committed themselves as yet to economic and social modernization. In this group are countries with large indigenous or black populations, high rates of illiteracy, and grave polarization between the elite and the mass: Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and the Central American republics.

Latin American Jewish Women

Far less research has been carried out on Latin American Jewish populations than on the Jews of the United States. Those studies that have been undertaken vary in methodology and in quality from country to country: a surge of excellent research in the sixties was not duplicated until the nineties. Not all researchers break out data by gender, so information may need to be extrapolated from research on Jewish populations in their entirety. An additional complication is that, in the hispanic context, profound differences exist between askenazitas, sefaraditas, and women of the mizrahi (Arabic-speaking) community. A more traditional view of the role of women appears to prevail within the latter two communities than among Ashkenazim. Yet those Jews have been even less studied.

If one dates the dawn of women’s modern age from the availability of birth control, then Jewish and non-Jewish women are living in different time periods. Data on the demographic characteristics of Latin American Jewish women display an internal consistency that marks them as more modernized than non-Jewish women. The most profound difference appears in contrasting birth rates. In whatever country

---

1 If Latin American Jewish demography is no longer the black hole it once was, yet the data we must rely on are extremely varied as to methodology, provenance, and recency. Some of the best work dates from a generation ago. A summary of available data will be found in Chapter 8 of my The Jews of Latin America, from which the figures in this paper are drawn. Principal researchers cited are Sergio della Pergola (for Argentina, Mexico, and all-Latin America), and Henrique Rattner and Anita Brumer for Brazil.
we examine, the Jewish birth rate is half that of the matrix population, even in Argentina, the most modernized of the republics. Mexico is the exception here, with a Jewish birth rate rivaling that of the nation as a whole. But that rate is dependent upon traditional patterns of childbearing among Arabic-speaking Jews, and a survey of their younger sisters shows that mizrachi women also are beginning to control the number of their pregnancies.

Infant mortality is at a very high level throughout Latin America, but Jewish women are free of the repeated trauma of bearing and burying angelitos – infants who die in the first year of life. In Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil, recently calculated rates of infant mortality are 36 per 1000, 50 per 1000, and 70 per thousand respectively. In these countries, the rate of infant deaths within the Jewish communities is close to zero. In the 10,000 member Jewish community of Porto Alegre, Brazil, for example, search of cemetery records located one newborn death in the period 1991-93.

The global phenomenon of low infant mortality among Jews can be accounted for by a combination of reasons that are also persuasive within the Latin American setting: more intense urbanization among Jews over the past century and a half, when cities had better preventive facilities than the countryside; earlier adoption of birth control among Jews, with the side effect of enabling mothers to bestow better care upon each child; the low rate of illegitimacy; the comparatively high number of physicians among Jews; existence of Jewish religious observances that are supportive of good health. The Jewish demographic pattern extends to Latin America, where infant mortality rates resemble those of Jews on other continents rather than the rates that prevail among their sister Latins. The contrast between high rates of infant mortality throughout Latin America and the low rate within Jewish communities throws into relief the modernized character of Jewish life as compared with the traditional pattern of human wastage that continues to prevail in society at large.

In all the countries examined, ashkenazi families are smaller than sephardi or mizrachi families. Modernization was a distinctively European phenomenon that Jews originating in Arabic or Balkan lands did not participate in as directly as did Jews of central, western, or even eastern Europe. Greater traditionalism implies higher fertility rates and larger families. There is a consistent difference in family size between ashkenazi and sephardi families in all communities for which data exist. Nevertheless, even when ashkenazi and sephardi families are averaged together, Jewish families are generally smaller than families in the population as a whole.

The result of these trends is a Jewish median age in the mid-thirties, in contrast to a median age in the mid-twenties for non-Jews. Most deaths of Jews occur after age 65. A longer life span ensures that mothers are able to nurture their children to maturity. On a continent where throwaway children roam the streets in a battle for survival, within the Jewish community motherless children are rare. Survival into the sixties, in addition to being its own reward, frees women to pursue autonomous goals not oriented toward child rearing. The blighting of promising careers through early death is far less frequent among Jews than in the general population.

The history of the Jews of Latin America is one of consolidation into metropolitan centers, and this has been an immense boon to women, who, judging from the memoirs of colonists, suffered great deprivation in the countryside. Jews now live in the cities, a majority in the great cities, and the largest number in the national capitals. When there is just one major urban center in a country, as is true in Mexico, Costa Rica,
El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay, nearly the entire Jewish population of the country lives there. Where a secondary city exists, as in Bolivia, Panama, and Venezuela, the second largest Jewish community is located there. In nations characterized by many urban centers such as Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia, Jews are found in all major cities and many minor ones.

The concentration of Jews in Latin American metropolitan centers derives from three historic roots: urbanization of Jews in their countries of origin; the massive urbanization that has taken place all over Latin America in the past decades; and the need of immigrants to integrate themselves into the economy. There are jobs in the cities, while agriculture has long been a losing proposition for small landholders worldwide.

**Occupations of Latin American Jewish Women**

Jewish women are impacted differentially by the non-Jewish milieu in which they live. Situated outside the moral or religious authority of the Catholic Church, neither have they been subordinated to rabbinical dictates concerning their proper role and behavior, although religious authority remains stronger among Sephardim than among Ashkenazim. Judaism as practiced in Latin America has been until very recently an extremely weak force, one that did not raise barriers to the participation of women in Jewish or general life. Furthermore, Ashkenazim inherit Central and Eastern European customs, which exhibit a substantial measure of equality between women and men. Jewish women engaged in a range of occupations since the early years of immigration to the continent, when they were farmers, factory workers, peddlers, and labor activists – groups that have been less studied than those unfortunates who were forced into prostitution. Even in the agricultural colonies, with their primitive social settings, some outstanding Jewish women became teachers, librarians, founders of schools, clubs, and charities.³

By 1960, the Argentine national census found that 50 percent of Jewish males and 20 percent of Jewish females over age 14 were in the work force (a smaller percent than the national average, as more members of this age group were in school). Three occupational groups each claimed 20 percent of Jewish women workers: secretaries, salesclerks, and free professions. These were all higher percentages than for non-Jewish women. A 1994 survey of the Jews of Porto Alegre, Brazil found that 22 percent of Jewish female heads of households are housewives, 13 percent are in commerce, 18 percent are teachers. Single-digit percentages of these women are physicians, engineers, architects, psychologists, and entrepreneurs.

Although the majority of Jewish immigrants entered the Latin American economies by way of petty commerce, there has been increased professionalization for both sexes, based on family savings and the accessibility of higher education. Jewish women entered professions such as teaching and medicine early in the migration period; as university education spread, their participation in the professions rose. No evidence exists of a Latin gender gap in science or mathematics, and Jewish women have become professionally engaged in a range of scientific fields. Many combine marriage with careers, a life pattern that is facilitated by the availability of cheap household help. Despite their professional success, their ascent to positions of authority is often blocked by male prejudice against women in decision-making positions and by social prejudice against Jews.

---

³ A review and discussion of Jewish women’s occupations is to be found in an article by Sandra McGee Deutsch, “Women: The Forgotten Half of Argentine Jewish History.” *Shofar* 15:2 (Spring 1997).
Latin American Jewry is generally middle class, but there exists a wide range of incomes and status. Brazilian Jews have established a position among the three percent of the population who constitute the national elite. Argentine Jewry, by contrast, exhibits a complete range of income from great wealth to poverty, including a majority who are working class or in two-career middle class families; but none can be counted among the elite because of intense social prejudice against Jews. In Mexico and the Andean republics, Jews are middle or upper class. In these countries, there appear to be no Jewish poor because those who cannot make it into the middle class find it impossible to adapt to the living standard of the indigenous poor. In distress, they either make aliya or call upon international organizations such as HIAS or JDC to relocate them.

**Education**

With the notable exception of Argentina, most Latin American governments have ignored or mismanaged the duty of providing a basic education to the mass of their citizens. At the same time, for the benefit of those who can afford private schooling, university admissions have historically been open and subsidized by the state. As Jewish communities came into existence, they founded their own schools to fill the educational vacuum, both in order to ensure the continuity of the Jewish heritage and to equip their children to participate in the larger society. As nations shifted from traditional to modernizing attitudes, Jewish schools shifted their emphasis from Jewish studies to career-oriented curricula. Girls as well as boys were thus able to take advantage of the availability of higher education.

Among the immigrants themselves, university education was a rarity, though some women and men were actually able to earn medical degrees in the early years of this century. It was the children of the immigrants who benefited most from open university admissions policies. The younger the age group, the more Jewish university students are found within it. The 1960 Argentine national census showed that 40 percent of Jewish men and 21 percent of women aged twenty to twenty-four were either attending college or already had their degree in hand, proportions that have almost certainly increased since that date. In São Paulo in 1968, when 66 percent of Jews of college age were enrolled in institutions of higher learning, this figure included more than half of Jewish women aged twenty to twenty-four. In addition, 12 percent of women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine were studying at universities or technical institutions, as were 3.8 percent of women aged thirty and over. Women comprised two-fifths of Jewish students in the sixties. These figures contrasted spectacularly with the 3.3 percent of the general population of the city who were receiving higher education at that date. In the more recent Porto Alegre study, 33 percent of heads of families (both men and women) 55 years of age and older had completed university; that figure rose to 77 percent for those under age forty-one.

The Brazilian data confirm a trend that appeared in earlier Argentine studies, which showed that in that country, 31 percent of Jewish students were women, as compared with 24 percent of women among university students generally (including the Jewish component). The outcome of university education has been social mobility for women as well as for men. A survey of 125 Buenos Aires women engaged in stereotypically masculine professions found that a majority of the sample were daughters of immigrants; one-third of that cohort were Jews or daughters of Jews.
The entry of Jews into the free professions in numbers far exceeding their proportion to the population conforms both to the patterns of Jewish history and to the developmental needs of their societies. That the latter are becoming more persuasive than the former is shown by the accelerating tendency to enter professions that relate to modernization, such as engineering, business administration, public relations, marketing, accounting, and architecture. Jews still become doctors, but there is more deployment throughout the economy. Among the wealthiest Jewish families, there is now a shift from communal schools at the elementary and secondary levels to prestigious secular schools in the private sector. The Jewish school, no matter how good academically – and some are very good indeed – cannot provide what is most desired by the present generation: entry into general society and upward mobility within it. A correlation between higher education, intermarriage, and assimilation emerges from the data as well as from anecdotal material.

Marriage, Intermarriage, and Assimilation
A study conducted among São Paulo Jews in the 1980s suggested that the frequency of intermarriage tends to be highest among native-born university graduates. In 69 of 80 mixed marriages, the Jewish partner had attended university, a higher educational level than prevailed among Jews who married endogamously. The 1994 study of Porto Alegre provided a longer time-line for intermarriage. Among respondents over 69 years of age, one in 440 heads of family and one in 25 of their spouses (mostly, but not entirely women), descended from one or two parents who were not Jews. Among Jews between the age of 21 and 30, the corresponding figures were one of 9 and one of two. Meanwhile, there is a growing surplus of Jewish women over Jewish men, starting at age 20, for which the most apparent explanation is the greater number of men than of women who marry out of the community.

Israeli demographers have charted the diminution of the Argentine Jewish community since 1960. They find that more males than females cease to identify themselves as Jews; that more men than women are intermarrying, and that children of mixed marriages are not likely to be raised as Jews. The high and rising rate of intermarriage among Argentine Jews, unless the trend should be reversed, will lead to the assimilation of Argentine Jews into the general population.

Mexico provides an interesting variation on this picture. Intermarriage was found to be non-existent (or unreported) among Arabic-speaking Jews living in that country. The rate of intermarriage among members of the Ashkenazi Conservative congregation, 21.7 percent, was doubled by intermarriage rates among the non-affiliated, who incidentally also had the highest rate of postgraduate degrees. Obviously, other factors intervened as well, but still the data are suggestive.

It seems appropriate here to mention the phenomenon of consensual unions in Latin America. Again, customs diverge widely, but for poor families, the cost of a church wedding is often prohibitively high; weddings are confined to those who can afford them and the majority of unions among the poor, particularly in rural areas, are consensual. Among Jews, marriage has been the norm. Because of its association with the middle and upper classes, marriage itself has become a statement of a class position, aligning Jews with the elite rather than mass. However, where there is no legal provision for divorce (Argentina until 1994), the number of consensual unions increases among Jews as well.

The impact of machismo on Jewish populations has been inadequately studied. Machismo, which licenses multiple unions for men but mandates women’s fidelity to one man, has its obvious appeal for men.
Abundant opportunity exists for the untrammeled exercise of the male prerogative in countries such as Brazil or Venezuela where large numbers of poor and racially differentiated women are available for sexual exploitation. Marianism, however, is not an attractive option for Jewish women, expressed in one sociologist’s facetious query – “Can Judaism survive in a land of mulatas?” The encounter between Jewish lifestyles the immigrants brought with them, and the customs they encounter in the Latin context, sets the stage for intense personal dramas.

Interruption and assimilation to the majority culture are regarded as the primary threat to Jewish survival on the continent by Latin American Jewish leaders, who refer to the phenomenon as “the white pogrom.” The rapid and increasing rate of assimilation is deplored and perceived by them as the most urgent item on the communal agenda, eclipsing in importance the problem of antisemitism which, as they correctly point out, exists all over the world.

In seeking to gain acceptance, many Jews opt to forego their Jewish identity. This is a phenomenon common in the Western world since emancipation, but it appears to be more pronounced in Latin America, where conservatives reject cultural pluralism as a valid ideal and liberals accept a Jewish presence only on the Enlightenment premise that Jews will abandon their Jewishness. Abandonment of Judaism occurs most frequently during the university years; an anomaly of the situation is that so many Jewish students are studying under intellectuals of Jewish origin. The entry of increasing numbers of Jewish youth into university life has been coupled with a noticeable rise in the rate of intermarriage. The assimilationist course, which conforms to societal expectations, deprives Jewish communities of intellectual leadership at a time when their full acceptance as citizens is by no means assured. Jews at both ends of the spectrum – those who intermarry and ignore their Jewish heritage and those who emigrate in order to lead fuller lives as Jews – contribute to the cultural homogeneity of the Latin American peoples, who are as yet undecided whether to accept cultural pluralism as a valid ideal.

Religious Observance
Until the 1970s, nearly all Latin Jewish congregations were Orthodox. There was no public female religious presence (and not a whole lot of male presence). The feeble presence of Orthodoxy, combined with the ease of dis-affiliation and assimilation, meant that the problem of the agunah rarely surfaced.

Establishment of the Seminario Rabinico in Buenos Aires in the 1960s led to growth in the number and popularity of Conservative/Reform congregations, often grouped together as Progressive. About fifty such congregations now exist across the continent. They enjoy a high rate of participation by families, especially children and teenagers, and involve mixed seating of women and men, female cantors, and even the occasional female rabbi. To the extent that Progressive synagogues are responsible for the contemporary resurgence of religious observance among Latin American Jews, the status of Jewish women can only be enhanced. At the same time, missionary outreach to secular Jews by Chabad emissaries has also contributed to an enhanced appreciation of Judaism; its impact on the future status of women is, however, problematic.

Abandonment of the Jewish heritage is almost always couched in secular terms: there are few conversions to Catholicism. Evidence to this effect can be found in the Mexican survey. Three percent of Jews contacted by the Mexican sample survey characterized themselves as non-affiliated. Within this group, eighteen
percent of marriage partners had been born Catholic, but fewer than one percent of these spouses reported themselves to be Catholic at present. Meanwhile, the 72 percent of responding spouses who reported themselves to have been born Jewish dwindled to 58 percent who consider themselves Jewish at present. The number reporting themselves to be of no religion at all went from eight percent at birth to 33 percent at present, confirming my belief that former Jews and their children tend to join the mass of the secular unchurched who populate Latin American urban centers. While Catholic spouses were leaving the Church, Jewish spouses were abandoning Judaism. Anticlereical attitudes characteristic of this sector of the population target both the Catholic and the Jewish establishments (as irreligious as the latter may be), producing Jews who are willing to identify themselves as having been born Jewish, but who do not associate with the Jewish community.

*Literary Perspectives*
A Latin American Jewish literary boom occurred in tandem with the wider and much better known Latin American literary boom, and Jewish women are part of it. Struggling to reconceptualize women's lives through literature are Jewish women authors such as, Esther Seligson, Sabina Berman, and Angelina Muniz-Huberman and Margo Glantz of Mexico; Teresa Porzecanski of Uruguay; Clarice Lispector of Brazil; Alicia Steinberg, Ana María Shua, and Alicia Freilich of Argentina, Marjorie Agosín of Chile as well as numerous others. Many of these authors, like their male counterparts, have left Latin America to live in the United States or Israel, whether to escape the contradictions imposed on them by Latin American societies or for purely personal reasons. Blending Jewish tradition with contemporary Latin literary styles such as magical realism, they are challenging the gender and ethnic roles to which they were socialized.

As writers, these women reveal personalities in transition, struggling to break free of patriarchy but not always able to visualize what it means to live an autonomous life. The position of women varies qualitatively among *ashkenazi*, *sephardi* and *mizrahi* families, but across the board, these writers portray the clash between the daughters’ desire for personal fulfillment and parents’ expectations of early marriage and the daughters’ acceptance of the domestic role as primary. Patriarchy bears down on all Latin American women, though with decreasing weight due to its incompatibility with modern life. Beyond this burden, young Jewish women must deal with personality distortions brought on by the immigrant experience, the tug between immigrant and *criollo* culture, and the pressures of *a machista* society whose values run counter to Jewish tradition. All these are common themes in the work of Latin American Jewish women writers. What distinguishes their stories from similar immigrant literature issuing from the United States is the very special quality of *carino*, a loving kindness that derives from the Latin ambiance.

Beneath the idiosyncratic tales these authors tell lies a shared vision of lives hemmed in by society’s uneasiness over Jews and Judaism. The milieu in which these writers grew up, be it Argentina or Chile, Bolivia or Venezuela, may not have been as threatening as that their parents fled, but neither did these societies offer the degree of acceptance that Jews found in the United States. Marginalization resulted in widespread confusion about what it means to be Jewish, and a need to tailor their Jewishness to suit Catholic style. True, the Catholic Church, as institution and as ideology, is much reduced from its formerly pre-eminent position. But it has yet to reject the anti-Jewish preachings that characterized earlier centuries. While some individual Jews have made it to the top of the economic or political heap, the thick stratum of antisemitism in which much of the population remains mired limits the social mobility of the Jews
generally. Jewish women writers, by recording their experience as outsiders, challenge the morality of cultures that demand total conformity as the price of admission.

At this stage of research on Latin American Jewish women, it seems impossible to provide a definitive answer to the question that animates women's studies: namely, whether women are more severely impacted by ethnicity or gender. Since patriarchy and the *machismo* it spawns have historically been templates for the authoritarian state and church; and since these institutions are the primary bulwark of the patriarchal society, it may be that our answer lies not in an either/or dichotomy, but in subtle analysis of the interaction among all these factors.
IRANIAN JEWISH DIASPORA WOMEN

by G.B.

As we reach the millenium, Iranian Jews are in the midst of a major diaspora triggered by the Iranian revolution of 1977. An estimated 40,000 Iranian Jews now live in the U.S. About 30,000 emigrated to Israel and 25,000 are dispersed in other parts of the world, leaving only about 20,000 Jews still living in Iran.1 Wherever they have emigrated, Iranian Jews do not easily mesh with the majority Jewish culture. Those who live in North America feel marginalized: their experience has been that American Jews either know nothing about them or, if they do, are unimpressed by a Persian-Jewish tradition that is older than the predominant ashkenazi one.

“We go back a very long time,” an Iranian Jewish emigré in her fifties told me. “It was 2500 years ago, when Cyrus the Great conquered Palestine, that the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem. Remember the 2500-year celebration that the Shah held? We always remember it as another celebration for the Jews who could have returned to Jerusalem but did not. We are very Persian, having lived for so long in Iran: our food, the music we like, our names, our lifestyle and taste, the way we like to arrange our homes has a lot of similarity with other Iranians. We also celebrate No-Ruz (the Iranian New Year/spring solstice) and all the festivities that start with Chaar-Shambeh Souri (the last Wednesday before the New Year), and end on Sizdeh-Bedar (the thirteenth day after the New Year). Now in L.A. some Jews are starting to celebrate other holidays that we didn’t really do in Iran, like Shab-eh-Yalda, (the winter solstice). It’s good that most of our community is here because the Jewish Americans and the Israelis are very different from us. For me it is important that my children remember that they are Iranian Jews, not just Jews.”

North Americans often call all Middle Easterners Arabs, a broad term that renders invisible the diverse nationalities, ethnicities, religions, linguistic differences, cultural and social practices and tribal identities of these peoples. Most of the 20 countries in Southwest Asia, the Middle East and North Africa are predominantly Arab but the exceptions are Turkey, Israel, and the new republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Iran.

In Iran, cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic diversity has long existed within a single nation-state. The official language in Iran – Persian or Farsi – is part of the Indo-European language family whereas Arabic is part of the Afro-Asiatic language family. But in addition to Persian-speaking Iranian nationals, there are Azerbaijani Iranians who speak Turkish, Lors who speak Lori, and Kurds who speak Kurdish. All learn Persian at school. Persia’s state religion was Zoroastrianism until 1642, when it was conquered by Arab Muslims.2 Today, 98% of the population is Muslim (93 percent Shiites and 5% Sunni). There are

---

1 Pliskin, Karen 1987; G.B., 1999
2 From the 16th through the 19th centuries, Islam was the state religion, in the Safavid dynasty (1502-1736) Shiism was practiced. During the reign of Nader Shah (1736-1747) who was a Sunni Moslem, the authority of the Shi’ite clergy was weakened. After Nader Shah was assassinated in 1747 there was tremendous instability in Persia until 1794 when the Qajjar dynasty came to power (1794-1925) and the Shiite doctrine of Islam became dominant again. In 1925 the Pahlavi dynasty was established and remained so until the revolution of 1978-1979 and the consequent establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This brief historical overview illustrates how for Iranians, the Arab conquest is a part of Iranian history that needs to be placed in context.
several non-Muslim religious minorities besides Jews; they include Christian Armenians and Assyrians, Zoroastrians and Bahais. But their numbers are small. The 1976 census, the last before the revolution in 1978-79, indicated that religious minorities, excluding the Bahais, amounted to less than one percent of Iran's total population of 34 million.

The Jewish community in Persia traces its history to the deportation of the Israelites during the reign of Tiglat Pileser III (727 B.C.E) in Samaria, and the destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar (586 B.C.E.). Cyrus the Great, King of Persia (538 B.C.E.) allowed the Jews to return to Judea to rebuild the Temple. However, some of these exiled Jews chose not to return and instead established permanent communities in Babylon and Persia.3

Along with the Zoroastrians and Christians, the Jews of Persia were among the non-Muslim religious groups that had sacred books and were considered “protected peoples.” They were called *ahl al-kitab* (people of the book), protected under the sacred laws of the Quran, and permitted freedom of worship. However, social and political restrictions still applied to these populations.

With the establishment of the Pahlavi Regime in 1925, Reza Shah Pahlavi eliminated many of the humiliating and discriminatory laws which Iranian Jews had been experiencing for hundreds of years: the *jesiyeh* or head tax was eliminated, as were dress codes, and restrictions in housing. The elimination of *najes* (impure) codes of contact with non-Muslims in public and governmental institutions of the new nation state, increased economic and social interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims, allowing Jews to hire Muslim workers, and also permitting Jewish children to attend state schools and universities.

Reza Shah and his son's interest in rapidly centralizing and secularizing Iran markedly improved the status of Jews. Iranian Jews speak Persian – an important indicator of acculturation and Iranian identity. By the 1970’s, Jews were often indistinguishable from other Iranians in work settings and in public life: they have Persian first and last names. Many – especially the urban elites – speak Persian without a dialect. Iranian Jews cook Persian food and observe the hot/cold dietary regulations. Food such as lamb, hen, dates and figs are classified as *garmi* (hot) and are thought to speed up the metabolism by thickening the blood. Beef rooster, plums, watermelon and oranges are considered *sardi* (cold) and slow down the metabolism by diluting the blood.

Many twentieth century Iranian Jews were active participants in the social, literary, and economic mainstream. During the revolution, many Iranian Jews – particularly the younger ones – were active in demonstrations and held gatherings to express their allegiance to Iran as citizens struggling to create a more democratic society.

The 1976 census estimates that 62,000 Jews were living in Iran in the seventies, but Jewish leaders claim that this official figure is too low. Their estimates – based on registered birth, circumcision, *bar mitzvah*, marriage, divorce or death records maintained by Rabbis in cities across Iran and therefore more accurate than the census data in which undercounting is possible – range from 120,000 to 150,000.4 The census

---

3 Yegar, 1993

4 These have been given to me at interviews with leaders in the Jewish Iranian communities in Los Angeles and New York.
does not distinguish between the two Jewish sub-groups among the Jews of Iran: the Kurdish Jews, who lived primarily in towns and villages in Kurdistan who speak Persian as well as Neo-Aramaic; and the Iraqi-Iranian Jews who had been emigrating to Iran from Iraq since 1914 (the official end of the Ottoman Empire) who speak Arabic and Persian.  

Prior to the Revolution, matters of personal status among Jews in Iran were left to the Jewish religious courts. The Jews had a legally recognized bet din (rabbinical court), which handled marriages, divorces and matters of inheritance for the state. This institution used to function with the aid of dayanim sent from Israel. The power of this rabbinical court over inheritance was a major factor in keeping Jews tied to the Jewish community. French Alliance schools were established in the major cities where Jews lived such as Hamadan, Isfahan, Shiraz, Mashad and Kermanshah. Between 1944 and 1979, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee established vocational and educational schools, as well as religious and cultural programs in Jewish communities across Iran.

The Iranian revolution changed the situation of Jews in Iran and contributed to the growth of the Iranian diaspora worldwide. Economic, social and cultural conditions deteriorated significantly for many Iranians who had ties with the Pahlavi regime. The past twenty years also mark the largest diaspora of Persian Jews in this century. After the revolution, cases of legal, economic and social discrimination and persecution of members of the Jewish Iranian community increased. Jews were no longer allowed to buy land in the oil-rich regions of the country, they faced job and other forms of discrimination: sometimes shopkeepers (such as the local breadmaker) would not sell their products to them. The current government, however, asserts that all “people of the book” are free to practice their religion in Iran. In fact, since the revolution, television and radio shows have portrayed in documentary style how Jews, Assyrians, Zoroastrian and Armenians practice their faith and religion. They point out that religious minorities are protected and should not experience persecution because of their religious practices.

The ethno-religious diversity of Iranians became much more noticeable after the revolution, when many religious minorities who actually experienced or feared increased persecution began to emigrate. Migration of Iranian Jews, Bahais, Zoroastrians, Armenians, and Assyrian Christians intensified because of the religious characteristics of the Islamic Republic. Political asylum was more readily granted to members of religious minorities who applied for refugee visas than to others.

“There were a lot of executions and everyone was scared they would come after someone in the family,” an Iranian Jew who was 20 at the time told me. “The ‘U.S. imperialist and Zionist alliance’ was being denounced during demonstrations. After Afghanian (a prominent Jewish businessman) was accused of being a Zionist and executed, we all knew that we would have to leave. Many of our friends and family had already left but my father didn't think it would get this bad. He had a Muslim business partner and he trusted him. One evening this man came over to our house and told my father that we would all have to leave in the next few days. He had seen my father’s name on a list. They would be coming to arrest him very soon. He could delay the process for a few days to give us enough time to get smuggled out. We had to leave everything behind and get to Turkey to apply for refugee status.”

---

5 G.B., 1989
The Iranian diaspora illustrates the importance of addressing the presence of sub-groups within an ethnic group. Jewish Iranians are a good example of sub-ethnicity among Iranians. Since Iranians are not ethnically homogeneous, their ethnic rather than national identity was often primary. Being Jewish and part of a religious minority within the predominantly Muslim population of Iran was a major marker for Iranian Jews. But after emigration to the United States – particularly to Los Angeles which contains the second largest Jewish population in the United States – there was a major shift: Jewish Iranians became one sub-group of Jews rather than one sub-group of Iranians. Cultural, social and economic differences between them and other Jews, problems in immigrant adjustment and acculturation to a non-Sephardic tradition led Iranian Jews to emphasize their Iranian as well as Jewish identities. Very much like Cuban Jewish exiles in Florida, who have not – after four decades – integrated into the sizable Jewish community of Miami, Iranian Jews brought with them cultural, linguistic, social, culinary, religious and psycho-social lifestyles that resisted the assimilationist model of “melting” into a predominantly ashkenazi Jewish culture. By maintaining sub-ethnicity as mizrahi Jews and Middle Easterners, Iranian Jews are finding ways to retain their unique identity and to resist assimilation into North America as well as into traditional ashkenazi or sephardic Jewry.

The 1990 U.S. Censuses of Population indicate that the largest concentration of Iranians in the Western world is in Los Angeles County. They have settled in affluent areas such as Beverly Hills, Brentwood, Bel-Air, Malibu and Santa Monica, and also in Woodland Hills, Encino and Sherman Oaks. Community figures now estimate that Los Angeles also has the largest concentration of Iranian Jews, a community of over 30,000 people most of whom live on the West Side and in the San Fernando Valley but also in areas that have historically had a high concentration of Israeli Jews, such as the Fairfax district in Los Angeles. On the East Coast, Iranian Jews have primarily settled in Long Island, especially in Great Neck, Little Neck and Roslyn as well as in the Bronx, and Manhattan. There is a sizable population of Mashadi Jews concentrated in Great Neck. They have just recently completed building their synagogue.

Most Iranian Jews who emigrated to Los Angeles are from the higher social classes, the majority from the capital city of Tehran. In addition Jews from Hamadan (considered the burial place of Queen Esther), Esfahan, Shiraz, Yazd, Kashan, Mashad, Abadan, Khoramshahr and Kermanshah are also a part of the Iranian Jewish communities in exile.

The first wave of Iranian immigration to the United States was comprised primarily of students and visitors. Iranian students were a visible part of the international student body during the 70’s and close to 50,000 Iranian students were registered at universities and colleges across the United States. It is estimated that in 1973 half of all the Iranians abroad were students studying in the U.S. They entered on student visas and the expectation was that they would return to Iran after completing their studies.

It was also in the 1970’s that many Iranian students abroad became active in branches of political/cultural Iranian organizations (such as the Confederation of Iranian Students) establishing a movement of opposition primarily aimed at exposing the repression and violation of human rights by the Pahlavi regime in Iran.

---

5 with 76,000 Iranians or 29% of all Iranians living in North America.
8 Hossein Askari, et.al 1977
For these students, national identity as Iranians superceded ethno-religious diversity within the group. Azerbaijani, Kurdish, and Baluchi students as well as Jewish, Armenian, Assyrian and Bahai students worked with Moslem students in opposing the Pahlavi regime. They drew international attention to the surveillance of Iranians by the secret police (Savak) and the increasing numbers of political prisoners in Iran.

The second wave of Iranian immigration to the United States occurred in the two decades since the Islamic revolution. In those two decades, the profile of Iranians in the United States changed dramatically to include larger numbers of economic migrants as well as religious and political exiles fleeing Iran for fear of persecution.9 Given the Islamic republic’s increasing repression of leftist and nationalist oppositional movements, many students were afraid to return to Iran and settled permanently in the United States.

Driving down the streets of Pico or Olympic Boulevard in Los Angeles, signs in Persian, Arabic, and Hebrew script are very visible. An Iranian Jewish woman shopkeeper whom I was interviewing remarked:

“Sometimes I go for two days before I have to speak English. When I go shopping I first check the two Persian markets I always go to on Pico Ave, Sabze-Meidan (Green Pastures) or Elat Market (a city in Israel). They compete with each other and their prices are not so different in terms of the rice, vegetables, spices or herbs I need for cooking. Sometimes I’ll find fresher vegetables in one and better fruit in the other so I just plan to going to both of them, I usually buy my limou shirin (sweet melon) and the other fruits that I need at Sabze Meidan and then I also buy my barbari and sangak bread there. Then I go across the street to Elias kosher meat market to get my chicken and other meats that I’ll freeze. You know Elias was my butcher in Tehran. After the revolution he came to Los Angeles with his two sons, rented this store, fixed it up like his shop in Iran, taught his sons how to do the business and then went back. He’s still there, and they say that a lot of Muslims buy meat from him too. There is another kosher meat across the block who are Russian Jews but I prefer to go in here. I can speak to him in farsi and ask for exactly what I want and the service is very good. He was smart to put his name on the store. Everyone knew Elias the Ghassab (Butcher) so he doesn’t have to worry about advertising, it’s already there. Then if I need to buy teacups or check the prices on the rice cookers in the market I drive over to Rimaco, a few blocks down. In 10 years things have changed a lot. Now I can choose which Iranian store I want to go to. When I first came in 1979 it wasn’t like this, there were one or two stores around here in the Fairfax area and one in Westwood and one in Santa Monica. Now some jokingly call Westwood, Iranwood. The Iranians have influenced even the Americans, you know the Westward Ho market in Westwood has a little Middle Eastern, mostly Iranian section.”

The Jewish population had already experienced social, economic and political restrictions due to their minority status in Iran and were therefore better prepared to cope with changes in status after emigration. For Iranian Jews, contact in synagogues and in Jewish organizations, as well as monetary support for Jewish refugees and poor immigrants through the Jewish Federation, has increased interaction and communication between Iranian Jews and North American Jews, despite the cultural differences between them. For example, in the early 1980s, several temples in Los Angeles provided space for Iranian Jews to organize and hold their own traditional services. Social agencies such as Vista Del Mar were also approached to help place refugee Jewish youth in homes in Los Angeles, and women affiliated with the National Council of Jewish Women helped locate housing and shelter for immigrants from Iran.

These institutionalized and informal contacts, as well as the existence of an established Jewish community with distinct neighborhoods (Fairfax and West Hollywood) with kosher food and stores catering to Jewish

---

customers are all factors that helped the adaptation process for Iranian Jews. As an Iranian Jewish business-
woman told me:

“I make it very clear that I am Jewish. Yes I am from Iran, but I am not Muslim and I left Iran because of
Khomeni, so I am from the Middle East but now I am a U.S.citizen just like all the other immigrants who
have come here because of persecution.”

Another important factor that may have aided Jewish Iranians in their adjustment to life in Los Angeles
was that Iranian Jews perceived themselves as settling permanently in Los Angeles, and consequently were
more active in creating a sub-community and exile culture for themselves. A Jewish woman in her 30’s,
with two young children said:

“We are different from the Muslims, who keep saying that when Khomeini and the Islamic Republic fall,
we will return to our homeland. Our homeland is gone forever, my whole family has left Iran, and I doubt
that I will return there in my lifetime, and I doubt that even my children are ever going to go to Iran.
Our history in Iran goes back thousands of years, but now this marks the end of this history, and we have
to make a new identity for ourselves for the sake of our children. We are Iranian, and it is our duty to raise
our children to know where they have come from, as Jewish Iranians, who are now also American.”

During my interviews, it became evident that the feeling of permanent resettlement represents a distinct
difference in the way Jewish and Muslim Iranians view their immigration, or self imposed exile since the
revolution. A Muslim woman who has been in Los Angeles since 1980, remarked:

“I will go back to Iran immediately, as soon as this craziness is over. My mother, brother and sister live
in Tehran. It is my homeland, and I hope that soon my family can be reunited in Iran, where all of us want
to be... I am physically comfortable here, but my family and heart is in Iran.’

Attitudes toward immigration among Iranian Jews was strongly affected by whether family members have
been able to join each other in Los Angeles, recreating extended family and friendship networks that were
and still are an important aspect of social and communal life in Iran. In contrast to the frustrations and
anxiety expressed by Muslim families, among Jewish families there was more evidence of larger kin networks
having assembled in Los Angeles. For example I attended a Jewish wedding where four generations of the
family were there to celebrate. It had taken five years before all members of the extended household were
reunited. As one woman mentioned

“Our family is out. All of us, my husband’s parents and my own, all my sisters and brothers, my aunts and
uncles on both sides, and the same is true for my husband’s family. He only has one brother who lives in
Long Island. The rest are here, we are all here together, we have no-one left in Iran, so we have to keep the
family together and live the way we used to in Tehran.”

Some Jewish Iranian women I interviewed initially talked about planning to return to Iran when the situation
improved for the Jews. But as time went by, more and more Jews left Iran and formed new communities
in Los Angeles and New York and with each year the possibly of returning became less viable. By the early
90’s, I noticed that many had resigned themselves to the fact that they would never return to Iran.
A Jewish woman in her fifties remarked:
“Here in Los Angeles, I have my whole family and that is what makes the difference. Unlike this Muslim friend of ours, who is part of our doreh (sequential gatherings), who always has an ear and a eye toward Tehran and her family that is still there; I have my children, my mother, my sisters and brother and their families, and my husband’s family here. Many of our friends from Iran are here, so life has changed for us but not as much as for her. We have started to have the same kind of parties and family gatherings here too, and I don’t think so much about Iran since our family is all out.”

Economic and social ties between Iranians of different religious orientations have evolved in the United States. A Jewish women in her 40’s mentioned to me that in Iran, her husband had to establish economic ties with Muslim men in order to engage in business endeavors. Despite these frequent economic affiliations, social interaction and reciprocal visitation to homes was not a common practice among Jewish and Muslim business partners. She added:

“I remember Mahmoud Agah coming over for tea and seeing my husband at home sometimes, but we never had his family come over for dinner and although we had good relations with each other, it was clear that our families were not going to mix and socialize much with each other.”

In Iran, economic ties between Jewish and Muslim Iranians in Iran did not spill over into social and recreational interactions. Jewish Iranians were very strict about maintaining endogamous marriages. As an older woman said “we lived side by side, but we were different, and we wanted our children to know that we are Jews and Iranians, and they had to learn this at an early age.” Forming economic partnerships with Muslims is no longer necessary for Iranian Jews in Los Angeles. In fact, in the early 80’s the reverse situation existed in Los Angeles. Muslim businessmen found that having a Jewish partner added to their credibility, a reversal in minority position.

Iranian Jewish and Muslim women are establishing new economic and social ties in Los Angeles through contacts with each other in businesses as well as through family (intermarriages) and friendship networks. These social contacts are not a result of forced economic affiliations between male members of Muslim and Jewish households. Sharing certain common culinary, social and cultural traditions and desiring services specifically catering to the Iranian community has created avenues of increased interaction among sub-groups of Iranian immigrants.

Cultural, social, and economic differences in immigrant adjustment, accommodation, and acculturation has led many Iranian Jews to reinforce their Jewish and Iranian ethnicity. Thus one will often hear them express their Jewishness before their Iranian identity. North Americans are often unable to differentiate between Jewish and non-Jewish Iranians and express surprise when they hear an individual self-identify as an Iranian Jew.

One of the problems of using the 1990 census and other statistical data banks is the lack of identification of Middle Easterners in racial or ethnic terms. The available categories at present exclude Middle Easterners who do not identify their race as fitting in any of the following categories: Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Black not Hispanic, and White not Hispanic. The categories identifying race and ethnicity in legal documents in the United States in the 1990’s exclude Middle Eastern immigrants. Middle Easterners are often classified as “non-hispanic white,” a category that includes persons who are
European as well as those who are Middle Eastern and North African. At present, Middle Easterners can only be identified in census data through responses to the question about place of birth, or ethnic origin. Only the long form of the census questionnaire answered by every sixth household asks this question. Under this system, American-born Jewish Iranians will not have an opportunity to report their Iranian ancestry.

A professional Jewish Iranian woman told me:

“There are always a lot of forms to fill out as I apply for grants or sign up my children in programs. Every time I have to check off one of the boxes, it gets frustrating, I either have to not check off anything, or I check off “other” and then try to write in Middle Eastern on the side. Recently I have printed out about 20 copies of a short statement that I take with me to attach to forms, so I draw an X over the whole section and in red ink write “see attached,” I basically just want them to change this arbitrary classification which hurts us as Middle Easterners since we are not considered a “minority,” I know some of my Jewish friends tried to find ancestors who had fled Spain to claim Hispanic status, and others have tried to classify themselves as Asians. It gets really complicated. if only they would change this classification system, with all the racism against Middle Easterners. We are in a double bind: we are not white and what we have experienced here has a lot to do with racism and discrimination against us as Middle Easterners and so we experience institutional racism on top of everything else.”

At present there is a sizeable 1.5 generation of Iranians in the U.S. (1.5 generation are those born in Iran and immigrating at under 12 years of age, 2nd generation refers to those born in the U.S.). Census data on Iranians in the U.S. today indicates that about one quarter of the population are under the age of 15, in 1990, and the bulk of Iranians, 44% were between 25 and 44 years of age. More research is needed on this emerging descendent population to gauge the patterns of their incorporation into the diverse North American Jewish communities. New technology has made available an Iranian cyber-community, affording American Iranians to communicate among themselves, especially on the website Iranian.com. If self-identification and other forms of expressing cultural and ethnic identity become more widely used, mizrahi Jews in the United States might not have to re-experience the marginalization of their identity or the pressure to accommodate to the dominant ashkenazi Jewish culture. As Houman Kashani wrote in the monthly Shofar, “I have attended a Reform elementary school, a Conservative middle school, and a Modern Orthodox high school. Throughout these experiences I have learned and appreciated the different aspects of Judaism. However, I would strongly disagree with someone sending their children to strict orthodox schools. Unfortunately, in most of these schools, the rabbis are very insular individuals who attempt to teach the students their austere ashkenazi beliefs. We are one of the oldest groups of Jews in the world. One of the reasons we have lasted so long is because we have never labelled ourselves: there was no difference between a Persian Jew that went to the kenisha (temple) every Shabbat and one who went only on Yom Kippur. We were simply Jews.”

In the United States today, the Iranian Jewish diaspora is triggering a re-examination of hegemonic notions of American Jewish identity. Iranian Jews with their own ethnic and cultural tradition are challenging the American Jewish culture that was brought from Eastern Europe and that is presumed to apply to all ariving

---

90 Bozorgmehr, 1997
91 Kashani, Houman, Shofar #217 Pp 93
Jews regardless of their background. This ashkenazi standard is similar to the WASP standard for assimilation to North American society. By challenging this standard, narratives by Iranian Jewish immigrants indicate how they seek to retain and celebrate their Iranian identity as well as their mizrahi identity, and how they have created religious and cultural organizations to help them do so.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


JEWISH WOMEN IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

by Ana Lebl

The earliest traces of Jewish presence on the territory of the former Yugoslavia are archaeological finds from Roman times. We have so far excavated remains with Jewish symbols from over ten different sites. An epitaph found in ancient Pola (Croatia) from the second or third centuries C.E. bears the name of Aurelia Soteria. Her sons, Soter and Stephanus, dedicated the monument to the memory of their mother, God-fearing and pious sympathizer of the Jewish religion.

After a gap of many centuries, the earliest written sources on the Jewish presence in this area date from the fourteenth century. The largest wave of Jews arrived in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, following the expulsion from Spain and Portugal. Sixteenth-century documents also offer some information on Jewish women. We read, for example, about Donna Gracia Mendez Nasi, born in Lisbon. She is remembered for her outstanding knowledge, intellect, wealth, and business relations, all of which she used to help Jews in need. She was recorded to have visited Dubrovnik, in Croatia, on her way from Italy to Constantinople in 1553.

More substantial information on Jewish women exists from the mid-nineteenth century. It was the period of great social changes, in Jewish as well as the greater society. On the territory of the former Yugoslavia there were both sephardi and ashkenazi communities. Typical examples of nineteenth-century Jewish centers are the predominantly sephardi Sarajevo in Bosnia, sephardi and ashkenazi Belgrade in Serbia and mostly ashkenazi Zagreb in Croatia.

Bosnia had been part of the Turkish Empire for four centuries. From old photographs, we can see that sephardi women in Sarajevo were dressed very much like Turkish women, possibly respected and opulent, but hidden behind their clothes. In 1878, the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia slowly brought in a European flavor, a new way of life, which is obvious from the fashionable women’s dresses. The way women were dressed indicated their social status and their life-style.

Laura Papo-Bohoreta, born in Sarajevo in 1891, was an exceptional Jewish woman of her time. The most recent and detailed source for her life and work is a book on Judeo-Spanish literature in Bosnia and Herzegovina published in Sarajevo during the war of 1992. She spoke six languages, taught French and literature, wrote poetry, short stories, plays and prose, including 15 pieces in various Jewish magazines between 1924 and 1936. Her essay named in Ladino “La muzer sefardi de Bosna” meaning “Sephardi woman of Bosnia,” was written between 1931 and 1932. Two hand-written versions of it are still kept at the City Archive of Sarajevo (as are most of her other works). They have not been published or translated. Perhaps such a translation would be a project for the HRIJW.

Realizing that the old sephardi dresses and traditions were starting to disappear, she wrote a study of the sephardi woman in Bosnia at the turn of the century. Bohoreta described in detail the woman, her home, her neighbors, cooking, holidays, weddings, children, charities, her relationship with her mother-in-law. She described the sephardi woman of 19th century Sarajevo as very proud, concealing her problems, moral to the point of fanaticism, merry, curious, patient. Bohoreta also compiled texts and music of old sephardi romances, proverbs, rituals and traditions.
European influence was stronger and came earlier to the ashkenazi communities of Zagreb and Belgrade. There, ashkenazi women, usually wealthy, were dressed like their European neighbors. We can see their leisurely life-style in the style of their dresses. The fact that 15-20 meters of textile were used for each dress and that the ritual of getting dressed obviously required plenty of time, shows that they lived in comfort, had a lot of free time and were allowed to show off in public.

The social changes of the second half of the nineteenth century brought emancipation to European Jews. They began to work in new professions and became more integrated in non-Jewish society. The founding of the first associations of Jewish women in what was Yugoslavia coincided with the establishment of similar non-Jewish organizations.

Women gradually gained the right to education and participation in social and public life. The first school for Jewish girls from age six to 13 was opened in Belgrade in 1864, only four years after the first girls' school in the area. Attendance was, at the beginning, only a privilege of girls from well-to-do families. For a few more years, higher education was restricted to private, expensive schools. Girls there could study, together with non-Jewish girls, music, foreign languages and handicrafts for a year or two. In Serbia, schools became obligatory for girls in only in 1882.

Despite differences in traditions notable until the second world war, both sephardi and ashkenazi women organized into Jewish women's associations that had similar ideas and goals. The first women's charitable “ladies' societies” of the mid-19th century in Croatia were multi-ethnic and multi-religious, including Jewish women as active members. The first Jewish women's associations in Croatia were created in 1861 in Vukovar and in 1887 in Zagreb. The women who created these philanthropic societies were usually from wealthy homes, educated far above the level of the majority of women, and natural leaders. The first women's organization in Belgrade was the Jewish Women's Association, founded in 1874. Soon after, the Ladies' Society was established in Sarajevo too.

The main motivation for these societies was the same as today: to be able to help the needy. The charitable work included helping impoverished, pregnant and ill women, gathering dowries for poor girls and providing various means of relief to the members of the community. In times of economic crisis, the differentiation between members grew bigger. It was important to overcome the disparities and to enable every woman to feel comfortable, not to lose her dignity. Each member of the women's society had the feeling of belonging, and an opportunity to contribute and help others in one way or another.

In times of war, urgent charitable and humanitarian actions left no time for planning. During the Balkan wars Jewish women took active part as volunteer nurses, in collecting and producing donations for hospitals and for the wounded. The sephardi community provided everything necessary for a military hospital of 100 beds and the ashkenazi community organized “The 22nd reserve military hospital for ashkenazi Jews” with 40 places. All nurses were members of the Jewish Women's Societies.

Neti Munk is the example of a Jewish woman whose activities brought her the recognition of non-Jews. Born into a wealthy Jewish family in Belgrade in 1865, Neti Munk was a volunteer nurse in all wars between 1885 and 1918. She was awarded the highest military, Red Cross, crown and church medals and plaques of the time. She was one of the most active members of the Executive Board of the Jewish Women's Society. She was buried in 1924 at the Jewish military cemetery in Belgrade with the highest military honors.
At the turn of the 20th century there were eleven Jewish women's associations in Croatia alone. That number increased during the first decades of the 20th century to 31 organizations in 1929. In the 1920s, many Jewish girls in Croatia studied in Jewish schools and had their bat mitzvah. They grew up fully conscious of their future role and joined Jewish Ladies’ Societies as a natural continuation of their education.

Until the end of the first world war, sephardi and ashenazi women's organizations were separate. WIZO, the Women's Zionist Organization, founded in Zagreb in 1924, put all Jewish women together in one organization. Left-oriented Zionist girls' movements focused on promoting Palestine, studied Jewish topics, organized cultural and sports activities and also read and studied communist, often forbidden, literature.

Jula Weiner said in her speech at the founding conference of WIZO in Zagreb: “The status of a poor Jewish woman in some of our towns is desperate. It is not enough to visit them once or twice a year during our philanthropic campaigns. WIZO has to find ways of improving their social and economic status.” By 1930 WIZO already existed in all, large and small, Jewish communities in Yugoslavia. In 1940 there were as many as 67 WIZO organizations in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Between the two World Wars, the number of Jewish and non-Jewish women's associations increased rapidly, with Jewish women as members of both. For example, in 1928 Paulina Lebl Albala, an active Zionist, founded the “Yugoslav Association of Women with University Degrees” in Belgrade.

The importance the Jewish community attributed to women is evident from the article called “The status of the Jewish woman,” written by the Chief Rabbi of Vrsac Dr. Hinko Urbach in 1927. The Rabbi compliments “our charitable women's societies that do invaluable humanitarian, social, hygienic and educational work, full of understanding for social needs, with a lot of sensibility for calm and tender generosity, without much talking and spectacle.”

The period after the WWI was peaceful and fruitful for women's societies. There were about 35,000 Jewish women in Yugoslavia in the period before the second world war. They organized many events, including activities oriented towards the education and health of children, and towards young mothers and their problems. Jewish summer camps were organized for hundreds of Jewish children. During the 1930s, thousands of Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia found temporary haven in Yugoslavia. Jewish women's organizations helped them in many ways, before they faced the same fate in 1940.

Of the 71,000 Jews in Yugoslavia registered in 1939, only about 12,000 survived the war. Of the entire Jewish population of Yugoslavia 83% perished in the Holocaust. Five aliyot of Yugoslav Jews left for Israel between 1948 and 1952. Only 6,200 Jews remained in Yugoslavia.

Of the 35,000 Jewish women in Yugoslavia before the war, only about 7,500 survived the Shoah. They returned after the most terrifying experiences, many with their husbands and children missing or killed, their homes burnt. Yet, hundreds of orphans, as well as old and sick and hungry people, needed help. Jewish women found new strength to distribute aid parcels, to cook meals, to reopen kindergartens and old age homes.

It was not before 1951 that women were able to renew Jewish women's organizations. By then, only about 2,700 Jewish women remained in Yugoslavia. The Jewish women's sections were revived in Belgrade, Zagreb, Sarajevo and in a dozen smaller towns. They all united into the Coordination of Jewish Women's Sections of Yugoslavia in 1958.
Although Yugoslavia at that time was a Communist country, there was relative freedom of religion. Since it had always been a multi-national country, national minorities were accorded the right to keep their traditions. There were no Jewish schools, but there were numerous other activities. Jewish summer camps were permitted, as well as other country-wide Jewish youth gatherings. It was possible for Yugoslav Jews to cross the borders and travel to Israel and other western countries. Madrichim (group leaders) from Israel and the USA were also able to participate in our summer camps, etc. Unlike in other eastern European countries, it was no problem for Jews to declare themselves as Jews, without facing any discrimination or anti-Semitism. In many ways, the situation of Jews in Yugoslavia is similar to that of Jews in some post-war western European countries. The Jewish women's sections organized many public Jewish activities, even during the 1950s, such as lectures about the state of Israel, and on aspects of Judaism, as well as about local Yugoslav themes – something unheard of in other Communist countries at that time.

The 40 years from 1951 to 1991 were prosperous in the work of individual women's sections and in the Coordination of Jewish Women's Sections of Yugoslavia. In other Eastern European countries, the Communist years are usually described as the Dark Ages, when everything Jewish was forbidden. But in the Jewish community of Belgrade, for example, during only three months of 1958, there were 14 lectures given for several hundred women. The topics ranged from Judaism and the modern state of Israel, medicine, arts and education, to the analysis of the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. All the Jewish holidays were celebrated along with official Yugoslav and international communist holidays. The Coordination of Jewish Women's Sections became a member of IC JW and Jewish Child’s Day, and kept in close contact with the women's section of the Association of Yugoslav Jews in the USA, Swiss Women’s Union etc. This Coordination existed for 33 years.

The partition of the former Yugoslavia resulted in the establishment of several countries (namely: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Macedonia and Yugoslavia) each with growing national and religious feelings of their majorities and at the expense of the identity of the minorities. In 1991 the Coordination of Jewish Women's Sections of Yugoslavia ended its existence.

However, all of the new countries still have some form of Jewish women's organizations. In Bosnia, the war in 1992 dictated the activities of the Jewish community. A dozen Jewish women who remained in the hell of Sarajevo, under the leadership of their president Sonja Elazar, organized themselves for work in war conditions. These courageous women did not only look after themselves, but managed to help the weak, elderly, and sick. The Jewish Women's Society provided help for all that needed it, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, often risking their lives. They named their section after Laura Papo-Bohoreta, but each and every of them deserves to be called a Bohoreta of the present.

The Jewish Women's Union of Croatia is based in Zagreb. It consists of women's sections of Zagreb, Osijek, Rijeka, Split and Dubrovnik with about 150 members. The Union of Jewish Women of Croatia is a member of the IC JW and is connected to other international Jewish women’s organizations.

The Jewish community of Split, where I live, has about 120 members, of which 65 or 55% are female. Out of 45 women, 20 are registered with our women's section. During the war in Bosnia from 1992-1996, Split was the main center for getting people and goods to and from Sarajevo. Women from the Jewish community in Split played a vital role welcoming people who came in Jewish convoys from Sarajevo.
Exhausted and hungry refugees, desperate after leaving their homes and their past, found women who cared. Many of them were old people, Holocaust survivors, refugees for the second time, who often fled Sarajevo with not more than one bag.

Lenka Montiljo-Bilalagic, herself a refugee from Sarajevo, initiated the work of the Menorah club for needlework. She organized a group of refugees accommodated in hotels in Makarska, to sit, chat and work together during their endless refugee days. They crocheted kippot of their own design. The kippot were distributed and sold through the JDC in western countries. That way their dull refugee days became shorter and they regained some measure of being useful again, of earning some money and not being completely dependent on relief to keep going and to preserve their dignity.

Thanks to generous help from American Jewry, through the UJA and the AJJDC, many food and clothing packages reached Split, and, from here, other places. Jewish women tirelessly helped in the distribution of aid. Jewish refugees were all accommodated safely and comfortably. Some elderly refugees, who could not go on traveling and moving, remained in Split. Our community became their new home and family. Women from Sarajevo enriched our women's section.

Today, the Women's section is the most active part of the Jewish community in Split. The section meets once or twice a month to discuss current problems and needs. We organize visits to the lonely and sick members, and try to attract more, especially younger women. The members of the section prepare food and decoration for all our communal celebrations and are the best lecture audience. Our members travel to various meetings in Croatia and other countries. Four of our members took part in the last ICJW meeting in Prague in May 1998.

Despite the fact that we are a very small community and although active young women are few, our daughters are a promise of a bright future!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum*. Vol. I. 1936, Rome

Levy, Dr. M., 1911, *Sefardi u Bosni*, Sarajevo.


*Sponenca Jevrejskog zenskog drustva u Beogradu* 1874-1924, 1924, Belgrade.


Tadic, Prof. Dr. J., 1959-1960. *Iz istorije Jevreja u jugoistočnoj Evropi; Gracija Nasi i Beatrice de Luna. Jevrejski almanah:* 36-39


BEING A JEWISH WOMAN IN FRENCH SOCIETY

by Regine Azria

Like the United States, France has enjoyed the privileges and benefits of a Revolution. This revolution led to a non-totalitarian regime, opened the gates of society and gave positive social recognition to individuals and groups previously relegated to subordinate – even despised – positions and status. French people are very proud of their revolutionary past and of their authorship of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. It is not an overstatement to say that French Revolution was the genesis and still is the hallmark of modern France. The Revolution gave legitimacy to practices of French political culture still relevant today.

Perhaps it is because of this glorious self-image that the French thought they were free from having to be the leaders of a gender revolution. But if the French led in the field of political democracy, this is far less true as far as the women's struggle for equality is concerned. France did not give women the right to vote until 1944. Thanks to the Separation law which established the principle of laïcité, state institutions were released from the yoke of religion. But this did not prevent the state from holding onto a traditional attitude with regard to gender issues. Despite a long and passionate national debate, initiated in 1998 by the socialist government about the necessity of legisating male/female parity on the electoral lists of the competing parties, women are still tremendously under-represented in French political life: while constituting 53% of the French electorate, women represented no more than 6% of the deputies elected in 1995.

By contrast, 40% of the deputies in Sweden at the time were women.¹

While the chivalrous tradition of courtesy so highly praised by lovers of French culture was slowly vanishing, sexism (the dark side of this tradition) has persisted with concrete effects in public and private everyday life. Until very recently, gender issues and the will for real change have met with a general lack of concern. Feminism and gender directed actions have hardly been welcomed in France. At the same time, women are far from being marginal actors in French public life. One may deplore the fact that they still are too often excluded from high rank administration positions and from the leadership of too many firms and companies. One may deplore that they are more vulnerable to labor market fluctuations and more massively touched (together with young people) by unemployment and retrenchment. One may deplore the persistence of inequalities in wages, status and work conditions. However, one must also note significant and encouraging evolutions, such as their upward professional mobility and the subsequent access of a growing number of women to prestigious sectors and positions. This progress has already led to a significant feminization of some previously exclusive male sectors, particularly medicine and research, as well as the legal professions.

How does French Jewry fit into this picture?

The Jewish population in France is estimated at about 600,000 people. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, this is the third largest Jewish population in the world, after the United States and Israel. Yet French Jews represent 0.9% – less than one per cent – of the total French population. This population is ethnically and culturally heterogeneous, composed partly of European *ashkenazi* Jews and partly of north-African *sephardi* Jews.

In the aftermath of decolonization (the 1950s-1970s), France was the site of a meeting between two types of Judaism and two types of Jewish experience: the experience of native, emancipated French so-called *Israelites* on the one side, and the experience of Jewish immigrants on the other. The *Israelites* were, on the whole, less observant, more assimilated Jews. Many of the immigrants were more traditional and community-centered, holding conceptions of Judaism and Jewishness that were quite distinct from those of the old-timers. This was a historical meeting between two Jewish worlds, cultures and populations which had never met before and hardly knew each other. Since they would have to share a unified Jewish institutional space and framework, they would have to adjust to each other.

This meeting between *Ashkenazim* and *Sephardim* had enormous concrete consequences for the organization and further evolution of Jewish life in France which I cannot elaborate on here. Did it influence the lives of Jewish women of both sides? Probably, as they learned from each other. But owing to an increasing number of *ashkenazi* and *sephardi* intermarriages and to a steady process of assimilation of the *Sephardim* to French cultural norms, one may expect that the young generations, if they still identify as Jews and do not marry out, will consider themselves simply as Jews or French Jews, sharing a common global Jewish heritage.

As far as women are concerned, this evolution is already perceptible in the private domestic sphere, where intergenerational transmission and cultural exchanges involving daughter/mother, daughter-in-law/mother-in-law relations are carried out. It is particularly noticeable in the diversification of the ways of cooking and choosing ethnic and/or kosher food, in the ways of preparing Jewish festivals with mixed rituals, in the ways of educating children, in body care, and in the observance of purity laws.

With all these preliminary features to consider, it is quite difficult to speak definitively on Jewish women in France. The main reason is the clear lack of data. Because of the cultural conditioning I have mentioned, there are few French scholars involved in gender or feminist studies and, all the more, in Jewish women studies. Therefore, there are few relevant surveys, inquiries, or ethnological or documentary materials on these matters and issues. I myself am not a specialist in these disciplines and when I happen to meet gender related issues, it generally is “by the way” rather than head-on.

As French citizens and members of French society, Jewish women share the current condition of all Jews in France. French lawyer and former president of the *Conseil Constitutionnel* (the equivalent of the U.S. Supreme Court) Robert Badinter would say they are “free and equal.” Antisemitism is not, for the time being, a major or central concern in France, supplanted as it is by anti-Arab xenophobia and racism.

---

2 525,000 according to the *American Jewish Year Book of 1997*; and 700,000 according to the Sofrès 1977 estimate.
As women, Jewish women share the condition of any women living in France. Just as in any other open democratic and liberal meritocracy, their political, economic or social status depends mainly on their personal merit and on life opportunities, rather than on their being Jewish or not. The list of French Jewish female celebrities is long and includes such people as politician Simone Weil, journalist Anne Sinclair, the late popular singer Barbara, writer Nathalie Sarraute, lawyer Josette Halimi, and many others.

Despite socio-cultural gaps related to age and country of origin, Jews living in France are overwhelmingly middle-class people, whether they inhabit the city or suburbs. Second and third generation Jewish women have reached a high level of education, have fewer children than their mothers and grand-mothers (except for the minority of ultra-orthodox) and have a fairly high rate of divorce. On all three counts, their rates are distinct from French averages. As Israeli demographer Sergio Della Pergola put it: through their demographic characteristics, Jewish women anticipate and mark in a more pronounced way than any other category of population, some of the most significant demographic trends of modernity.

One should remember that France has a tradition of hierarchy and centralization, that goes back to the Monarchy. The ancien régime’s propensity toward centralism was reinforced by the administrative netting of France by Napoleon I. At that time, Jews were made to organize as a religious minority within a centralized framework, taking the Catholic Church as its model. But rapidly, the inner dynamics of Jewish life, complicated by new groups of immigrants, burst out of this narrow, one-dimensional framework.

A diversity of Jewish organizations and associations appeared, each one having its own purpose and definition of its mission: religious or secular, social, political, educational, cultural or philanthropic, ethnic, etc. Within this plethora of institutions, Jewish women found their roles depending on the degree of conservatism or openness to women participation. They functioned as members, militants, professionals and decision makers. Only rarely were they leaders except of women’s associations such as WIZO or Coopération féminine (the Women’s branch of the Jewish Appeal).

Wherever they are involved, Jewish women tend to be active and effective, particularly in fund raising, Jewish philanthropy, and care of children and the aged. However, as more and more young Jewish women become professionally active, they also become quantitatively less committed to the Jewish community than their elders. On the whole, non-married young women (and men) feel largely unconcerned with community participation.

This development ties into the French culture of individualism, which generally leads to a practice of non-affiliation within French society. Community-building and identification with community is not “politically correct” in France. It is at the heart of the current very intense political debate on national identity and immigration, in which some participants deny any rights or legitimacy to infra-national groupings based on ethnicity or religio-ethnic criteria.

This national cultural ideology seems to have been internalized by many Jews, judging by their very low rate of affiliation and participation in Jewish community-life. Less than one of every two French Jews are affiliated in some way with a Jewish organization and less than 20% are regular community participants. Therefore it would be quite misleading to identify the French Jewish population with the French Jewish community. And therefore too, it would be at least as misleading to limit an analysis of French Jewry to community-involved individuals, whether men or women.
Non-affiliated Jews (men and women), and/or intermittent community-life participants, which constitute the majority of the French Jewish population, deserve particular attention because they are representative not only of mainstream French Jewry but of a large part of Diaspora Jewry. Owing to their lack of visibility and to their apparent lack of Jewish specificity, they have been largely ignored by scholars and thus less investigated. Yet, they are the most critical and problematic agents of transmission of Jewish identity. As such we cannot ignore them. Their attitudes toward Judaism, Jewish involvement and Jewish transmission, are to be decisive for the future as they represent the larger part of the Jewish people. In particular we cannot ignore the women who are part of this non-affiliated Jewish population.3

Young Jewish women’s level of secular education is universally high in France. We lack precise figures but one can assert that consistant progress is noticeable from one generation to the next. Especially among sephardic Jews, the educational gap between mothers and daughters is quite impressive. The proportion of young women and girls brought up in traditional families whose mothers could hardly read but who are themselves attending university or higher education institutes, is quite large.

By contrast, the level of Jewish education is universally low, both for boys and girls. Less than 20% of school-age Jewish children attend full-time Jewish schools. In many of these schools, especially in ultra-orthodox ones, the quality of the teaching, both Jewish and secular, is poor. This is because of a lack of well-trained teachers in Jewish disciplines; but also because of the marginalization of general culture in the curricula of the Jewish schools.

Nevertheless, general and Jewish education is still the most natural channel for women’s advancement, even within Jewish community institutions. There are two factors that offset the weaknesses of French Jewish educational institutions. The first is the availability of post-graduate training, whether within the framework of non-religious state institutions (universities, the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, or l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales) offering classes on Jewish subjects; or in the framework of private institutions such as the Institut catholique, the Centre universitaire d’Études juives (Cuej) or the recently created Institut André Neher for the formation of Jewish teachers. The second factor is the availability of Jewish training abroad whether in Israel, in England (Leo Baek Institute, Jews’ College) or in America.

Well-trained women account for a considerable part of the Jewish teaching profession in France. The massive feminization of this sector, traditionally held by male teachers and professors, is due of course to the opening of Jewish learning to women, but also to the fact that the position of teacher in a Jewish school has never been awarded high social status in the Jewish world. Even nowadays, in societies where school education is central, the prestige of intellectual knowledge does not compensate for low wages and the enduring poor image of Jewish teachers. When they have a choice and if they are not prompted by strong Jewish motivations, most well-trained male professionals prefer to work outside the Jewish community’s labor-market. In the present French context of unemployment, however, many male professionals have no choice but to work in Jewish institutions.

3 For more about non-affiliated Jewish families living far away from any organized Jewish community – mainly in distant suburbs or in the countryside, see Régine Azria. 1998 “Juifs des villes, juifs des champs” Cahiers du judaïsme, 3:42-55
The feminization of many professional sectors in France must be seen as an ambiguous phenomenon: its positive side is real progress; its negative side is that often means a lowering, according to general French standards, of the sector’s prestige and social image.

Relatively easy access to knowledge – particularly to Jewish traditional knowledge denied them for ages by religious authorities, – has not given French Jewish women noticeably better access to direct religious participation or to power. They are still not able to count as part of a minyan, publicly read from the Torah, or conduct synagogue services. They cannot aspire to religious authority (access to the rabbinate or rabbinical courts), despite the fact that, according to the Jewish tradition, a sound knowledge in Jewish sacred matters entitles a person to claim such religious authority.

In France, the only women in the religious establishment are the Reformed/Liberal synagogue’s Talmud Torah supervisor Colette Kessler, and first and only female Rabbi, Pauline Bébé (trained in England). This congregation was established only a few years ago. Contrary to the North-American situation, Liberal and Reform Jews do not represent a major religious force or trend within French Judaism, despite the fact that they have met with an increasing popularity within the last decade. Since its creation in 1907, the synagogue and its rabbis have been systematically ostracized by consistorial main-stream rabbinical authorities.

Actually, French Jewish women have sometimes forced their way through, as women and as Jews. Traditionalist, orthodox or secularized, most have extra-domestic activities and their fellow-men cannot but acknowledge their competence. The last citadel is the Jewish orthodox establishment and its rabbinical representation.

An unprecedented event happened in France in November of 1997. For the first time in the Consistoire’s history, four women stood as candidates for its Council election. In itself, this challenge to male exclusive authority and power was the unequivocal expression of a deep change in Jewish women’s mentality and of quite a new attitude. But there was close to a revolution when the scores were publicly announced. The four women were elected to the first five positions (1, 2, 3, 5), which implied that they could also run for the presidency of the Consistoire. The Jewish religious electorate had expressed its readiness for change but, as expected, the rabbinical authorities immediately reacted through the channel of the rabbinical court. To explain their veto, they argued that the tradition of women's non-involvement in community management should be preserved. None of the women ran for the presidency of the Consistoire.

Confronted by the enduring double sexism of French political culture and Jewish tradition alike, the positions and roles of women within French Jewish life reflect their positions and roles in French society. A majority of Jewish women are not involved in Jewish life. A minority of those affiliated participate as benevolent militants or professionals, especially in the social and educational fields. A few women are community or association leaders or holders of honorific titles. Yet, as happens in French society as a whole, one notices a significant presence of those who are involved in Jewish life and a steady progress of their presence in key and central institutions at higher levels of responsibility and prestige.

These remarks should not obscure the fact that much of Jewish life transpires at home and that despite the generalization of women’s working outside, women still have a key role in the domestic realm. Jewish socialization and transmission to children is on the responsibility of both fathers and mothers, but mainly mothers. How does that work in every day life? We have very little hard data about it.
SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH WOMEN

by Sally Frankental

It is a truism to note that all Jewish communities, in all times and places, reflect the context in which they are located. In the South African case, the segregationist policies of the colonial authorities, the Boer republics, and the Union, followed by the apartheid system of the past fifty years, form the inescapable frame for all who live in South Africa. The complex processes involved in the post-1990 unraveling of the apartheid regime constitute the country’s current socio-political reality.

This paper is a preliminary attempt to situate the little that is known about South African Jewish women, in relation to the Jewish community and the wider society.¹

The South African Jewish community is a highly organized, relatively affluent community that numbered approximately one hundred thousand Jews in 1991.² The two largest cities, Cape Town and Johannesburg, are home to eighty-five per cent of all Jews, with small and diminishing populations in Durban and Port Elizabeth, and tiny scatterings elsewhere. Despite these small numbers and continuing emigration, the South African community remains one of the ten largest Jewish communities in the world.

It resembles other (especially western) diaspora Jewish communities in many respects – in its relatively recent immigrant origins, in its pro-Israel stance, in its vigilance against anti-Semitism, in its concern to promote cultural continuity and to fight assimilation. It differs from other diaspora communities in several respects, for the most part in degree rather than substance. In addition to the particularities of the apartheid context, it differs with regard to its origins, its relative internal homogeneity and harmony, and the level of its Zionist commitment.

Two fundamental ‘social facts’ have underpinned the community since its inception. First was the heterogeneity that greeted the nineteenth and early twentieth century immigrants. The sheer linguistic, racial and cultural diversity of the local population provided a particular social space for minorities, a space which both facilitated and reinforced Jewish collective identity and identification. Second, by virtue of their skin color, all Jews – men and women – found themselves beneficiaries of a social system built on race and exploitation. Despite a brief moment when their ‘whiteness’ was questioned, they were inevitably members

¹ There is virtually no research on Jewish women in South Africa. The 2213 entries in the Bibliography of South African Jewry include only ten items under the heading ‘Women’ and seven are short journal articles (Belling, 1997:91). Well researched though these may be, none can be considered a major study. As a consequence, this paper was prepared for the IRIJW conference on the understanding that it could only be an impressionistic piece, based on intimate personal and professional knowledge of the community, and on a few telephonic interviews with key women.

However, the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town has rich, untapped primary source material in its archives and interested researchers are hereby invited to visit.

² Numerically, the Jewish population peaked at 118,000 in 1970, constituting 3.1% of whites; it had reached its highest proportion in 1936, at 90,645 or 4.5% of the white population. The 1991 survey (Dubb, 1994) estimated community size at between 92,000 and 106,000, constituting approximately 2% of whites and 0.5% of the total population. The report includes a discussion of the difficulties entailed in estimating the size of the Jewish population in South Africa. The Kaplan Centre has recently conducted a second comprehensive national sociodemographic survey but its results were not yet available at the time of writing.
of a ‘pigmentocracy’ – a minority, but privileged and part of the dominant class, an unprecedented experience for Jews.

Anglo-German Jews established the first congregation in Cape Town in 1841, and Jews were prominent among those who responded to the mineral discoveries of the 1860s and the 1880s. However, it was the arrival of some forty thousand east European Jewish immigrants in the three decades between the 1880s and the outbreak of World War I that consolidated the community. This wave of immigrants was certainly not monolithic – it contained the familiar array of socialists, pietists, Zionists, and Bundists to be found in many of the east European societies of the period. Despite this considerable internal diversity, however, the disproportionate numbers who arrived from one region, Lithuania, gave the community an unusual degree of homogeneity relative to other diaspora communities. This was reflected in the virtual absence of Hasidism (until the 1970s), in the particular form of Yiddish spoken, and in a variety of foods and customs particular to Lithuanian Jewry. In addition, the east Europeans’ lack of exposure to Reform Judaism meant that Reform or Progressive Judaism was established in South Africa only in 1933, far later than in most diaspora communities.

A second difference from other diaspora communities is the very high level of commitment to Zionism and to Israel. The strength of the Zionist movement had been evident since the formation of the first Chovevei Zion Society in South Africa in 1896 and the resolution, in 1898, to establish the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF), just one year after the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. It is noteworthy that the Zionists were the first Jews to create a country-wide organizational framework, preceding the formation of a representative Jewish organization to serve as a liaison with the authorities.1 That the majority of recent South African Jewish emigrants have chosen to settle not in Israel but elsewhere in the diaspora has caused some disappointment among Zionists everywhere. Nevertheless, South African Jewry demonstrates higher per capita rates than most diaspora communities on a range of ‘Zionist’, or pro-Israel, indices: number of olim, proportion affiliated to Zionist organizations, financial contributions to Israel, number who have visited Israel and frequency of visits, and, at least until very recently, the number of youth involved in Zionist youth programmes.

A third difference of degree, clearly related to the previous two, is the high level of cohesion within the community. Overlapping organizational memberships result in relatively little organizational tension or competition. The deep divides between non- or anti-Zionists reported for many Jewish communities, whether from an earlier period or currently, has never been a major feature of Jewish life in South Africa. The overwhelming identification with Orthodoxy, measurable by affiliation irrespective of practice, and the correspondingly small proportion of Progressive Jews (still popularly called ‘Reform’ and estimated at 13%), together with the absence of any other Jewish ‘denomination,’ has also kept religious tensions to a minimum through most of the community’s history. Although the religious profile of Johannesburg, the city with the largest concentration of Jews, has shown a significant increase in the number of observant Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox in the last two decades, it is still accurate to characterize South African Jewry as ‘non-observant Orthodox’, or ‘three-times-a-year’ Jews.

---

1 The South African Jewish Board of Deputies, modelled on the equivalent British body, is today the umbrella representative organisation of the community. It was founded in 1912 as an amalgamation of the previously separate Board for the Transvaal and Natal, created in 1903, and the Cape Board, created in 1904. By 1955, 327 different organisations were affiliated to the Board, of which 24 were women’s societies (Saron & Hotz, 1955:396).
An additional feature that contributes to communal cohesion and distinguishes South African Jewry is the very high proportion of Jewish school-age children who attend private Jewish day schools – 85% in Cape Town and 70% in Johannesburg. The majority attend schools which are part of a national network that styles itself “national-traditional” or essentially Zionist rather than Orthodox. Other well-established schools include the Orthodox Yeshiva College, and the ultra-Orthodox network of schools run by the Lubavitch movement.

One conclusion that can be deduced from the above is that South African Jews share a high degree of ethnic group consciousness and manifest strong Jewish identity. Yet the consensus, the cohesion and even the rise in levels of observance, are less a product of internal Jewish forces and impulses than they are a response, albeit not always self-conscious or acknowledged, to apartheid’s threats and constraints. For example, the local diversity at the turn of the century might have been irrelevant for Jewish communal cohesion, indeed might have facilitated assimilation, were it not for the segregationist, and later apartheid, policies which actively and purposefully differentiated the general population and encouraged separate group identities and identification. Heightened ethnic consciousness thus acts as both cause and consequence.

An additional aspect, directly pertinent to women, is that South Africa is both a very religious and very patriarchal society. Christianity is dominant, with many denominations represented among all classes and ‘racial’ categories. Years of relative isolation from world trends tended to exacerbate the existing tendency towards conservatism so that although there are some women clergy in South Africa, this is still an exceptional, and in some cases contested, phenomenon. The position of women is little different in Islam, Hinduism or African traditional religions although some African women have achieved relatively high status through participation in women’s church groups.

Yet at the same time, several women’s organizations have played prominent roles among different sectors of South African society. In the 1920s and 1930s in particular, Afrikaner women’s organizations were effective both in their welfare work and in mobilising support for Afrikaner nationalism. The ANC’s Women’s League has been a powerful political and social force among African women in particular, and the Black Sash is a well-known civil and human rights monitoring group with a well-established record of protest against the former apartheid state.

During the 1980s, and especially after the unbanning of the ANC (African National Congress) and the SACP (South African Communist Party) in 1990 and the beginning of the liberalisation of South African society, a variety of women’s organizations – liberal, feminist, Marxist, religious, party-political – both in principle and on the basis of lessons learned from revolutions elsewhere, insisted on women’s liberation together with, and not after, political liberation. The sentiments expressed in the ‘struggle’ slogan of working for a ‘democratic, non-racist, non-sectarian society’ were incorporated into the new constitution and the Bill of Rights. As a result, South Africa has some of the most progressive gender-related legislation, constitutional clauses, and even dedicated structures and procedures in the world. As in many places, however, there is a gap between intentions, even when enshrined in law, and implementation, and the 1998 CEDAW (Convention Against Discrimination Against Women) report to the United Nations documents that gap for South Africa.

---

*4 Convention Against Discrimination Against Women Report, 1997.*
In addition, and congruent with an authoritarian (national) regime and notions of exclusivity, it was not surprising that in the past the organised Jewish community showed little tolerance for internal dissent. It was also, and with considerable historical justification (see Shain, 1994) sensitive to its own vulnerability. Since the liberalization of South African society, with its efforts towards democratization and its embrace of diversity in all spheres, Jews too are beginning to express their internal differences more openly, and tensions, conflicts and even intermarriages are on the rise. In short, as South African society ‘normalizes’, so South African Jewry undergoes a diaspora version of normalization and becomes more like other diaspora Jewish communities.

How have these historical processes and conditions of existence impacted on Jewish women in South Africa?

For the east European immigrants, supporting their families and fashioning a cohesive communal structure were of primary importance. To this end, congregations were established and consolidated throughout the country, and a proliferation of Jewish organisations catered for a wide range of interests and needs in both rural and urban areas. ‘Ladies’ Guilds’ were attached to most congregations and their activities, particularly in the smaller rural communities, often extended well beyond synagogue matters. However, seldom, then and now, did they serve on the main synagogue committee.

Not surprisingly in an immigrant community, welfare organisations of various kinds were among the earliest to be established. As might be expected, women were active in all of these wherever they were to be found. Welfare societies to help new arrivals, to look after orphans (and later, the aged and widows), chevrot kadisha, bikkur cholim societies, and soup kitchens were among the many kinds of association formed and/or run by women.5

Women were also active in the Zionist movement. Indeed, according to Shimoni, “from the beginning, women conducted the bulk of Zionism’s practical work in education, fund-raising and organisation.” Yet it was not until 1928 that one of the leading women Zionists became a member of the SAZF’s Executive in her own right.

The B’neth Zion Association (Daughters of Zion), a women’s Zionist organisation whose membership grew from 60 to 160 in the first two months of its existence, was established in Cape Town in 1901 as an affiliate of Dorshei Zion, an all-male Zionist society (Widan, 1984). Among other things, the BZA took responsibility for the distribution of the Jewish National Fund ‘blue boxes’, contributed to the newly formed WIZO (Women’s International Zionist Organisation) in Palestine, initiated Hebrew classes for girls and started the first Hebrew nursery school – but its funds were controlled by the men! However, by 1930, the year white women in South Africa gained the vote, the B’neth Zion finally took control over the monies it raised and gained representation on the Dorshei Zion.

In 1932, the (national) Women’s Zionist Organisation of South Africa was formed. By 1967, its membership had grown to 17, 000 and it had become “by far the most numerous and active component of South African Zionism.”6 In addition to fund-raising for a variety of Zionist funds and for their own projects, all branches ran wide-ranging educational and cultural programmes

---

5 see Abrahams, 1955; Norwich, 1993; Saron & Hotz, 1955; Schrire, 1993.
Of course Jews also engaged in broader societal processes, beyond specifically Jewish interests. Their contribution to the economy, 'the arts, and sport has been documented in a variety of publications with little focus, however, on women.' The painter Irma Stern and the novelist Nadine Gordimer are probably the only Jewish women in their fields known outside of South Africa.

Politically, it should be noted that despite their upward mobility through the century, Jews in South Africa have never constituted a significant political force. Their small number, the ‘English’ control of commerce, and the constituency-based parliamentary system within a Westminster framework from 1910 to 1994, precluded their access to real power. Yet their involvement in political processes, and most particularly in opposition politics, has always been disproportionate to their number. In each era, and in each political space, Jewish women have been among the activists. Bertha Solomon, liberal parliamentarian and noted advocate on behalf of the underdog, Ray Alexander, Communist and tireless trade unionist, were just two of the most prominent. In a later period, Ruth First was murdered as a direct consequence of her willingness to confront the apartheid state, and Helen Suzman gained international recognition as a champion of the oppressed.

The Jewish individuals who participate actively in the cultural and public domains in South Africa clearly do so as individuals, and not as representatives of the Jewish community. However, many of those noted for their political activism were, in the Isaac Deutscher sense, ‘non-Jewish Jews’. Thus, in relation to public Jewish figures in general, but to the anti-apartheid activists in particular, the relationship between their Jewishness and their behaviour continues to be questioned and debated. On the other hand, a few women, known to identify as Jews, serve in various senior positions in the new democratic administration. This is truly a new phenomenon that invites investigation.

Of course there were always Jews who specifically wished their activities to be associated with the label ‘Jewish.’ Foremost among these was the Union of Jewish Women. Founded in 1930 as a national secular organisation for Jewish women, it is the only Jewish women’s organisation to work closely with non-Jewish women’s organisations. It undertakes projects of all kinds, for the benefit of Jews and Gentiles, and has been at the forefront of many developments in coloured and black communities. One of its proudest achievements was the early establishment of pre-schools in disadvantaged communities. Like the Women’s Zionist Organisation it also conducts an extensive educational and cultural programme.

In the past, one particular consequence for women of the privileged status of whites, was the availability of affordable domestic labour. A full-time, live-in domestic worker and child-minder was a commonplace and one did not have to be rich to afford this liberating luxury. Jewish women were thus available for communal work to a much greater extent than their counterparts in other countries, and in fact constituted a particularly important resource for the day to day conduct of Jewish communal life. Furthermore, in all centres, and at least until the late 1970s, a significant proportion of the members of the Synagogue Ladies’

---

7 see Arkin, 1984 (Ch.9); Kaplan, 1986,
8 see Shain & Frankental, 1997; Shimoni, 1980 (Ch.9)
10 The relationship between Jewish employers and their domestic workers, and the changes in those relationships in response to the changing political climate in the country, and in comparison with non-Jewish employers, would be one worthwhile area of investigation.
Guilds and/or the Union of Jewish Women were also members of the Women's Zionist Organisation (WZO), resulting in valuable cross-fertilization of ideas, and considerable co-operation among Jewish women's organisations.

However, as women have joined the work-force in increasing numbers, all voluntary organisations have experienced a drop in membership. In addition, with the general changes in South African society, the employment of domestic workers is no longer as widespread a practice. Neither the Union nor the WZO espouses what could be called a feminist philosophy nor does either body consider feminist consciousness-raising a primary responsibility. One consequence is that, with individual exceptions, those Jewish women who are involved with organisations which fall under the broad rubric of 'the women's movement' are not involved with Jewish organisations; and those who work for and with Jewish organisations do not, for the most part, join other kinds of women's organisations. Indeed, although Jewish women were among the founders of the Black Sash, they were not conspicuous among its members in the 1970s and 1980s.

A further consequence has been that those young women who encounter feminism at the university are not attracted to Jewish women's organisations once they leave college, even if they were active in Jewish youth or student movements while in high school and college.

This raises questions of continuity and of leadership. While these are issues that concern most Jewish communities in the diaspora, the South African context is particular in several respects. Foremost among these is the fact that the community is aging rapidly, not only because of the demographic trends common to all liberal democracies – lower birth rates, delayed marriage, a rising proportion of well aged – but especially because of emigration. And those most likely to emigrate are always the most mobile: talented and skilled young singles or childless young couples, and older wealthy people, often benefactors of the community. From a Jewish perspective it is to be hoped that the strong ethnic identity of South African Jews will lead them to contribute positively to Jewish life wherever they find themselves, and evidence from around the world suggests that this is indeed the case. From a South African perspective, faced with a situation of diminishing resources and growing need, within a country undergoing rapid and radical transformation, strong lay and professional leadership is essential.

Somewhat ironically this situation bodes well for potential leaders among Jewish women. Historically, women have usually achieved positions of leadership within women's organisations before attaining leadership positions in other Jewish organisations. And, as is common everywhere, women are more likely to be second-in-command to male chairpersons, school principals or presidents – even on committees such as welfare, where they are the majority. In South Africa, welfare organisations and welfare professionals had more dealings with, and more knowledge of, both state structures and disadvantaged communities than any other sector of the organised Jewish community. In the new political dispensation that experience is invaluable and I believe it no accident that the current Chairperson of the Board of Deputies, the first woman to hold this position, has a background in welfare work. In addition, there are growing numbers of women in law and in business, two traditional source areas for Jewish lay leadership. This, coupled with the propensity of diaspora leadership for the 'political correctness' of the moment, may well see dramatic changes in the participation, and status, of women in the South African Jewish community.
In similar vein, the assumption should be tested that the rise in outmarriage is a consequence of the dilution of Judaism or Jewish identity, or that South African Jewry is simply ‘catching up’ with Jews in the rest of the free world in the conditions of modernity and post-modernity. It is equally possible, at least in the South African setting, that a combination of structural factors underlies this relatively new phenomenon: the sociological success of the day schools – which means that most young Jews in a given city know each other from school; escalating emigration due to factors in the wider society, leading to demographic imbalances in terms of both age and gender.

In the religious domain, most identifying South African Jews, men and women, fall into the paradoxical category of ‘non-observant Orthodox’ (i.e., are affiliated to Orthodox synagogues but practise little). In these congregations there has been no sign of any new possibilities for women in ritual or synagogue life. Quite the contrary: it is the opinion of many that with the influx of Lubavitch and other ultra-Orthodox rabbis, the Beth Din has become palpably more vigilant and more stringent in the application of Halakha in the past decade.

Despite the educational activities of the Jewish women’s organisations, including those of the Reform movement, most Jewish women in South Africa know little about feminism and are isolated from the women’s movement abroad. They have never heard of the women elsewhere in the world who have campaigned against barriers to women’s full participation in Jewish life, nor are they familiar with the issues involved. Among the relatively small proportion of observant Jews, which includes the rapidly growing number of ba’alei and ba’alot t’shuvah in Johannesburg, there has been an exponential increase in educational and other organised activities for women, within an Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox understanding of women’s place in the world. Indeed, the success of the ba’al t’shuvah ‘movement’ in Johannesburg (also an under-researched phenomenon) has wrought profound changes in the lives of a great many of the city’s Jews. Because the ‘outreach’ (to Jews) programmes of a variety of religious groups have reached so many, the lives of their non-or-less observant kin and close friends have inevitably also been touched. The effects are visible and measurable: the dramatic increase in the number of Jews physically recognisable by their dress as Orthodox, the increased use of the mikvah, the introduction of an eruv in several residential areas, an increase in the number and variety of kosher eating places and increased patronage of them, the increased use of a mechitza at weddings, and, in contrast to any other city in South Africa, the marked increase in the number of non Sabbath-observers who attend synagogue services and shiurim.

Until very recently there was little, if any, contact between religious women’s groups and other Jewish women’s organisations. However, a new body, the Co-ordinating Council of National Jewish Women’s Organisations, was founded in 1998, which suggests that there may be new-found recognition of the value of women working together.

There are also hints of other, less formal, change. Younger women, often those who have lived abroad and usually in North America, have experienced the kind of Jewish life that permits – or at least tries to promote – combining career, family and involvement in community. Difficult though ‘having it all’ has proved to be everywhere, it is gratifying to note small, but enthusiastic new beginnings in several places. At the initiative of young, well-educated, Jewishly committed women, several new ventures – study and
discussion groups for men and women – have begun in both Cape Town and Johannesburg. What is
genuinely new is that the groups are unaffiliated to any existing organisations and that the exploration
of controversial issues in Judaism and Jewish life, form their central agenda. In the past, even the recent
past, sensitivity to their own vulnerability inclined Jews to value consensus to an unusual degree. The new
groups deliberately recruit participants with distinctly varied degrees of (past) commitment to Jews and
Judaism, reflecting the rich diversity that is South African Jewry in the new South Africa.

REFERENCES
Abrahams, I. 1955. The Birth of a Community Cape Town Hebrew Congregation
      Oxford University Press
      Jewish Publications-South Africa
Norwich, R. 1993. ‘Jewish Women in Early Johannesburg’ Jewish Affairs 48(2)
Republic of South Africa: 2nd Report: Country Response to Questions and Concerns raised by CEDAW
Schrire, G. 1993. ‘Women and welfare: early twentieth century Cape Town’ Jewish Affairs 48(2)
Widan, B 1984. ‘Women’s Role’ in David Sherman (ed.) 40 Years in Retrospect: The Story of the Western
      Province Zionist Council Western Province Zionist Council
MIZRAHI WOMEN IN ISRAEL: THE DOUBLE ERASURE

by Pnina Motzafi-Haller

A mizrahi feminist friend who heard me say that I planned to review the literature on mizrahi women in Israel suggested that I read Patricia Hill Collins’ Black Feminist Thought.¹ As I read about the rich intellectual tradition of African-American women and the words and ideas of Black feminist thinkers like Audre Lorde, Alice Walker and Bell Hooks, I realized that hardly any theorized work which explores the intersections of gender, ethnicity and class had been produced in Israel. I also came to realize how mizrahi women’s intellectual work has been suppressed, and made virtually invisible until very recently. There are some beginnings, a few articles published in the more progressive academic literature and, more often, internally-circulated essays. I would like to shed some light on this emerging discourse, but before doing this I wish to pose two questions: first, why is there such a small, little-known body of work that places mizrahi women at its center? Second, why is it emerging only in the past four or five years?

Part of the answer lies in the nature of the dominant social and intellectual discourse in Israel that has effectively silenced such voices by delegitimizing the very definition of the mizrahi woman as a speaking subject. The discussion I offer about the way mizrahi women were constructed as a social category and simultaneously silenced in Israeli scholarly discourse leads to several observations about the sociology and politics of knowledge in Israel. I ask: How are categories of knowledge defined in Israel and by whom? Who decides what is worthy of “serious” research and what is the “exotic” marginalized domain of knowledge reserved for women scholars and/or anthropologists? Finally, the most critical question I raise is: What do we learn from this case study that explores the links between scholarship and identity about multiple systems of domination and the way they define access to power and privilege, shape peoples’ identities and experiences in Israel and elsewhere?

If I were to follow the accepted positivist style of mainstream Israeli scholarship, I would begin with a simple definition of our “subject matter.” It would say something like: “Mizrahim, also known as Sephardim or Orientals, are Jews who migrated to Israel from Asia and Africa, mostly from Muslim societies. Jews who migrated from Europe and America are known as Ashkenazim.” I would then cite the thoroughly-documented fact that Mizrahim in Israel constitute the lower socio-economic ranks of the Jewish population in Israel, and then proceed to note that the position of mizrahi women is even lower than that of their men folk. Mizrahi women cluster at “the bottom of the female labor market, service and production jobs.”² I might then add that Mizrahim, especially first generation of immigrants, are “traditional” and note the unenviable position of mizrahi women, in patriarchal families. Following such a model implies, of course, that we are dealing here with a well-defined population consisting of the interlocking categories of gender and place of origin.

¹ Routledge, 1990.
² Bernstein, Deborah 1993:195.
My starting point for this essay rejects such an essentialist model of identity. I opt for what Anderson and Hill-Collins (1995) call an “interactive model.” I wish to conceptualize mizrahi women as a social category that is shaped in a moving process that determines not only ethnic and gender identities, but also patterns of inequality and power. The position of mizrahi women within the interlocking categories of ethnicity, class and gender, I argue, is significant not because it statistically places people in categories, but because such positioning shapes the concept of self and structures interactions, daily experience and opportunities. Cornel West, the African American philosopher, wrote that race matters in the US. because it is a “constitutive element of life” in America. Ethnicity and gender, I wish to argue here, are similarly constitutive elements in Israeli life. They affect access to power and privilege; they construct meanings and shape people’s everyday experience.

Saying that mizrahi women emerge as a social category in a matrix of domination and meaning does not say, however, that it is a homogeneous group without tensions and internal contradictions. It is precisely these varied experiences of mizrahi women at factories and in peripheral towns, in the margins of academic life and in muted public discourses that must be explored. This essay is written to uncover the very process of silencing; its goal is to expose the exclusionary practices that inhibited the exploration of our own muted experiences. “Once it is understood that subjects are formed through exclusionary operations,” feminist theorist Joan Scott has written,“it becomes necessary to trace the operations of that construction and erasure.” I would like to focus this essay on one arena of the wider process of such construction and erasure of the mizrahi woman as a subject in Israel-academic discourse.

To understand the way Israeli academic discourse has conceptualized mizrahi women one must untangle two intertwined key concepts: Mizrahiyut (a collective identity claimed by people of mizrahi origin) and Israeli feminism. Mizrahi women’s thinking has to struggle against a double process of erasure and silencing. As the female members of a subordinated ethnoclass, mizrahi women intellectuals face hostile reactions to their very claim that Mizrahiyut, is a viable basis for their action and thought. The negation of mizrahi collective identity as a basis for distinctive claims, material and symbolic, is a powerful one precisely because Mizrahim, as Jews, are said to be part of the mainstream.

Unlike Palestinians, who are excluded from the definition of the Israeli Jewish national Self, Mizrahim are said to be “Israelis,” although “Israelis with a problem.” Their positioning at the margins of Israeli political, economic and cultural life (a position reproduced for the fourth generation since immigration) is constructed as “temporary;” as a problem to be surmounted with good liberal policies of “lifting up.” While the prevailing Israeli academic research has been obsessed with recording the parameters of what it calls “the ethnic problem,” it has not allowed any mizrahi assertive voice to share its discursive space. Israeli feminist discourse, in its turn, has not been able to free itself from the dominant male-centered orientalist images of mizrahi women.

Let us begin with the larger picture and examine how women, in particular, or gender relations, in general, have been treated in mainstream academic discourse. I asked a student to examine the long list of scholarly books that claimed to describe and analyze “Israeli Society.” She found that among the dozens on Israeli society written in the past four decades, only one included gender relations in its overview.³ All the others,
including those which deal with divisions and social gaps in Israeli society (e.g., Smooha et al. 1978, Ben Porat 1989) include no discussion on women in Israel. In one classical book entitled *Israeli Social Structure* edited by Eisenstadt, Adler, Bar Yoseph (a woman), and Cahana in 1969, the student found one mention of women. In a short paragraph that deals with “the Arab village” there is a sentence that reads “The women in the [Arab] village constitute a problem of their own [“be’ayah be’îneh atzmah”]. In Eisenstadt’s updated volume *The Transformation of Israeli Society*, 1985, one finds tables that present data on patterns of employment and salary along gender lines, but no discussion of the data is offered.

Significant academic work about inequality along gender lines begin to appear in Israel only in the mid-1970s. The first tentative essays (several later anthologized into readers about “Women in Israel”) were concerned with establishing the legitimacy of this subject matter. They tried to dispel the powerful myth that Israeli men and women have been equal partners in the founding of a Zionist-socialist society. Even in the late 1980s, Sylvia Fogel-Bijawi and Alice Shalvi asked, “Is there a problem of inequality between the genders in Israel?” (1988). By the early 1990s, three collections on women in Israel signaled the beginning of an assertive feminist scholarship in Israeli academe. However, the struggle against inequality along gender lines took a universal “Israeli woman” as its subject matter. Differences within this postulated “Israeli woman” category along class, nationality and ethnic origin were seldom discussed. Regardless of their varied theoretical and ideological background, the editors of the three influential volumes had little to say about the unique experience, actions and struggles of *mizrahi* women in Israel. Reviewing *Israeli Feminism New and Old*, Barbara Swirski writes “All the events described below occurred among Jews and were not relevant for Arab women, nor did they have anything to do with Oriental or Orthodox Jewish women.” In fact, this new feminist writing, had replaced the limited, unabashedly paternalistic work carried out on *mizrahi* women during the ’50s and ’60s with silence.

Why has current feminist scholarship been so limited in its effort to go beyond its preoccupation with urban, professional middle-class *ashkenazi* women? Why did it replace the blatant Orientalist bias that triggered earlier interest in *mizrahi* women with a vacuum? Before addressing these questions, let us return to the 1950s and to the insertion of *mizrahi* women into the larger orientalist discourse in Israel.

Sociological research on *mizrahi* women during the ’50s and ’60s was part of a larger academic discourse that expressed open paternalism towards the Jews of the East. This discourse was inseparable from the aggressively orientalist public discourse that posited *ashkenazi* Jews, who controlled the institutions of power of the young state as “western” vis-a-vis the Jews of the East who needed to be transformed into “new Israelis.” The term that Rivka Bar Yossef, a key woman sociologist, coined for this process is: desocialization and resocialization.

If *Mizrahim* were backward, then their women were doubly so. Studies of the time (Palgi, Fietelson, Ortar) objectified their negative traits as “traditional.” Unlike the professional, progressive (*ashkenazi* middle-class) woman, the *mizrahi* woman was limited in her role as mother and wife. The bitter irony is that, even there, the *mizrahi* woman was found inadequate – not only as an individual, but, more critically, for the state because she lacked the ability to prepare the next generation for Israeli life. In a study entitled “Pregnancy-

---

4 Both articles 1988
East and West” published in 1966, Dr. Ester Goshen-Gottstein, a clinical psychologist at the Hadassah Medical School compared attitudes to first pregnancy between oriental and western women living in Israel. Both oriental and western women might be “motherly,” she wrote, but “the woman living in a modern marriage will tend to give child-centered reasons for wanting her first child” whereas for the oriental woman the child “often represents an avenue for the husband’s lack of attention.” The research also “found” that pregnant oriental women were “selfish,” “self-centered” and “narcissistic.”

The fixation on the “traditionalism” of mizrahi women led to quite powerful observations. Thus Palgi, in an often-quoted article (1955), identify “typical personality disturbances” of immigrant Iraqi women in Israel of the 1950s. These “traditional” women exhibit dramatic “psychological scars” caused by adjustment to “modern” life. There is no mention in this study of their difficult and alienating experience in transition camps (ma’abarat) where they struggled to keep their families together in humiliating conditions for years before they could move into permanent homes. “Modern life” on the margins of Israeli society in the 1950s may, indeed, have caused psychological scars – not because of their assumed “traditional mind,” but due to the dehumanization they experienced in the hands of those who sought to “save” them and their children.

Indeed, these “scientific” studies are marked by a missionary-like zeal that called for state intervention to prevent the “cultural retardation” of mizrahi children by their mothers. Ethnographic studies published in the late 1950s documented the “primitive” child-rearing practices of mothers of the Kurdish community. Psychologist Gina Ortar made a career advising the educational system how to “rescue” mizrahi children from the “cultural backwardness” of their families. These kids, a whole theory explained, were te’unei tipuah – “in need of treatment.”

The concept “in need of treatment” was used extensively in Israel in the late 1950s and 1960s to legitimize paternalistic educational policies that identified mizrahi children as lacking in skills and abilities in comparison with their ashkenazi counterparts. Even dramatic changes in Israel had little effect on the paternalistic, corrective urge of this “in need of treatment” logic. It withstood the downfall of Labor hegemony due to the massive mizrahi defection, the national trauma after the 1973 war, as well as major shifts in theoretical frameworks for education. When a Central Statistics Office publication described almost a quarter (24.9 percent) of all women in Israel as “mothers with many children” (imahot m’rubot yeladim) with a formal education of zero to four years, the same paternalism pertained. A new crop of research projects, several commissioned and financed by the Israeli Center for Demography, reproduced the earlier negative depiction of the population of mizrahi women as nashim te’unot tipuah – “women in need of treatment.” These women were described as “passive and dependent,” with low self-image and self-esteem, whose “spiritual powers were “limited” and whose “survival patterns are not among the more advanced”6 Shoshana Sharni (whose work was published by the Office of the Prime Minister) warned in 1973 of the mizrahi woman’s “limited knowledge, hints of limited and shallow personality. If we see this mother as one of the key figures children identify with – the prospects are not encouraging.” Based on this research, social workers and psychologists devised a range of intervention programs that were intended to uplift and improve the lot of these less-fortunate Jewish sisters.

6 Sharni and others 1976.
Orly Benjamin, who reviews this body of work and cites many more examples of its biases, asks: why dwell on such outdated examples of what is evidently bad research carried out almost two decades ago? Her answer is that with no alternative sources, this outdated work remains the main source for more recent scholarship on mizrahi women.

Of this more recent scholarship, I have located five studies with mizrahi women as their subject. Two (Yael Katzir 1976 and Lisa Gilad 1989) are about Yemeni Jewish women; one (Rachel Wasserfall 1990) is about Moroccan women; one is about Tunisian women (Esther Schely-Newman, 1991); and the last (Susan Starr Sered 1987, 1992) is about pious mizrahi women in Jerusalem. All five authors are women anthropologists. The limited number of their studies is underscored when we consider that of the five, only two (Susan Sered and Esther Schely-Newman) currently hold academic positions. Yael Katzir and Rachel Wasserfall dropped out of academic life and have published little of their dissertation material. Lisa Gilad was killed in a tragic car accident. Their few publications have had almost no impact on shaping mainstream Israeli academic male-centered discourse.

In that mainstream writing of the last two decades, mizrahi women are never subjects in their own right. Rather, research treats them as objects, a category that illuminates by contrast characteristics of ashkenazi women. Take, for example, a study concerned with patterns of marriage and parenthood among “young women in Israel.” The researcher, Haya Stier, asserts that, “In Israel it is expected from women of mizrahi origin to enter family duties earlier than women of ashkenazi origin because women of mizrahi origin represent a more traditionalist group.” The far from startling results of her research confirms this “widely-known” social fact. The tautological nature of the research design and argument is lost on the researcher.

A second, more subtle but not significantly different, example is Tamar Rapoport’s article that seeks to explore the experiences of sexuality in two populations of Israeli girls who attend boarding schools. Although it is clear for any reader familiar with Israel that one group is mizrahi and the other ashkenazi, the author chooses the familiar euphemisms of girls “in dire straits” (bemetzuka) and girls from “established” (mevusasot) families. The short quotes of the mizrahi girls are peppered with references to their families as “primitive.” There is a thinly hidden moralism about the “good ways” of the girls from “established homes” and about the hopeless victimized position of the girls “in dire-straits.” This article, like the more common statistically-based kind, never rises beyond the all too-familiar cliches of Mizrahiyut as a debilitating “traditionalist” cultural package that colors all of life for these young women.

Maybe because it claims to represent their voices, this article suggests the limits and dangers of contemporary liberal sociological analysis in Israel. Such scholarship provides evidence of inequalities along gender and ethnic lines but never explores how patterns of inequality in the larger political economy and history of Israel have shaped such experiences and structured their reproduction. Such scholarship contributes to the hegemonic discourse precisely because it explains nothing. By representing, through respected, academic jargon, the multiple marginality of mizrahi women as a fact, these studies invite an acceptance of the status-quo.
In this view, mizrahi women, even second and third generation, are disadvantaged because of some frozen, unshakable “traditionalism.” Little sustained effort has been made to systematically challenge the epistemological and theoretical presuppositions of such a hegemonic model. Moreover, despite the obsessive statistical recording of what is known in this literature as “the ethnic gap” – the patterns of inequality along gender, class and ethnic affiliation – Israeli mainstream academic research has largely failed to develop a theoretical framework that linked these cross-cutting lines of division. No serious effort was made to more fully describe, much less explain, the reality emerging from multiple oppressions. The effort to reconceptualize critical dimensions of this dominant model and to expose its seemingly “scientific” representation of reality as being ideologically and culturally constructed has only begun. “Reclaiming,” writes Hill-Collins is “discovering, reinterpreting, analyzing in new ways despite the silencing mechanism of mainstream discourse.”

The intellectual mizrahi discourse I now turn to works against what Spivak has called “social and disciplinary epistemic violence,” which is extremely effective in today’s Israeli academic discourse. Epistemic violence is the open aggression directed by those who define their systemic knowledge as the only “true” kind of knowledge against any other claims. The small community engaged in mizrahi intellectual feminist discourse has struggled against a very powerful hegemonic discourse. Their (our) initial subversive act has been to define ourselves as feminists and mizrahi. The question of who defines whom, and the power relations involved in this process is of crucial significance. It may be helpful to examine what I call the “political economy” of the small, emerging group of women who make up the core of this contemporary mizrahi feminist discourse.

First, mizrahi women intellectuals in contemporary Israel do not hold central positions in mainstream Israeli sociology, anthropology, or political science departments. The few who were able to establish academic careers, like Ella Shohat or Smadar Lavie, did it in the U.S. Film maker and activist Simone Bitton lives in Paris. Those of us who hold academic positions within Israel are marginalized. Vicki Shiran teaches on a part time basis at several academic institutions. Dahan Kalev and I have non-tenured positions at institutions and departments that are peripheral to the mainstream. Doli Ben Habib is completing her doctorate. Outside the academy, Tikva Levi and Mira Eliezer run an NGO, Hila, that works to empower parents in peripheral towns and neighborhoods. Tikva Honig-Parnass is an editor of News from Within, an independent left-leaning magazine, and Barbara Swirski established and now manages Adva.

This small group of women has very few avenues of publication and thus limited exposure to wider audiences. Most of their work appears in in the form of short essays and interviews published in radical, small journals (e.g., the Israeli feminist journal Noga; the radical mizrahi-centered publication Iton Acher and in two left-leaning publications of the Alternative Information Center, News from Within (English) and MeTzad Sheni (Hebrew).

Central to the evolving mizrahi feminist discourse is the blurring of the lines that distinguish academic from activist spheres. The same women who organize and shape conferences and workshops are those who link theory to practice. One of the earliest and most articulate voices to examine feminist theory in
its Israeli context is that of Vicki Shiran. A legal scholar with many years of activism in mizrahi and feminist circles, Shiran is key in reshaping Israeli feminism and mizrahi consciousness. In 1991, Shiran developed a comprehensive thesis about what it means to be a feminist in Israel in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{11} She addressed two audiences: the general public and, more narrowly, feminists active in Israeli feminist organizations.

Shiran described the state of Israeli feminism as a sad situation where very few women define themselves as feminists, and where substantive ideas about woman’s liberation have neither taken root nor created a fertile ground for thinking or taking action. Feminism is widely ridiculed in Israeli public discourse and its political and social importance diminished. Shiran, like all other mizrahi feminists, espouses a radical rather than reformist feminism. The latter, she observes, focuses its struggle on getting more of the cake (e.g., more women in the Knesset) and therefore “plays into the hands of the oppressor and contributes to the reproduction of the status quo.” She refuses to play the role of “token mizrahi woman” in the mostly middle-class, ashkenazi feminist circles in Israel.

Shiran is not alone in observing that the core of the Israeli feminist movement is made up of middle-class, ashkenazi Jewish women. Katya Azoulai writes that Israeli women organizations are managed by an “exclusive forum of women who believe that their academic and professional degrees grant them insights which are better than the insights gained by women whose life and work experience had prepared them, perhaps to no lesser degree, to represent and highlight issues relevant to a wider section of the population.”\textsuperscript{12} Barbara Swirski argues that “one of the causes for the failure of the feminist movement in Israel to reach the wider public of women stems from its neglect of inequality in other spheres of Israeli society… the kind that exists between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, between Jews and Palestinians.” Swirski notes that “Palestinian and Mizrahi women who were active within their own communities had a hard time seeing these feminists as partners in their struggles; they felt the [organized] feminists do not acknowledge the worth of their struggles.”

Dahan Kaleb points to the double standard of middle-class ashkenazi feminists who focus on politically-correct issues such as demonstration for peace, or for advancing the cause of lesbians or Palestinian women, but never on the needs of low-income mizrahi women (who, she notes, might be baby-sitting for the demonstrating women).\textsuperscript{13}

Shiran extends this criticism by insisting that the question of mizrahi and Palestinian women and their oppression must alter the very nature of feminist analysis in Israel. Shohat, Shiran, and Dahan-Kalev insist that any concrete understanding of the position of women in Israel must take into account the intersection of ethnic, religious and class background. The oppression of women in Israel occurs within their respective class, religious and national circles. “A Jewish mizrahi woman,” Shiran writes, “who is oppressed by mizrahi and ashkenazi men is not in the same boat with ashkenazi women because she is discriminated against in comparison to these women and is often oppressed by them.” When the cross-cutting lines of gender, ethnicity and class are analyzed, the simple call for “Israeli sisterhood” comes into question. Shohat is explicit: “Any attempt to tell us there is one homogenic feminism, is an effort to silence us.”

\textsuperscript{11} in a three part essay published in Iton Acher entitled “Feminist Rebel”

\textsuperscript{12} 1991

\textsuperscript{13} 1997
Shiran describes the implications of such an analysis with regard to an affirmative action proposal presented to the Knesset. As a member of the Committee for Advancement of Women in Government Services, Shiran found herself in a contradictory position. The proposal called for the advancement of women over men with equal qualifications in top government positions. In the Israeli reality of intersecting ethnic and gender hierarchies however, the first ranks are occupied by Jewish ashkenazi men, and the second ranks by mizrachi men and ashkenazi women. These mizrachi men, Shiran noted, support the households of many mizrachi women. If she supported her “ashkenazi sisters’” struggle for advancement, was she not undermining her own, and other mizrachi women’s economic interests? In advocating such ethnic-blind feminist advantage, was she not contributing for the increasing gap between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim?

Shiran points out that the very definition of the struggle (for advancement in the five highest-ranked government positions) is a reflection of the limited, intra-class and intra-ethnic group nature of the contemporary Israeli feminist political agenda. A committed agenda for equality would have redefined the struggle and extended it for all governmental posts, or placed its priority on middle-range posts where most women, mizrachi as well as ashkenazi, find themselves. Another direction could have been to redefine the criteria for job advancement in ways that will be more inclusive of Mizrahim. Given the gap in formal education between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, a call for more flexible criteria for advancement to top managerial positions (for example, based on track records that demonstrate leadership and creativity, rather than an adherence to certificates and formal education) might advance less academically qualified mizrachi men and women.

In 1991, Shiran led a group of mizrachi feminists who demanded that the feminist movement adopt affirmative action principles in its own ranks and institute a policy of equal representation to mizrachi and Palestinian women. A year later, the system of equal self-representation was extended to lesbians. The entry of significant numbers of non-ashkenazi women into organized feminist circles ushered in a new era in the hitherto elitist feminist discourse. Mizrahi women took an active part in the planning of the ninth Israeli feminist conference and, for the first time, convened mizrachi-centered workshops. Mizrahi feminists invited ashkenazi women to discuss their own position and to explore their (perhaps racist or unexamined) views of Mizrahim.

The heated discussion about the nature of Israeli feminism reached a new, explosive level at the tenth conference when 200 mizrachi lower class women flooded the conference, invited in by the grassroots organization Hila. Israeli feminists were confronted with the question of class and ethnic divisions right in their own “front yard” – during their own yearly convention. Metzad Sheni later published the reflections of several women – mizrachi and ashkenazi – who had participated. Some claimed that they were humiliated by the ashkenazi organizers and that they faced blatant paternalism, such as instructions on what they should and should not discuss in the conference. Tikva Levi, manager of Hila said, “I personally heard paternalistic statements such as: “Don’t speak about your oppression at the hands of the ashkenazi establishment. Focus on your oppression by the hands of mizrachi men.” Vered Krako described the naked hostility between the two groups of women in the following way: “In the conference these (lower-class mizrachi) women met the very women who in their daily lives humiliate and oppress them – the teachers of their children, social workers, psychologists, counselors. These were the women who send their children to special education and vocational schools out of a distorted, racist perception of the mizrachi population.
It is obvious to everyone that (once channeled into such vocational schools) these kids could never attain a higher education or key positions in Israeli society. It is clear that the final product of such early educational channeling is a barely literate child, a drug addict, a prostitute or a juvenile delinquent.”

This volatile encounter between middle-class feminists and lower-class mizrahi women questioned the very claim for a shared feminist agenda. As one mizrahi activist put it, as long as askenazi feminism continues to focus on protesting cliterodectomy in Africa, it will remain irrelevant to mizrahi women and their more pressing agenda. A forum of about ten women, led by Hila activists, decided to organize a separate mizrahi feminist conference in 1996.14

It convened on the second weekend of May at the Green Beach Hotel in Natanya. I attended only a few months after my return to Israel after 17 years of academic exile in the U.S. and was carried away by the euphoria. The conference adopted the motto: “We Are Here And This Is Ours.” Tikva Levi described how she had been ashamed to bring her Iraqi-born mother to previous feminist conferences. “She is a real Arab,” she explained, alluding to the unbecoming, “shameful” connotation such Arab appearance (her mother is a Jew) entails in the dominant Israeli scene. Now, she beamed, she was certain that her mother would not only come but actively participate in workshops.

Henriette Dahan-Kalev put forward the same idea in her opening remarks: “This conference will enable mizrahi women to come here without leaving part of their identity at home. There are no stereotypes here and you don’t need to explain anything or apologize to anyone. For me, this is a dream come true.” Indeed, the conference was a statement of mizrahi assertive feminist voices. About 400 women attended, including Ethiopian, Arab and askenazi women who chose to support the mizrahi agenda. There were workshops on “educating our children,” “the role of mizrahi women in initiating social change,” mizrahi medicine, mizrahi music, and “the unerasable past.” There was a session conducted in Amharic, a workshop on “how to look teachers/clerks/bosses in the eyes” and more. The conference was hailed as a turning point. Elated participants and observers declared that the conference widened the agenda of struggle for equality and redefined the very nature of Israeli feminism. But it also demanded rethinking of several key questions that remained painfully unresolved.

We undertook a deeply conflictual evaluation of the goals and limitations of the mizrahi feminist agenda, identifying the contradictions inherent in identity-based politics. We asked: What is mizrahi feminism? Who has the right to represent it? What is its main agenda and how does it deal with internal divisions along class lines? How does it define itself vis-à-vis Ashkenazim on the one hand, and Palestinians on the other.

Like many other controversial issues, the question of who can articulate and represent the mizrahi voice was raised by Vicki Shiran. Shiran raised the question of representation in her biting comments on an essay published in Metzad Sheni. The author of the essay, Noga Dagan, is an ashenazi activist who was among the organizers of the mizrahi conference. Dagan’s essay attempted to place emerging mizrahi feminist thought within a framework of global feminist trends and theories.

---

14 Tikva Levi noted: “After the 10th feminist conference, a forum of mizrahi women who were interested in exploring their own particular issues among themselves was formed. We are interested in a feminist conference with a mizrahi agenda, one that will explore our history, our daily struggles.” (1995)
Shiran objected to Dagan’s claim to be a “theoretician” of mizrahi feminism: “Who does she represent in her seemingly historical review? What is her identity and politics in the context of her wonderful “politics of identity” thesis? What interest does she serve when she determines that “the concept of mizrahi women is political and not ascriptive? Does she speak on my behalf or on her own?”

Shiran has no doubt that by positing a political, rather than ascriptive definition of the category of mizrahi feminism, Dagan aims to dismantle the mizrahi collective, appropriate its message, and (without identifying herself vis a vis the group) speak in its name. The “Dagan incident” enables us to explore the more general, complex relationships between mizrahi and ashkenazi feminists on the one hand, and between mizrahi intellectuals and the majority of lower-class mizrahi women on the other. It also leads to a questioning of the boundaries of the collectivity defined at the crossing lines of gender and ethnicity.

Dagan is not the only non-mizrahi woman to take part in the discourse and political action related to mizrahi feminism. Tikva Honig-Parnas, the editor of News from Within explained her commitment in the following way: “My mizrahi feminist stand is a political and ideological choice; it is not linked to my ethnic origin. I do not accept the basic claims of the oppressing class I was raised in. My wishes for social change and equality are linked also to the liberation of Mizrahim from their oppression.”

Honig-Parnas explains the political and ideological choices she made as a two-step process: “First I discovered how classic Marxism ignored the subject of women’s oppression, as the concept of “working class” refers actually only to the male worker. That’s how I came to feminism. The second discovery was how the term ‘working class’ in the eyes of the traditional left in the world and in Israel misses the racial dimension. Here in Israel, we saw an abstract (ashkenazi) worker and resolved that as long as the national, Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not resolved, there was no chance of joining the class struggle. All this, while most of the working class is mizrahi, and while one can not distinguish between his class and his cultural-identity oppression. That’s how I became a mizrahi feminist.”

Another ashkenazi conference organizer stated: “I feel tremendously privileged to be part of this gathering, particularly as an ashkenazi woman.” She explained that her work for the mizrahi feminist cause enabled her to act against what she calls “Israeli racism that was inculcated into me.” Prior to the first mizrahi conference, Tikva Levi argued: “Ashkenazi feminists in the general conference wanted to channel the discussion towards issues of ethnic origin. We had objected to that. In fact, half of the organizers of the Mizrahi conference are Ashkenazi. Mizrahi identity is not defined by one’s ethnic origin. If there are women, or men, who in their analysis and their social consciousness are part of our struggle, we will not say no to them. Why should we? On the basis of ethnic origin? This is racism.”

These women make it amply clear that the direction taken by mizrahi feminists in Israel is not towards a rigid, ethnocentric definition of membership. The issue, if we go back to the Dagan Incident, is not one about identity; it is about the right to represent. Shiran is very clear that her criticism of Dagan's essay does not imply that ashkenazi women cannot and should not concern themselves with mizrahi feminist issues. She calls on Dagan to identify herself as a member of the hegemonic group and in relation to mizrahi. Shiran's point resonates with Patricia Hill Collins' ideas. Hill Collins poses the question “Who can be a black feminist?” She rejects the essentialist, ascriptive idea (all African American women are such by virtue of

\[1993:33.\]
biology), but she equally rejects the purely idealist analysis that presents membership as a conscious political choice by any person, regardless of her background, world view and experience. In resolving the tension between these two extreme positions, Hill Collins directs her attention to the centrality of black women intellectuals in producing black feminist thought.

The argument is that the concrete experiences of *mizrahi* and American black women intellectuals as members of specific ethnic, racial, class and gender groups necessarily play a significant role in our understanding of the world. Despite the divisions and variations among us, says Shiran, we share collective memory and a similar historical experience. What is needed at this point is a safe space where we can discuss such history and painful memory, and pose the difficult questions that link our position as oppressed and oppressors.

The call for creating a collective space where *mizrahi* issues can be discussed without the need to explain or apologize was made by several *mizrahi* feminists. Levi articulated the need to find a place where “we can clarify for ourselves what is *mizrahi* feminism.” The workshops planned for the first conference, says Levi, were intended to create a process of consciousness-raising. Similarly, in Shohat’s multi-cultural feminist framework, although people with the right “political identity” can join the group, discussions and clarifications of “our dilemmas” must be carried out in a framework where, in Shohat words;“we would not have to fend off negative images and hostile attacks.” Like Shiran, Shohat sees the need for internal debate as a necessary stage before a more secure *mizrahi* feminist agenda is developed.

The call, therefore, is for developing autonomy of *mizrahi* intellectual thought and not for separation. Autonomy stems from a recognition of internal strength, unlike separation that is motivated by fear. Unfortunately, the hopes that the first *mizrahi* feminist conference would enable internal interrogation and a feeling of empowerment were largely disappointed. Biton, Shiran, Shohat and others lamented that the conference had missed the opportunity of developing an autonomous *mizrahi* voice precisely because of the presence of *ashkenazi* and Palestinian women. “We should not hide behind the broad back of what we call *ashkenazi* women’s racism” Shiran writes in her review of the *mizrahi* conference. “We should begin with an internal discourse that explores racism, paternalism, and dishonesty, this time among ourselves, against our sisters and others.”

The presence of the *ashkenazi* and Palestinian women at the conference, Shiran argues, prevented the emergence of such internal, difficult interrogation because we engaged in battling with these women instead of with our own issues. *Mizrahi* women used *ashkenazi* women in the same way they were used by them in the *Ashkenazi*-centered yearly feminist conferences. “We wanted to ‘show them’ who is in charge here,” claims Shiran. “It was a show of force, not an exchange.” Shohat concurs: “Only an in depth analysis of the non-homogenous nature of the feminist project,” she explains, “can bring about a vital cooperation between diverse women.”

---

16 Where does this leave well-intentioned *ashkenazi* feminists, especially those who actively worked for the *mizrahi* feminist cause? They can certainly join the struggle but from their explicit position as members of their own social and ethnic group. Shohat, like Shiran, adopts a composite model that views ascriptive identity as the basis for a distinctive, political identity. Inspired by the multi-cultural discourse, Shohat speaks about the need for internal work of consolidating a group solidarity. Only once such work is complete, coalitions, based on proper analysis of the connections among gender, class, nationality, race and religion can emerge. Unlike Shohat and Shiran’s views Tikva Parnas-Honig (1996:34) warns that “the politics of identity” and “multiculturalism” might lead to closure, particularism, and reformist politics that might destroy the radical beginnings of the *Mizrahi* organized existence.”
Conference organizers had invited Palestinian women as welcomed guests to rejoice in our shared cultural roots but had not provided any serious platform or decision making role for the Palestinian participants. The issue of Mizrahi-Palestinian relations surfaced when popular singer, Margalit Tzanaani introduced one of her songs with a comment about “Jerusalem – the eternal capital city of the Jews.” Her comment underscored the delicate position of the Palestinian women at the conference and the ambivalence and diverging political views among the mizrahi women. In planning the conference, explained one of the organizers, a conscious choice was made not to discuss the issue of Palestinian nationalism. “We thought it was too early to deal with the issue at this first conference,” said Levi. “One needs to explore these issues in great depth and not with slogans.”

For anyone familiar with the Israeli scene, Levi’s comment and her hesitation to introduce the Palestinian question into the agenda planned for the first Mizrahi-focused gathering are pregnant with contradictory meanings. Was Levi projecting the hegemonic stereotypic views of lower-class Mizraim as “Arab haters” in her choosing to postpone the discussion of the place of Palestinian women in Israeli feminist agenda? Was she trying to skirt the most explosive question about the shared Arabism of Jewish and non-Jewish women?

Although she was criticized on both accounts, I do not share that reading. Says Mira Eliezer, “Let us not forget who lives with the Arabs. Who are we talking about when we say ‘co-existance?’ The Ashkenazim? Shalom Akhshav (Peace Now) people do not live with Arabs. Those who live in the mixed towns are predominately Mizraim. They tell us Mizraim are right-wing while the settlements are peopled mainly by Ashkenazim from the US.” Tikva Levi adds: “We must mention the hypocrisy of Meretz (a left of center party supported mostly by urban and kibbutz middle class Ashkenazim) who argue that Mizraim hate Arabs. It was Meretz who created our cultural denial. We must arrive at an understanding that the enemy is not the Arabs, but those who made us deny our Arabism.”

Be that as it may, the choice not to directly examine Mizrahi-Palestinian relations at the conference backfired. Amal Alsaneh, a Palestinian student of Social Work at Ben-Gurion University wrote, “I felt like a guest, and not like a full participant. The cultural similarities that linked me to the Mizrahi women who invited me did not diminish my sense of alienation. I felt more blocked there than in the general feminist conference of the previous year. I felt oppressed. Yes, it is true that ashkenazi women participate in the oppression of mizrahi women, but the mizrahi women, in their turn, oppress Arab women.”

Several mizrahi activists later concurred that their group had exhibited the same racist attitudes and exclusionary practices towards the Palestinian women they had experienced at the hand of ashkenazi women. Biton expresses this position powerfully: “We know what oppression is better than any group in Israeli society because we are simultaneously oppressors and oppressed,” she writes. “We are oppressed as women and as Frankyiot, as ‘women in need of care,’ as ‘house maids’ as ‘prostitutes’ and more. We are oppressors because we are part of the ruling group as Jewish women and Zionists. If indeed we have managed to rescue a few mizrahi kids from disadvantaged educational paths, we have also succeeded in securing for those children a future as oppressors and military occupiers.”

---

17 in the panel convened prior to the Mizrahi conference Mitzad Shen, April 1996.
18 in her essay “oppressors and oppressed” published in 1996.
With regard to the conference she says: “We might have silenced a few paternalistic ashkenazi women but had not managed to create a situation where an Arab women could openly speak.” Biton, like Shiran, sees the need to examine the mizrahi position as oppressors of Palestinian women not as a weakness but as a necessary step for a stronger, more coherent agenda. The emerging mizrahi feminist discourse will become the most radical and progressive voice in Israeli leftist discourse, projects Biton, only when it fights oppression in all its manifestations – the kind that victimize us and the kind that grant us a privileged position.

Until now, I have not discussed intra-Mizrahi class divisions. Shiran raises the issue in her direct, uncompromising way: “It is easy for us to talk about the ‘ashkenazi boss who exploits her mizrahi maid’ but is the mizrahi boss less exploitative?” The tensions that emerged in the 10th conference were related not only to the large presence of the mizrahi women organized by Hila, but also to their class background. These women who came with many children, feminist organizers argued, saw an opportunity to have a weekend at the beach at a bargain price.

The conference organizers are alleged to have paternalistically proposed to arrange another weekend for these women, with a few workshops thrown in to educate them about feminism. Yet, as Shiran notes with great pain, the woman who made that comment was herself a mizrahi feminist with a middle-class background who has been a veteran activist in the mostly ashkenazi organized feminist movement. Henriette Dahan-Kalev touched on the issue of intra-mizrahi class divisions when she wrote that despite her initial excitement she found the mizrahi conference “populist.” There was a fear among the organizers, contends Dahan Kalev, that abstract discussions about the nature of mizrahi feminist thought might be “above the head” of poor mizrahi women. Such internal “paternalism,” she says, led to “populism” and inhibited a serious discussion about the meaning of mizrahi feminism.

For Shohat, intra-mizrahi class divisions are not an issue. The distinction she makes is between intellectuals and the wider oppressed community. Shohat places at the center a group of committed intellectuals – “those of us who have devoted much time, thought and work to these subjects.” The role of this group is to carry out a thorough analysis of the varied life experiences of women and the links between their various forms of oppressions. Shohat posits a direct and necessary link between a sound analysis of the multiple oppression of a particular group and the strategies for liberation to be adopted by members of that group. Only after performing such analysis can the intellectual offer “the most suitable liberatory strategies” for women (and men) in “our communities.” Another courageous discussion of the questions of representation and intra-mizrahi class relations is offered by Dahan Kalev. In an important essay that was read with great interest by Israeli ashkenazi feminist academics, Dahan Kalev contends that the mizrahi feminist agenda is located at the crossing axis of ethnic and gender-based oppressions. The aim of mizrahi feminist struggles is therefore to empower mizrahi women.

Empowering strategies vary. One, adopted by Hila activists Levi, Eliezer, Krako and others has been to work directly with mizrahi lower-class women at the grass roots, identify their special needs and interests, help develop their own leadership potential, and through such sustained grassroots work enable a process of raising their social and political consciousness. These mizrahi activists have given up hope on mainstream Israeli feminism as a significant arena for social action. The second strategy, chosen by Dahan Kalev, continues to work within the existing ashkenazi-dominated institutional feminist framework. Its main goal
is to secure for mizrahi women their share in the state-generated financial, legal, and political resources allotted to all women and, within this context, raise the mizrahi perspective in every event, working against the invisibility of mizrahi needs and interests.

The emerging mizrahi feminist discourse is a vibrant and courageous discourse. It has faced critical, unresolved issues that underlie the social experience of women in Israel in ways that “mainstream” Israeli feminist discourse has never dared to do. It has brought to the surface the question of the relations between Palestinian and Jewish women in Israel and explored the deep tensions between middle-class, intellectual women on the one hand and working-class, underprivileged women on the other. It has opened up a public discussion that examines the everyday and political implications of working within non-essentialist ethnic definitions of community. Despite its limited range, both in terms of its time, depth, number of intellectual/ activists engaged, and the meager institutional resources available for its production and distribution, the impact of mizrahi feminist intellectual thought on mainstream Israeli feminism has been tremendous.

The annual Israeli mainstream feminist conference has adopted a strict policy known as the “quarter system” to give Palestinian, Lesbian, mizrahi and ashkenazi women equal representation on panels and in workshops. It is widely acknowledged that feminist concerns go beyond the narrow focus on middle-class women issues. Yet little of this dynamism and critical reevaluation has entered Israeli academe to reshape mainstream scholarship. In February of 1997, I outlined some of guidelines that I found essential for the reshaping of future research on and with mizrahi women in Israel.9

The kind of research I hope to encourage is NOT more that “fills in” the glaring gap in our ethnographic knowledge but a radically different kind of research and analysis. I do not want to see more research that documents the “customs” of Moroccan or Yemeni women, but research that examines Israeli social processes and institutions – labor, family, class, politics – from the perspective of the double marginality of mizrahi women. I propose to study mizrahi women from a theoretical perspective, inspired by post-colonial writers and especially by Homi Bhabha, who calls for the rejection of the seemingly natural binarism between center and periphery and opts, instead, for a research strategy that positions itself on the boundaries. Such a research strategy involves an analysis of the historical dynamics that created, fixed and reproduced social categories in Israel from the perspective and daily experience of mizrahi women. From this perspective, the universal Israeli who stands at the center of mainstream Israeli academe is revealed as an ashkenazi male. Once we deconstruct the dominant images that have created the binaries of male/female, east/west, private/public spheres we begin to see beyond the objectification of mizrahi women in Israel. We challenge the conceptual hegemonic structure and the social practices such system enables. Second, there must be a focus on the narratives of all mizrahi women – the stories of factory workers in peripheral towns as well as the story of gaining political consciousness as both mizrahi women and feminists. Understanding the reality of life of all these women must come from their own place and in their own words, not through external concepts and terms. Hill Collins, speaking about African-American women, explains the necessity for such research strategy for subjugated women “Being subjugated to the reality of multiple

---

9 at the 28th meeting of the Israeli Sociological Association
oppressions and distrusting the dominant paradigms of knowledge,” these women “rely on their own experience to survive and to determine what is real and true.” Particular attention must be paid to research methodologies that enable the women to break their silence, to enable them to speak for themselves.

Third, a research strategy that comes out of the double marginality of mizrahi femininity opens more questions about Israeli feminism today because it links the analysis of the intersections of class, gender, power, labor experience and family. Clearly, an analysis that takes only one such line of division – for example gender, and discusses it in distinction from class – leads to a distorted understanding not only a partial one.

REFERENCES LISTED
Azoulay, Katya 1991. “Thoughts on the Failure of Feminist Rhetoric” (Hirhurim al Kishalon HaRitorika HaFeministiti”) Noga
_____. 1992. Pioneers and Homemakers. Albany:
Fridar, Ariel. 1981. “Mothers in need of fostering participation in the Edgar program as a factor for change in the self reference of the woman, the husband to his wife, and the two to their child, his school and the community.” MA thesis, Ramat-Gan: Bar Illan University.
Goshen-Gottstein, Esther. 1966.“Pregnancy-East and West.” New Society


Honig-Parnas, Tikva. 1996. “Reclaiming the Place of ‘Black Feminism,’ ‘Mizrahi Feminism’ and the ‘Socialist Feminism.’ (LeHashavat Kevodam shel ‘HaFeminism HaShahor’; “HaFeminism Hamizrahi,” VeHaFeminism HaSotzialisti.” Metzad Sheni 5-6:34-39. (Hebrew)


Levi, Tikva. 1996. “We are here and this is Ours” Metzad Sheni April 1996(Hebrew)

Laor, Yitshak. 1995. Narratives with no Natives. Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan (Hebrew)


Raz, Rivka 1980. “The participation of mothers in need of fostering in the Etgar program as a factor for change in their self image, their perception of their image by their husbands, and in their views regarding family and child tending issues. MA thesis. Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University.


Shamai, Ronit 1997 “Black Feminism vs. mizrahi Feminism” unpublished paper. Tel Aviv University. 5.4.97
(HaAtzmi shel Nashim meAdoth HaMizrakh) City: Office of the Prime Minister,
Center of Demographic Studies.
in an Israeli Moshav’ Ph.D Dissertation, The University of Chicago.
Shiran, Vicki. 1993.“Feminist Identity vs. Oriental Identity.” In Swirski and Safir, 303-312.
Texas University Press.
_____.1993.“Making the Silences Speak in the Israeli Cinema.” In Swirski and Safir, 31-41.
_____. 1996.“Mizrahi Feminism: The Politics of Gender, Race and Multi-culturalism.”
(Znut BeKerev Yehudim KeTo’aat Levai LeMaavar Metarbut LeTarbut)
Stier, Haya. 1995. “Patterns of Entry into Marriage and Parenthood among Young Israeli Women.”
in Jerusalem” Israel Social Science Research 5, No. 1&2 87-96
Swirski, Barbara. 1991 “Opening the Circle” (Littoah et HaMaagel) Noga, Winter 1991
_____.1993.“Israeli Feminism New and Old” In Swirski and Safir, 285-303.
New York: Teachers College Press.
Ethnology pp 327-340.
JEWSH WOMEN IN MEXICO

by Paulette Kershenovich

Mexico is a country of more than 92 million people, a crossroads between the first and third worlds. “Mexico is so far away from God,” a former Mexican president once mused, “and yet so close to the U.S.” From the poor indigenous “Marías” begging for their livelihood, to young “Gueritas” (little female blondes) in their Versace suits carrying Gucci bags, the women of Mexico are as diverse and contradictory as the environment where they live. Entirely European-descended people account for only about 10% of all Mexicans. Jews do not comprise even one per cent. The immense gap between the culture of the latter two groups and the poor, indigenous population is one of Mexico’s distinct characteristics.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Mexico was not considered a desirable emigrant destination. Of 22 million people that emigrated from the old world to the Americas between 1885 and 1910, only about 116,000 reached Mexico. Jewish immigration reflected that pattern. It is estimated that from 1881 to 1914, more than 2.35 million Jews left their country of birth however only a miniscule number arrived in Mexico. In 1900, Mexico had 134 Jews. Ten years later, the number had risen to only 254.

1 President Porfirio Díaz
2 Maria (after Mary the mother of Jesus.) Since Maria is the most popular name in Mexico for both women and men (second name), this term is applied to women beggars. It also denotes the heavy religiosity in Mexico where 90% of the population is said to be Catholic. On poverty and women, see Mercedes Barquet, “Condicionantes de Género sobre la Pobreza de las Mujeres, [Gender Condition Vants of Poverty and Women],” in Javier de la Torre, et al, La Mujeres en la Pobreza, [Women in Poverty]. (Mexico: Colegio de Mexico, 1994), 73-89.
3 While Indians are still said to represent nearly a quarter of the population, in 1980 there were only slightly more than 5 million people (about 8% of the population) who spoke an Indian dialect and just over one million who spoke only an Indian dialect. Over the last four centuries descendants of Indians and Europeans, sometimes called mestizos (mixed bloods), have become the dominant group in Mexico. Today they account for at least two-thirds and perhaps three-fourths of the total population.
4 There are more than 50 Indian dialects spoken in Mexico. Some of the existing indigenous cultures are: Tlaxcalans, Tarascans, Mixtecs, Chichimecs, Zapotecs, Mayans, Huastecs and Otomis.
7 Dellaperoga and Lerner, 28; Sourasky, 273.
By the end of the 1920s, it is estimated that almost 10,000 Jewish immigrants had arrived in Mexico, coming first from the Ottoman Empire and then from Eastern Europe. By the end of the 1940s, as a result of Holocaust-related and other migrations, the Jewish population had reached 14,167 in a general population of 20 million. Although the number of Jews living in Mexico has been much higher, the current number fluctuates between 50,000 to 55,000 with 49.7% women and 50.3% men. This is because Mexico has traditionally been viewed as a temporary country of residence by immigrant Jews and as well as the changing demographic composition of the new Jewish collective.

Although there are Jewish communities in Monterrey, Guadalajara, Tijuana, Cancun and the Kahal Kadosh Bnei Elohim (Holy Congregation of the Sons of G-d) in Venta Prieta in the state of Hidalgo, this study will focus on Mexico City where 95% of Mexican Jews live.

There are three ethnic groups within this community: the Ashkenazim, the Sephardim and the Mizrahim, (originating mainly in Syria and called Arab by Mexican Jews). The Mizrahim are divided into the Halebis (also called Maguen David) from Aleppo, and the Shamis (also called Monte Sinai) from Damascus. Successive immigrations have had a disruptive effect upon the family, transforming the place of its members and redefining the role of women. Ashkenazi immigrants had experienced secularization and political and ideological liberalization, but the sephardi and mizrahi communities were more traditional and religiously oriented. The extended and patriarchal family constituted an important element of social standing. The traditional profile of values and organization of the community as the space for identity and development was central to the discourse of integration. The older generations have tried to maintain the original profile of an immigrant community while its younger members are continuously questioning that structure.

---

8 The Ottoman Empire had two main areas of Jewish settlement: (1) the Balkans and Turkey; and (2) North Africa, Syria, Palestine and the Arabian peninsula. As a result of the fall of the Ottoman Empire, coupled with the colonial expansion of Europe, the religious tolerance towards non-Muslims ended. This influenced and curtailed Jewish economic activity which had been in full splendor during the previous centuries. The instability and the general deterioration of the Ottoman Empire due to the Young Turks and the law they dictated which obligated all subjects of the Ottoman Empire to serve in the military (no matter their religions), propelled migration. Therefore, Jews fled out of fear that their children’s physical welfare would be threatened. The socio-political configuration of the Ottoman Empire was characterized by collective corporations of millets, a system of governance that placed Jews and Christians under the jurisdiction of their own religious authorities for most legal, social, cultural, and religious affairs. Jews lived confined to mellahs (neighborhoods), where they were subjected to periodic aggression from both Muslims and Christians and were obligated to pay a tax. The census in 1921 did not indicate the number of Jews in the country, since they were grouped in the same category as the Chinese, Israelis and Bundists.

9 Dellapergola and Lerner, 28; Sourasky, 273.

10 Dellapergola and Lerner, 116.

11 Dellapergola and Lerner, 114. The indigenous community in Venta Prieta is said to be descended from the crypto-Jews who hid their true identity and escaped persecution during the Santo Oficio (Holy Tribunal) during the Colony period (1519-1821). Since they do not maintain pure Jewish rituals, they are not recognized by the Central Committee as a sector of the Jewish community in Mexico.

12 Jews in Mexico City live primarily in Polanco (23.6%), Condesa (5.1%), Tecamachalco (22.3%), Herradura (9.6%), Chapultepec (7.1%) and Bosques de las Lomas (14.3%) suburbs in Mexico City. Mexico City now covers an urbanized area of some 15 by 20 miles (24 by 32 kilometers) and the greater metropolitan area occupies 890 square miles (2,310 square kilometers). Despite its already enormous population of 21 million, Mexico City gains more than 350,000 people per year. By the end of the century the city’s population could easily exceed 25 million.

13 39.5% Ashkenazim, 47.4% Sepharadic and Arabic sectors combined, 13.1% unknown or indifferent to their origins. Dellapergola and Lerner, 104.
Though its historical roots can be traced to the re-discovery of the Americas, the contemporary Jewish community in Mexico began with the reign of Porfirio Díaz in 1876.\textsuperscript{14} During his reign, known as the \textit{Porfiriato}, he encouraged foreign investment and attempted to modernize the nation. Diaz accepted bribes in exchange for concessions of land to friends and foreign speculators in order for them to invest and colonize Mexico. This policy, in tandem with the Russian pogroms, the Turkish Revolt, the Balkan War, World War I, and later the Great Depression were the main motives for the immigrations to Mexico. The country was seen largely as a temporary haven, a stepping stone for later immigration to the US.

The most predominant Jewish immigrants were of French and German descent, who were quite close to the governmental élite. This group was composed mostly of emancipated and assimilated Jews, who did not identify themselves as Jews, sometimes married Mexican Catholic women and thus, integrated totally into their new society.\textsuperscript{15} As a result, the early part of the \textit{Porfiriato} cannot be identified with organized Jewish life. Jews negated their identity as a consequence of the Spanish colonial heritage of religious intolerance and the anti-religious stance of the \textit{Republica Retaurada} (Restored Republic) initiated in 1867 and implemented during the \textit{Porfiriato}.\textsuperscript{16} During this regime, more than 95% of rural families became landless and in 1911 a revolt forced Porfirio Díaz into exile in Europe.

By 1900 in Mexico there were 94 male and 40 female Jews who enjoyed full religious freedom.\textsuperscript{17} From 1901 on, a group of Turkish Jews took part in religious services, and in 1904 ashkenazi Jews did the same in a Masonic temple.\textsuperscript{18} However, during the \textit{Porfiriato}, no Jewish schools, no exclusive Jewish cemetery or religious centers existed.

In the last years of the \textit{Porfiriato}, Mexico witnessed a new Jewish presence, one that was endowed with religious fervor. This group of Jewish immigrants lacked economic resources and thus could not invest in government-sponsored projects. Most of the men were shoemakers, furriers, traveling salesmen and tailors. However, the economic needs of the first years dictated the participation of women in these activities as well. In commerce, the family business and in the home, the Jewish women, just as other immigrants, affirmed their importance as breadwinners. The traditional obligation of the Jewish male toward religious study historically allowed women to be economically active. In Mexico, the modification of the masculine stereotype altered the Jewish women's space. The redefinition of their roles was expressed in the strengthening of the home and maternal chores as a privileged feminine sphere.

The 1910 Mexican Revolution and the consequent fall of Díaz brought socio-political and economic instability. Jews had to contend with discrimination and the rise of nationalist sentiments. As a result, the majority of ashkenazi Jews and many other foreigners abandoned the country. The Jewish community was reduced to only 100 families, however 2000 Jews from the Ottoman Empire entered Mexico at this time.\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{16} Krause, chapter 2.


\textsuperscript{18} Carreño, 29; Krause, 113.

\textsuperscript{19} Seligson, 153.
The acquisition of a Jewish cemetery and the reorganization of the Benevolent Society of the *Alianza Monte Sinai* in 1912 were significant steps in the development of future community organization. Establishing the cemetery demonstrated the intention of staying in Mexico. A plot of land on Justo Sierra Street was purchased in order to build a synagogue. Then, between 1917 and 1920, thousands of Jews from Russia, Poland, Lithuania, the Balkans and the Near East reached Mexico. They soon saw the necessity of creating a *Talmud Torah* in order to educate their children in the Jewish tradition. The language of instruction was Arabic. It was not until 1939 that it was replaced by Spanish and girls were admitted.

The wave of immigration that would comprise the bulk of the Jewish collective was initiated in 1921 as a consequence of U.S. immigration quotas. These quotas obliged potential immigrants to redirect themselves to neighboring countries and take up residence for at least two years prior to entering its territory. As a result, more and more Jews stayed in Mexico. In October 1924, the vigorously anti-Church President-Elect Plutarco Elías Calles publicly invited Jewish immigrants to come into the country, offering them government assistance.

The resulting immigration developed a large sphere of Jewish organizations that reflected the forms of collective Jewish identity: the *Radie Zadek* and *Maguen David Synagogues*; the *Young Men's Hebrew Association*; and the *I.L. Peretz Farein*, the first institution of Jews from Eastern Europe. Later renamed the *Kultur Gesellschaft* (Cultural Society), it published the first Jewish paper *El Mecsikaner Idishn Lebn* (Jewish Life in Mexico) and set-up a theater. In 1927, the *Kultur Gesellschaft* was again reorganized and was renamed the *Radicaler Arbet Teenter* (Radical Workers' Center) to reflect its composition of workers, industrialists and merchants from the radical left. Another institution of similar Bundist leanings was the *Jungt Gesellschaft* (Young Jewish Society) founded in 1921.20

Jewish men began to open fixed open-market stalls, merchant stores and small enterprises. Women worked in hat production, selling products at open stalls in the local markets, as seamstresses, housekeepers, or with their husbands. As Jews gradually attained more wealth, they began to give their money to religious centers, schools and institutions. Most women now attended elementary school and some even finished.

During this period of intense immigration, no organization assisting the immigrants existed. In 1922, the *Comité de Damas* (Women's Committee) was formed to address this issue. It provided job placements, medical care, loans, housing, dental clinics, education, and moral support. It also dealt with women's protection in case of abandonment or abuse.21 At this time, North American Jewish organizations such as the *B'nai B'rith* supported the development of Jewish life in Mexico by easing some of the financial burdens caused by immigration. Immigrants began to be received in the Veracruz Port by a representative who helped them obtain housing, food, and other help. *B'nei B'rith* maintained a hospital, hostel and soup-kitchen, and distributed care packages that were donated by the first immigrants.22 Women comprised the majority of the *B'nei B'rith* membership and played an important role in this endeavor. This wave

---


21 Headed by Lily Sourasky, Lily Rader, Clara Weinstock, Libnick, and Verlinsky. Sourasky, 137.

22 Sourasky, 132, 143-145.
of immigration started to decrease due to the world economic depression, and Law of Immigration of May 1929, which prohibited temporary entry to foreign workers. This produced a hostile attitude towards immigration during the 1930s.

The 1930s were difficult years for Jews in Mexico. The first organized attack against Jews occurred in the Lagunilla Market in 1931. Later the pro-Nazi Acción Revolucionaria Mexicana (Revolutionary Mexican Action) and their Camisas Dorados (Golden Shirts) continued the anti-Semitic campaign by demonstrating against, boycotting and attacking Jewish businesses. Jews were charged with taking jobs from local workers. The national press portrayed Jews as expendable. Anti-Jewish demonstrations were staged in many states of Mexico with the support of the Catholic hierarchy through its Cristero movement. Such circumstances discouraged immigration. Some Jews abandoned the country. However, the election of General Lazaro Cardenas in 1934 changed the politics of the nation and relegated anti-Semitism to the periphery where it has remained. Cardenas developed a vigorous modernization plan, redistributed land, built rural schools, nationalized the petroleum industry and strengthened the unions. But in 1937, the Senate approved the Population Law which limited immigration to 100 persons yearly from Poland or Rumania, with exceptions for political refugees or by Presidential decree alone. In that way, 400 people arrived in Mexico from Casablanca. By 1939, it was estimated that 400 families from Germany and Austria, and 200 from Poland and Russia immigrated to Mexico. This began a major wave of wartime immigration.

In the sephardi and mizrahi sectors, men worked in small businesses; in the ashkenazi sector, they worked in light industry. When a comfortable standard of living was attained, Jewish women returned to the private domain. In the 1930s, few women studied in the university. They participated on an individual level in all sectors (e.g., political, educational and cultural) towards the 1940s. They were instrumental in consolidating associations of mutual assistance and charity and they developed activities in cultural and social spheres.

During this time, we see the emergence of women's benevolent societies. Most were comprised of women from the ashkenazi sector, mainly on the political left, beginning with the Commission of Women in 1932. It helped men and women develop administrative skills, get job placements, and conduct vigils for the dead. The charity committee Fröien Farein (Yiddish – Women's Union) was created in 1932 to solve the economic problems that afflicted Jewish families. The Damas Pioneras (Pioneer Women) founded in 1935 by Sophie Udin followed close behind. Pioneer Women were the first to initiate assistance to battered women. Then the Feminine Union of the Monte Sinai established the Bikur Holim (Visit of the Sick) Benevolent Society in 1936, to care for the sick and gather funds for medicines. The Women's International

---

23 Anti-Semitism was initially sparked by debates surrounding the immigration quotas of the 1920s and nationalist sentiments during the Porfirato. The Anti-Chinese and Anti-Jewish Leagues were the first anti-Semitic groups in Mexico. A rightist nationalist campaign was promoted in the early thirties by President Pascual Ortiz Rubio with the ideology of local insurgency compounded by economic depression, rising anti-religious and Nazi tendencies.

24 An off-shoot of the Nazi youth movement, it dissolved in 1936. See interviews with Clara Gurvich and Sonia Zack in Testimonios de Historia Oral; [Testimonies of Oral History], [Mexico: Hebrew University in Jerusalem, 1990], 81, 149.


26 Some organizations such as the Israeli Youth Anti-Fascist League – (La Liga Juvenil Antifascista Israelita and the Israeli Chamber of Commerce and Industry – Cámara de Comercio y Industria Israelita, 1938) that resisted anti-Semitism from European roots as well as the Mexican home-grown and lobbied against the government to restrict the arrival of Jews.
Zionist Organization (WIZO) established a branch in 1938, followed by the Comité Central de Damas (Central Ladies Committee) in 1941. Among the main activities were the raising of funds for public schools, shelters for the homeless, food distribution among the poor, and the pledging of scholarships. The Comité Femenino de Damas Auxiliares del Centro Medico OSE (Feminine Committee of Auxiliary Ladies of the Medical Center OSE or DACEM) helped the sick and needy with free medical supplies and services. It donated funds and a summer house for needy children. Some of the general activities women participated in the 1940s were gathering handicrafts for charity, volunteering at the Red Cross, and distributing clothes among needy gentiles.

Modesty required a Jewish women to work at her husband’s side if her work was needed outside the home. Mixing with the indigenous population was discouraged unless it was associated with charity work. Partly due to economic necessity, and partly due to the modesty factor, most women did not finish high school and even fewer attended university. Women were married-off relatively young (usually before the age of twenty). Those who wished to study could attend the Jewish Seminar for Hebrew and Yiddish Teachers founded in 1947, which did not require a high school diploma, allowed married women with children to attend with ease, and sheltered single women from indigenous men. Most of these women went on to teach in the nascent Jewish schools, which were run by men.

The Jewish community of the 1940s reflected the full spectrum of trends and institutions – Bundist and socialist, Zionist and non-Zionist, ORT, Yivo or Ivo (Idisher Visenshafteljezer Institute or the Jewish Scientific Institute), the Worker’s League of Israel, the Kultur Tzenter (Yiddish Cultural Center), and the Hilfs Farein (Union of Help) to name a few. The youth (15-30 year olds) also formed the Comité Juvenil del Colegio Israelita (Spanish-Youth Committee for the Israeli School), the Cultural Renaissance Group Oif Lebung (Yiddish-Live Life), the Youth Chapter of Kultur Tzenter (Cultural Center), the Sports Organization Macabi, the Zionist youth movement Hanoar Hatzair, Yung Gesbir (Young Society-1935), the Pro-Hospital Youths, the Unión y Progreso (Spanish-Union and Progress) Group (1932), and The Arabic Youth Club Maguen David among others.27

---

27 This period of institution building marked the end of this period of search and thus became the foundation for the Jews of Mexico and was espoused by the Kehilah Nidje Israel (The Community of the Exiles of Israel, religious Ashkenazi-1922); Talmud Torah of Nidje Israel and from this evolved the Yidishe Shule or El Nuevo Colegio Israelita (Yiddish-The New Israeli School-1924). Agudat Ahim (Hebrew-Union of Brothers) and Tiferet Israel (Hebrew-Israeli Pride) also founded in the twenties, were the religious congregations of the Jews from Galitza and Poland, and the Zionist organization Poalei Tzion (Hebrew-Workers’ of Zion) were also founded. The representative institution of the community formed in 1932 was the Federación de Comunidades (Federation of Communities) and was renamed two years later Unión de Comunidades (Spanish-Union of Communities). In 1938, the Comité de Refugiados (Spanish-Refugee Committee) was organized which later became the Comité Central (Central Committee) on 9 November 1938 and since 1942 was legally responsible for representing the Jewish community to the Mexican government. Originally it dealt with resolving the problems of the World War II refugees and to counter-attack the anti-Semitic campaign through its Comité Unido de anti-difamación (Spanish-United Anti-Defamation Committee) which gave way to the establishment of the Tribuna Israelita (Israeli Tribunal). Currently, the Central Committee is comprised of seven sectors of the Jewish community, according to their place of origin: (1) Alianza Monte Sinai (Damascus-1912 and 1935); (2) Sedaka Umarpé (Help and Assistance - Aleppo -1909 and 1937); (3) UniÜn Sefaradi (Turkey, Balkans, Greece and Italy -1924 and 1943); (4) Hatikvá-Menorá (Central Europe - 1938); (5) Emuna (Hungary-1942); (6) Beth Israel Community Center (US-1953); and (7) Kehilla Nidje Israel (Eastern Europe -1922 and 1957). Each one has its own educational, social and recreational centers.
In 1950, the Centro Deportivo Israelita (the Israeli Sports Center) was founded to provide a space for integration and development of sports, art, culture and Jewish communal life in Mexico. The CDI became the focal point not only for social activities but for social integration and exists today: WIZO and Na’amot hold their annual bazaars and meetings there. Women organized elderly activities, “Baby and Me” gymnastics groups, and charity luncheons. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s women continued these activities and began to help Israel with funds, clothing, and medicines. The Ladies’ Committee now worked closely with the Israeli Benevolent Society. Women not only demanded to be heard, they challenged the status quo by pushing the religious authorities in their own sectors. As their challenges were met and their standard of living improved, women gradually became more empowered through better access to education and exercising leadership roles within the general Jewish community.

The 1980s brought socio-economic instability for the Jewish population. Mexico was wracked by severe inflation and an enormous foreign debt, which culminated in the 1982 economic crisis. Then, in 1985, a powerful earthquake killed an estimated 5,000 to 20,000 persons, left more than 100,000 homeless, and caused 4 billion dollars in damage. Jewish women under the auspices of Na’amot, WIZO and CMMI helped organize emergency relief funds and volunteered at centers of distribution and aid. Many Jews were severely affected by the crisis and the slump following the earthquake and many fled Mexico. However, the situation was not severe enough to deprive Jews of their now customary high standard of living. Jews, for the most part, still employed two or three housekeepers, had more than two cars per household, took annual trips abroad and generally enjoyed a lavish lifestyle.

Another severe financial crisis hit Mexico in December of 1994. This crisis triggered the deepest recession in Mexican history. The standard of living for the Jewish community has gradually dropped and Jews are now facing situations that were previously foreign. They include having to take out a mortgage on a home as opposed to paying in cash, postponing higher education, limiting trips abroad, and having women and teenagers work to help support the family. Working outside the home as well as obtaining a university education has become common for Jewish women. Pursuing a higher education is no longer restricted by societal norms but by economic considerations.

28 In 1950, fifteen youths (Jose Belkind, Jaime Dorotinsky, Samuel Dultzin, Moises Derzavich, Carlos Fishbein, Isaac Grabinsky, Rosendo Gervitz, Moises Gitlin, Fernando Katz, Jacobo Krumholtz, Felipe Libnic, Jose Steider, Edmundo Stern, Carlos Szapiro and Maz Udinsky) along with 250 other founding members established a collective center. Some prominent women athletes that participated in various Olympics were: Linda Bejar, 1968 Mexico, Fencing; Tamara Oynick, 1968 Mexico, Swimming; Deborah Weill, 1976 Montreal, Diving; Hellen Plaschinski, 1980 Moscow, Swimming and Marlen Bruten, 1988 Seoul, Swimming.

29 with the country’s GDP falling nearly 7% in 1995. More than $50 billion in international loans and a government austerity plan announced on 9 March 1995 combining spending cuts with tax increases were designed to help the economy out of recession. Hoping to stop the free fall of the peso and the Mexican economy along with it, President Ernesto Zedillo’s government announced a tough austerity plan designed to control inflation and move the economy quickly out of recession. The plan unveiled by Finance Minister Guillermo Ortiz increased gasoline prices by 35% and electricity costs by 20%, with more increases in the price of the two state-produced commodities planned for later in the year. In addition, the plan raised the national value-added tax from 10% to 15% and increased the minimum wage by 10%. With an estimated inflation rate of 42%, and the nation’s GDP expected to decline by 2% in 1995, the Zedillo administration hoped that its harsh stabilization plan would help the Mexican economy get on the road to recovery.
A college degree is very much a passport to social mobility in Mexico. Most Jewish women who want to study and are able to afford to do so attend university but usually obtain only a Bachelor of Arts since higher degrees are seen as deterrents to marriage. Most marry during the course of completing their academic degree. Today, 22.5% of Jewish men and women actually complete a BA. Only 7.6% attend graduate school. Professionals and academics are more common among ashkenazi women; their number is increasing slowly in the sephardi and mizrahi communities.

Marriage is viewed in Mexican-Jewish culture as a requirement for happiness, and it is expected of women. Women who are not married by a certain age are highly stigmatized. It is readily assumed that they are socially unfit, lesbian, mentally disturbed, unattractive, promiscuous or too highly educated. Exceptions are made if a tragedy occurred in the family during those marriageable years, or if the woman lived or studied abroad and just re-entered the community. Once married, woman are torn between a home life and a public one. Women are able to work outside the home as long as they do not negate their familial duties.

Once they have settled into married life most women employ housekeepers, who are seen as their liberators from domestic chores, and as status symbols. Some Jewish women even employ more than one maid, as well as a cook, nanny and chauffeur. However, despite ample time for study, few engage in their field of study. An average of 18.1% of all Jewish women are housewives, but this figure is higher in the Monte Sinai (25.8%) and lower in the ashkenazi (15.2%) sectors. There is a small percentage of young women who work while married, primarily due to the new economic conditions that resulted from the economic crash. Older women, who traditionally do not have any formal education, work together with their husbands while the younger generation is employing their once-forgotten degrees. Younger women tend to be employed in Jewish education, graphic design, writing or managing stores.

Although there is much research and writing carried out by Jewish women, there is no scholarly research on Jewish women in Mexico, only small accounts contained in greater studies of the Mexican Jewish community. A Jewish Studies master’s or diploma is offered at the Iberoamericana University (UIA) and in the Hebraica University, a Jewish institution sponsored by the Kehillah Ashkenazi Community. Women’s Studies in Mexico began in 1983 with the establishment of the first Interdisciplinary Women’s Studies university program at The Colegio de Mexico. Since 1990 it has been offered at the graduate level. The

---

30 Of the fewer than 50 universities in the country, 20 percent are located in Mexico City; and a staggering high percentage of university students – perhaps more than 80 percent – are in the city. This helps to maintain a socio-economic imbalance in educational levels that greatly favors the middle and upper classes. Dellapergola and Lerner, 118.

31 Dellapergola and Lerner, 118. Some exceptions did exist: Elizabeth Glantz (73) studied medicine in the 1920s; Gucha Bielak, studied medicine and Ruth Ferry (63) became a gynecologist in the 1930s; Mira Yasonovsky, Dentist; Sara Dumont, Pediatrician; Henriette Begun, Gynecologist-obstetric; and F. Yavits, Pediatrician, all in 1950; Esther Aliphas (30) became a psychologist in 1962; Architect Sara Topelson de Grinberg was women of the Year in 1996; in the literary world: Sara Sefchovich, Gloria Gervits (70), Miriam Moscona, Esther Seligson, Sabina Berman, Margo Glantz, Rosa Nissan. Ethel Krauze. Numbers in parenthesis indicate the pages in Historia Oral, where their interviews and others can be found.

32 Among the Jewish-Mexican population between the ages of 15-24: 79.4% single; 20.3% married, 25-34: 84.2% are married; 35-44: 89.3% are married.

33 Dellapergola and Lerner, 119.
Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM) developed a research area on Women, Identity and Power in 1983 and since 1994 has offered it at the graduate level. In 1992, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) established the Gender Studies Program, and two years later the UIA developed one as well.

The Jewish women's institutions that still exist are the CMMI, Fröien Farein, ORT, Na'amat, B'nei Brit, WIZO and the sisterhood organizations from various institutions such as the Keren Hayessod (National Fund for Palestine). Na'amat women have volunteered for the General Hospital Manuel Gea González, the Red Cross, disaster relief, the pre-school Ponciano G. Padilla, and have campaigned arduously concerning violence against women. More than seventy per cent of Jewish women contribute to Jewish communal organizations in a significant way and 15.3% are directly involved in their administration on a voluntary basis. They are actively involved in charity or Zionist organizations (67.2% of the Jewish population in Mexico consider themselves to be Zionist).

The political status of Jewish women remains low. They are generally not active in politics and unaware of the political circumstances surrounding them.

There is a growing apathy in the Ashkenazi community concerning religious life. The Magen David are 18% Orthodox, 33.8% Conservative, 44.5% Traditional, 1.3% Reform, 2.3% non-religious. The Monte Sinai are 6.1% Orthodox, 32.5% Conservative, 56.4% Traditional, 1.2% Reform, 1.8% non-religious. The Sephardim are 14.6% Conservative, 70.7% Traditional, 2.4% Reform, 11.4% non-religious, and community religious observance is usually adhered to. Nevertheless, 88.7% of all Jews appear in synagogue only during the high holidays. Most deeply identify with their Jewishness but not with their religiosity.

The community is very close-knit and unified in its Jewish identity. Nearly 90% of the children belong to a youth movement and nearly 75% support and participate in the community. Most Jews in Mexico consider themselves Jews first and Mexicans second. This bond is due to their isolation within the greater Mexican Catholic culture. Jews in Mexico for the most part do not mix with other Mexicans. The intermarriage rate is a low 3.1%. Most children attend one of the nine Jewish schools. These do not include the six Kollelim (Orthodox higher institutes of learning) or two Yeshivot prominent in the Orthodox community.

---

34 Dellapergola and Lerner, 126-127.
35 Dellapergola and Lerner, 128.
36 One notable exception is Maria Elena Nahmad (Secretaria del Medio Ambiente, Recursos y Pesca, [Secretary of the Environment, Resources and Fishing]). For a study on socio-political participation of women in Mexico, see Anna Fernández Poncelsa (ed.), Participación Política de Las Mujeres en México, [Political Participation of Women in Mexico]. (Mexico: EL Colegio de México, 1995).
37 This community is now comprised of 6.3% Orthodox; 19% Conservative; 56.3% Traditional 5.6%; Reform, 10.8%; non-religious; 1.0% other members.
38 Dellapergola and Lerner, 117.
39 Colegio Israelita or Yidishe Shule (Israeli School) - 1924 (reorganized as the New Colegio Israelita in 1950), Yahvne - 1942, Tarbut - 1942, I.L Peretz School or Naye - 1950, Atid – only elementary, and Beit Ha'yleladim – only elementary (Ashkenazi); Colegio Hebreo Sepharadi (Sephardi Hebrew School) - 1945 (Sephardi); Monte Sinai - 1942, and Maguen David - 1950 (Arabic).
To conclude, the Jewish community is isolated from the general Mexican culture. Most young Jewish men and women live in a sheltered bubble until they reach university where they discover a kaleidoscope of cultural and religious views. After their bubble has burst, a series of questions arise about the kind of society that they inhabit. For most, university is the first place where they have come into contact with non-Jewish intellectual circles and where their ideas can be debated and refuted. For men, this experience leads to sexual encounters with non-Jewish women and the potential of fatherhood. For women it is a phase of de-flowering and the possibility of bringing shame upon the family. If a man dates a non-Jewish woman it is neither encouraged or discouraged unless he fathers a child.

If a woman dates a non-Jewish man, it is totally frowned upon and seen as a blemish on her social standing. A woman’s sexual activity outside of marriage, if discovered, weighs heavily upon her family’s honor. For men, it is seen and dismissed as boyish fun. The sexual differences that exist today are only small indicators and reminders of the traditional nature and history of the Jewish-Mexican community. Religion and traditional Jewish values are a basic component of a collective identity and as a catalyst for behavioral patterns of Jews in the greater Mexican non-Jewish culture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Interviews
Frida Shwartz, Personal Interview. 1 October 1998.

Books and Articles
Bibliografia de Cursos, Seminarios y Talleres del Programa Interdisciplinario de Estudios de la Mujer (PIEM) [Bibliography of Courses, Seminars and Workshops of the Interdisciplinary University Program], Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 1996. [Spanish]


Harris, Victor. *The Jews in Modern Mexico.* Los Angeles: Howe and Campbell, 1907 


Sourasky, Leon. *Historia de la Comunidad Israelita de México, 1917-1942,* [History of the Israeli Community in Mexico, 1917-1942]. Mexico, 1965. [Spanish] 


ISRAELI WOMEN AND HEALTH

by Susan Sered

Writing this paper, I find myself wearing two hats that I have never before worn at the same time. I am writing both as an anthropologist who studies gender in Israeli society and as a women’s health activist. I am one of the founding members of the Israel Association for the Advancement of Women’s Health, the first feminist organization in Israel dedicated solely to improving the health status of Israeli Jewish and Arab women.¹

The theme that I will address, wearing each of these hats in turn, is why Israeli women make so many visits to the doctor, why they are hospitalized so often, why they complain of so many chronic illnesses, and why the life expectancy of Israeli women is among the shortest of women in the western world. But before I begin, I want to draw you into my anthropological way of thinking about the body.

Anthropologists understand the body to be not only a biological entity but also a cultural construct. We take seriously the notion that cultural patterns and practices and social arrangements and beliefs actually shape the body. Rituals in which the body is flamboyantly modified (such as brit milah) are perhaps the clearest expression of this notion, but other sorts of patterns and arrangements, such as preferential feeding of male or female children, fashions in clothing, ideas regarding beauty, modes of employment, and medical practices, to name just a few examples, also give form to the individual body. When anthropologists use the word “body politic” we mean it literally! The body both represents political arrangements and is shaped by them.

With this conceptual framework in mind, I would like to share with you some data concerning the health status of Israeli women. Israeli women, consistent with the pattern found throughout developed societies, visit family doctors 20% more often than men in all but the youngest, zero-four age group. Women visit medical specialists 60% more often than men do, and in the 2544 year old group, they visit medical specialists twice as often as men do. Hospitalization rates for women are 33% higher than for men.² These kinds of numbers suggest that Israeli women, like other western women, are sick more often than men are sick, despite, on the average, living several years longer than men do. Women report a higher overall rate of six of the most common chronic diseases – diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, ulcers, asthma, and hypertension – which women suffer from at 1.5 times the rate that men do.³ Israel also has a high rate of breast cancer and women’s mortality rates from cancer are comparatively high, while Israeli men’s mortality

¹ My argument in this paper appears in a more developed form in Susan Sered, What is Making Women Sick: Gender and Authority in Israeli Society, University Presses of New England (forthcoming).
² The statistics cited in this paper have been provided by the Israel Association for the Advancement of Women’s Health. The IAAWH can be reached at POB 46155, Jerusalem, 91460. Contributions are being sought to help fund a range of exciting programs aimed at improving the health of all Israeli women. The Israel Women’s Network has collected statistics on women’s health in a 1998 publication entitled Women in Israel: A Collection of Data and Information, edited by Nira Reiss.
³ Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, Avorva et al 1996
rates from cancer are comparatively low.\textsuperscript{4} In other words, the issue at stake is not physiological women’s bodies are not less “hardy” than men’s bodies, but rather social: something in the way that social life is organized seems to make women sick.

The kinds of explanations that have been offered by scholars (see Doyal for a review of the literature) to explain the higher rates of illness among women include: women’s double work load inside and outside of the house (a workload that often includes long-term care of small children, handicapped family members, and aging parents or in-laws); sustained discrimination against women, especially the economic discrimination that leads to the feminization of poverty in much of the world; cultural patterns of defining women’s normal physiological processes (such as pregnancy and menopause) in pathological terms, thereby encouraging women to see themselves as not healthy and to seek out expert medical advice during numerous stages in the normal life cycle; cultural images of women as weak (these images can become a self-fulfilling prophecy); cultural ideas of women’s beauty that translate into harmful physical practices (such as extreme dieting, wearing high-heeled shoes); and, finally, depression (rooted, it is suggested, in the “unfairness” of a woman’s life in a male dominated society, in suppressed anger, or in low self-esteem) which is manifested through physical and psychological symptoms.\textsuperscript{5}

All of these patterns are present in Israeli culture, and all help explain why Israeli women, like their counterparts in other western societies, are so often sick.

But there is at least one number that leads us to think in a more particularistic way about the unique experiences of Israeli women. While Israeli women, like women throughout the western world, live longer than men, the gender gap in Israeli life expectancy is only 3.6 years for Jews (1.5 for Arabs). This is HALF (or one quarter) the gender gap among Americans and most of the developed world. Thus, in 1996, the life expectancy of Israeli women was 79.9 years (compared to an average of 80.7 years for women in the EU countries; and the life expectancy of Israeli men was 76.3 compared to 74.0 for men in the EU countries. The gender gap in life expectancy has also been found to be smaller among Israeli Jews than among Jews in Montreal (the one North American population for whom reliable comparative statistics are available), indicating that environmental or cultural rather than genetic factors are responsible for the poor health profile of Israeli woman.\textsuperscript{6}

The question that frames this paper is: Why does the life expectancy of Israeli women rank only 13th to 15th in the world (there are slight variations from year to year) while the life expectancy of Israeli men is among the highest in the world, ranked second or third, following only Japan, Canada, and Sweden? The long life expectancy of Israeli men suggests that the Israeli semi-socialized health care system is, at least, adequate (on a personal note, having spent the past year in the U.S. I can affirm that the Israeli health care system is in many ways superior to the American, both in terms of universal coverage and ease in accessing the system). The answers seem to lie in cultural patterns of gender rather than in the health care system itself.\textsuperscript{7}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{4} Hoffman and Avgar 1998

\textsuperscript{5} A good overview of these issues can be found in Lesley Doyal, \textit{What Makes Women Sick: Gender and the Political Economy of Health}, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick NJ 1995.

\textsuperscript{6} See Shatenstein and Kark, 1995

\textsuperscript{7} A good comparative discussion of women’s health in Israel can be found in Eileen Hoffman and Amy Avgar, “Women’s Health in Israel and the United States: A Cross-Cultural Perspective,” \textit{Journal of Gender-Specific Medicine} 1(2): 44-51.
\end{footnotesize}
A first piece of information that can help us out is research such as William Skinner’s brilliant study of Tokugawa, Japan that shows that patriarchy, in the sense of significant and systematic power differentials between men and women, is unhealthy for women: when there is a significant power differential between men and women, women’s life expectancy falls.⁸

Israeli society is characterized by systematic power differentials between men and women. The top echelons of government and the business sector are intertwined with the top echelons of the Israel Defense Forces, an institution that openly and systematically excludes women from positions of power and prestige, and that valorizes male bodies, bonding and authority. The gross underrepresentation of women in government and in the high ranks of private industry are an easy-to-measure gauge of women’s relative powerlessness in Israeli society.

A second piece of the picture is that Israeli women have more children than women in other western countries. Israel’s notoriously high natality rate is not spread evenly among the population: Arab women, ultra-orthodox women, and women of non-European ethnic groups are pregnant more often and raise more children than highly educated, secular, Jewish women of European backgrounds. But even among well-educated women, the fertility picture is complex. I would like to share with you some of the information that the Israel Association for the Advancement of Women’s Health collected by means of a questionnaire published in one of Israel’s most popular women’s magazine – At – of August 1996.⁹

The questionnaire, that was completed and returned by 839 women, asked for a wide range of health and life style information. The results offer interesting perspectives on these issues. First, the women who filled out the questionnaire were overwhelmingly middle-class, married, and well-educated (60% had completed more than 12 years of school). Almost all worked outside the home in some capacity (although their average incomes were a third less than the average incomes of Israeli men). Approximately two-thirds of the women were mothers; the average number of pregnancies was 3.4, and average number of births 2.5.

More than a quarter of the women had been pregnant five or more times. One in three women reported at least one miscarriage, and one in four reported at least one abortion. These numbers become even more significant when we learn that almost one in eight married women reported having undergone fertility treatment. Indeed, Israel has one of the highest (if not the highest) rate of IVF (In Vitro Fertilization) in the world. What these numbers suggest is that Israeli women spend a great deal of their lives not only raising children (alongside other responsibilities) but also worried about, dealing with, stressed from, and in medical treatment for fertility “problems” of one sort or another. Israel’s maternal mortality rate is low by international standards: it is not childbirth as a purely physiological matter at issue here. Rather, I am talking about cultural constructions that construe the female body, and especially the female reproductive system, as problematic and in need of repeated or ongoing medical attention.

Let me continue this train of thought, taking a slightly different tack. We have a great deal of documentation showing that, cross-culturally women around the world work more hours per week than men, and that

---


⁹ The results of the survey were published in the January 1997 issue of At, in an article by Amy Avgar and Carol Gordon.
women's overwork causes poor health. Israeli women are employed outside the home, have more children than women in any other 'first world' country, and tend to be responsible for aging parents and often in-laws. (In the At magazine survey, approximately one third of the married women also cared for aging parents or a handicapped family member). Yet I think that overwork alone is probably too simplistic an explanation for poor health. We all know that when we are busy at work that we enjoy and for which we feel appreciated and are adequately renumerated, we feel good (and, in fact, studies in the U.S. show that full-time housewives complain of worse health than women who work outside the home). The issue has to do with the nature and the social location of women's work.

Research carried out by social psychologists shows that people employed in positions in which they have lots of responsibility but little authority tend to suffer from higher rates of poor health. Nurses are the classic case. Nurses bear incredible responsibility for the lives and well-being of their patients, yet have almost no authority regarding decisions about diagnosis, treatment, or type of care. Indeed, the health profile of nurses is consistently poor.10

Lots of responsibility and little authority characterizes the lives of many Israeli women. Women are “equal” citizens (that is, responsible for taxes, encouraged to vote, etc.), yet they have almost no authority regarding ultimate decisions affecting the Israeli nation (for example, the “security” question). Women are grossly under-represented in the Knesset, and especially under-represented (perhaps not represented would be more accurate) in security forums and IDF decision making bodies.

Even in the arena of life in which Israeli women gain much supposed esteem – natality – the same pattern holds. Women are responsible for producing children, but the first system to which Israeli women turn for help, the health care system, is authoritarian. Doctors are paternalistic and women feel powerless regarding their own health. Moreover, Israel has one of the highest rates of IVF treatments in the world, indicating that even in the project of maternity many women are highly dependent upon a male-dominated medical elite that holds a monopoly upon “esoteric” treatments seen as having an almost magical power to give women their much-desired babies. Significantly, the provision of the Israeli government requires all Sick Funds to provide unlimited fertility treatment up to two live births. That mandatory “basket of services” does not, however, include contraception.

The second system to which Israeli women turn for help with health matters, the religious system, is equally authoritarian. For example, extraordinarily high rates of women turn to rabbis for help with fertility issues. The help that rabbis offer (blessings, prayers, and amulets) reflect a hierarchical world view in which God is the ultimate authority. Rabbis and other holy men share in some of that authority, but women have no authority whatsoever. The typical model of interaction between the sick or infertile woman and the Rebbe, rabbi or saint, is hierarchical and dogmatic: The holy man gives orders regarding which doctors to consult, which prayers to say, which mitzvot (religious commandments) to observe.

10 See Doyal, pp. 168-169.
In short, I would suggest that the unhealthy position of holding responsibility without authority is an overarching theme in the lives of Israeli women: Praised for their fecundity, expected to be able to raise their children to be healthy, well functioning adults, women in reality struggle to keep their own children alive in the face of disease, war and terrorism.

The intensive and extensive authority of both doctors and rabbis in matters concerning women's bodies is, in fact, a reflection of a much larger issue. Women's bodies in Israel are culturally defined as belonging to the collectivity as much, if not more, than to women themselves. First, women in Israel are urged to contribute to the national enterprise by having children. The government rewards women for having children with a “ma'anak leda” or childbirth grant (enough money to purchase basic baby items) and by publicly depicting women who are mothers to large families as national heroes. The discourse is explicit: Israeli Jewish women should dedicate their bodies to replacing the six million Jews lost in the Holocaust and to bearing and raising children who will be the next generations of citizens, mothers, and soldiers.

Second, women's bodies are constantly introduced into public discourse in Israel. The most obvious examples concern disputes between secular society and orthodox society over women's “modesty.” Newspapers report endless conflicts over women in trousers or short-sleeved blouses working in government buildings located in or near ultra-orthodox neighborhoods and rabbinical rulings concerning appropriately modest hair coverings or stockings for women. All women are now required to wear “modesty scarves” to walk through the passageway next to the Western Wall.

Third, a close look at Israel’s abortion law reveals an interesting pattern. Unlike America's abortion law that focuses on the status of the fetus (that is, the length of gestation), Israel’s law focuses on the status of the woman (her age, marital status, circumstances under which she became pregnant). In order to obtain a legal abortion, Israeli women must submit to questioning by a committee composed of two doctors and one social worker. In these committee meetings, the woman's body becomes a matter of public inquiry. (In fact, as Delila Amir has shown, almost all abortion requests are granted; the issue is that the committee ritual defines the woman's body as not her own. Using the terminology that I introduced earlier, the inquisitorial style of the abortion committees gives the message that while women are to be held responsible for unwanted pregnancies and for contraceptive failure, women do not have the authority to terminate their pregnancies.)

Fourth, compromises and deals between secular and orthodox political parties have created a situation in which weddings in Israel are carried out only under the auspices of religious authorities (recently, there have been some exceptions). The orthodox rabbinical establishment requires Israeli brides to immerse themselves in the mikveh (ritual bath) prior to the wedding, and to bring a note from the ritual bath attendant testifying to their menstrual purity. Again, I draw attention to the role of the state in institutionalizing a religious discourse and practice in which women's bodies elicit enormous amounts of attention as symbol-laden vessels that can bring either divine blessing or curse to the Jewish collective. All of these practices, and especially those legitimizing public scrutiny of women's bodies, encourage women to internalize the belief that their bodies carry weighty public and collective significance and responsibility.

yet little agency or authority. I would suggest that this is a heavy load to carry: the continued health and existence of the Jewish collectivity rests on the bodies, especially the wombs, of women.

Nira Yuval-Davis has eloquently argued that Israeli women’s bodies are construed as markers of the collectivity, of national identity, not only in such expressions as the “moledet” or “the motherland,” but also in the idea that men fight “for women and children.”

Even a cursory reading of Israeli newspapers exposes the national belief that the Israeli collectivity is vulnerable (to invasion and to world opinion), constantly endangered and under attack. I would like to suggest that women’s bodies, understood to symbolize the collective, “act” in a manner consistent with this cultural construction. In contrast, men’s bodies are culturally construed as the epitome of agency. While being a soldier for the state is not necessarily an agency-rich role, in Israel where the army is supposedly a “citizens’ army” and in which the army ethos (at least in myth) is one in which each soldier is important and individual initiative is rewarded, the army can be understood as an ironically health-enhancing site of agency for men.

A great deal of cross-cultural research shows that people, and maybe especially women (who tend to lack access to more direct and effective means of making public statements), tend to somatize (that is, express in corporeal ways) stress, unhappiness, negative feelings and experiences. Human beings reveal our concerns about relationships, our feelings, in a sense, our souls, through our bodies. The At survey mentioned earlier found that Israeli women complain of all kinds of chronic bodily symptoms: back aches, stomach aches, fatigue. These kinds of symptoms, in many cultures, seem to plague women more than men, and have typically been understood as somatic expressions of the unhappiness associated with women’s subordinate position in male dominated societies. Referring back to an anthropological understanding of the body, we can see that it can be “read” as a kind of map corresponding to cultural patterns. I would like to propose further that there is real significance to where in the body chronic pain or illness is located. The At survey gives us another intriguing bit of information: a full 75% of women reported that they suffer from headaches. Against the background of the culturally constructed, collectively defined, and publicly scrutinized Israeli female body, I would like to suggest that the incredible rate of headaches among Israeli women can be interpreted as a painful appeal to “pay some attention to my head, and not just to my body.”

---


BIBLIOGRAPHY


REPORT FROM LITHUANIA

by Basia Nikiforova

I write of a very small and shrinking Jewish community. Today there are only 5,500 Lithuanian Jews who constitute less then 0.2% of the Lithuanian population.

The history of Jews in Lithuania is intimately connected to the special geo-political and national-religious environment in Lithuania, which changed substantially over the past 50 years. During the 20th century, Lithuania lost its status as an independent state by its inclusion as a national-geographical unit of the Soviet Union. It regained its independence less than a decade ago. Today we have a generation, which in its childhood felt itself as the national-religious majority (Lithuanians-Catholics), in its maturity lived in a state where it felt itself as the national-religious minority, and in its old age it has returned to its initial position as the majority.

As a result of this history, Lithuanians – along with Latvians and Estonians – are people whose self-perception and self-consciousness encompass the mentality of both a majority and minority culture. These nations stood the test of colonial cultural policies: the facade of privileges in the development of the national culture combined with Russification.

For this reason these nations are very sensitive to the problem of tolerance/intolerance.

The Baltic States during the Soviet period had their own specific experience with Soviet colonialism. This included the deportation of part of the native population of (the so-called “bourgeois” part) to Siberia and North Russia, and of much resettlement of ethnic Russians on Lithuanian territory. The result is that Latvians and Estonians scarcely constitute a majority in their own states (only around 62% are ethnic Estonians, 52% are Latvians). By contrast, Lithuania has been for many centuries the epicenter and the point of intersection for different national and religious cultures. But at the moment of statehood’s restoration, Lithuania was very close to being an unicultural state. In comparison with Latvia and Estonia, 81.4% of Lithuania’s population are ethnic Lithuanians, and 98% of believers are Catholics. The national minorities in Lithuania make up only 18.6%: they include 8.3% Russians, 6.9% Poles, 1.5% Byelorussians, 1.0% Ukrainians, and 0.2% Jews.

The situation in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania has influenced the formation of each country’s legislative principles and practices concerning tolerance issues. Lithuania, alone among the Baltic States, from the first months of independence decided in favor of the so-called “zero variant” for citizenship acquisition. “Zero variant,” means that everybody who lived in the territory of Lithuania until 1989 (the restoration of Lithuanian independence) has the right to be a Lithuanian citizen. During the first two years after independence, everybody had time to choose Lithuanian citizenship or other variants. After that, acquisition of citizenship became a process with some conditions (time of stay in Lithuania, the knowledge of the state language, etc.). This decision was the result of the democratization process, tolerance, and political pragmatism, which created the juridical basis for a decline of potential tensions between the national majority and minorities. The legislative separation of church and state (which in practice is not complete) became the juridical basis of equal rights under the law for registration and functioning for all faiths in
Lithuania. Lithuanian's Jewish community has had a long and distinguished history. In the mid-nineteenth century, the territory which may be termed ‘historic Lithuania’ included a large part of Poland, Belarus, Russia and encompassed about 2.5 million Jews, who comprised about 15% of the total population. As a result of World War One, Lithuania became more homogeneous and Jews comprised about 9% of its population. Jews were already settled in Lithuania by the 1500s and were accorded a considerable degree of tolerance and goodwill. Their relatively favorable situation over the next three centuries drew additional Jewish migrants from other parts of Europe. At the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Great Duchy of Lithuania was relatively tolerant and afforded possibilities for development of economical and spiritual Jewish life. As a result, the influx of a heterogeneous Jewish population contributed to the evolution of a distinctly Lithuanian Jew. The Litvak was differentiated from the Polish Jew and developed a different community, even though Polish and Lithuanian Jewry were subsumed under the same political entity, the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, during two centuries. In fact, by the seventeenth century, a Jewish Council of Lithuania was able to promulgate a series of laws that established a large degree of autonomy for the Jewish community. A network of schools and social institutions was in place by the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The fortunes of the Jewish community were largely determined by the ruling powers and by events in the national and religious majority. M. J. Rosman's book *The Lords' Jews* is a good source for Jewish history in this period and its legal framework.

From the seventeenth century on, Lithuanian Jewry attained worldwide prominence. Rabbinical leadership, including most prominently Elijah ben Judah Solomon Zalman – the Vilna Gaon – established a series of distinguished yeshivot and the rise of Lithuania's reputation as a center of Jewish scholarship. An international conference was held in Vilnius last year to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Gaon's death.

During the nineteenth century in Lithuania there existed number of competing movements: the *Mitnagdim*, *Hasidim*, *Musar*, and *Zionism*. These competing movements created many conflicts and tensions but at the same time produced many famous leaders, including women who played a important role in Jewish political, social and cultural life. Among them were Helena Chackle, Alta Sudarskij, Anna Rozental, Roza Shabad-Gavrajska, Sofia Gurevich, Elena Chackis and many others. They were teachers, political activists, social workers and writers. Their presence was felt in the every sphere of Jewish life, not only in Vilnius and Kaunas, but in every little shtetl.

The case of Helena Chackle is particularly interesting for us. She was born in Kaunas in the end of the nineteenth century. She was very well educated: a graduate of the Kaunas gymnasium, and the Saint-Petersburg Bestuzev Women's Courses. She was leader of the Jewish cultural, educational and social organizations in Kaunas, head of WIZO, the editor of the Jewish children's magazine, a writer and literature teacher in the Shalom Aleichem School.

Alta Sudarskij was born in Dwinsk (Belarus). Her family moved to Lithuania, where she very soon assumed an important place in the Jewish women's movement, and in the development of Yiddish language and literature. Her parents' home was a center of the Jewish public and cultural life. Some years before World War II, she and her husband Mendl Sudarskij emigrated to the USA, where they composed the book *Lita* about Jews in Lithuania. After the death of her husband, she published a second volume alone.
During the 1920s, the Jews were the largest minority group resident in the country, constituting 7.6% of the total population. Good times for Lithuanian Jewry ended on June 22, 1941. During the first two months of the Nazi occupation, most of Lithuania's provincial Jews were murdered. The first victims of Nazi and Lithuanian collaboration were the shetel Jews. The next victims were Jews killed in ghettos when the ghettos were liquidated. Of the 250,000 Jews in Lithuania on the eve of World War II, only about 25,000 were still alive at war’s end. The Jews of Lithuania and their physical institutions were destroyed almost completely, sometime with the help of Lithuanian collaborators.

The real post-war rebuilding of the Jewish community in Lithuania began only after its independence in 1990. At that time, there were about 12,400 Jews in Lithuania. The post-war Jewish exodus had started in the 1950s. During this decade, 24,672 Jews emigrated to Israel via Poland. In the 1970s, more than 15% of the Jewish population immigrated to Israel. In 1994, estimated the number of Jews living in the country to be only 6,500. The largest concentration – some 4,000 people – lived in Vilnius. Jews were attracted to Vilnius both by its historical reputation as a center of Jewish life and by its important role as the center of Lithuania's economic, educational, cultural, and political activities. Today only 5,500 Jews remain in the country.

Who is a Jew? Self-definition of nationality, official designation of nationality, or religious adherence can determine Jewish identity. 62% of those who identified as Jews were born in Lithuania. Females far outnumber males (only 83 males for every 100 females) compared to 90 males for every 100 females in the Lithuanian population as a whole. 43% of all Jewish women in Lithuania have a higher education. In the age group 25-44 55.6% have a higher education. This is a higher level of education in this gender and age group than in Lithuania as a whole.

The situation of Jewish woman is the following: 43% of Jewish women are retired; 36% are employed; 8% are unemployed; 3% are students; and 10% are in unspecified situations. Employed woman can be broken down by sector. The largest group (27.5%) are working as engineers or technicians. The second largest group (21%) is employed in education. Other intellectual professions employs 17.6% of Jewish women; 8.2% work in medicine; 9.7% as office workers; 7.3% as manual workers; 3% as service workers. The marital status of Jewish women in Lithuania is reported as follows: married – 60.9% are married; 8.1% are divorced; 17% are widowed; 14.0% are single.

Most Jewish woman (69.9%) have one or two children (33.6% and 36.3%) and are active in the recreation of Jewish life and the restoration of the Jewish tradition in Lithuania. They work in Jewish schools, kindergartens, mass media, and social organizations whose most important function is to help single old and ill Jews, WIZO head, Mrs. Rachel Kostenian, described the typical Jewish woman she encounters as retired, poor, active in the Vilnius Jewish Society’s social and cultural life, originally from outside of Lithuania, interested in studying Jewish history, culture and traditions, often single and alone; her children having already emigrated to Israel.

There are Jewish women who are currently prominent in Lithuanian cultural, scientific and social life. Some are famous writers like Violetta Palchinskaite. Several generations of Lithuanian children have grown up hearing her tales and attending her plays for the Children’s Theater. One of the leading Lithuanian graphics artists is A. Skliutauskaite and in painting, I. Bindler. Professor Irena Veisaite is a famous theater
critic and head of the Council of the Open Society Fund of Lithuania (the local Soros Foundation). Mrs. Marina Zibuc is the head of publishing department of this Fund.

Interruption between Jews and non-Jews is now commonplace in Lithuania. This is the result of 50 years of Soviet strategy of secularization and internationalization and an indication of the integration of Jews into Lithuanian society. At the same time, it is evidence of the potential disappearance of Jews who choose to remain in Lithuania. Today the small Lithuanian Jewish community has a 41% rate of intermarriage and 56% of their children are born into families of mixed-origin. Only 42% of them identify themselves as Jewish.

The subject of my own current research is the role of Jewish women in the promotion of children’s Jewish identity in the mixed family. To what extent Jews might disappear in Lithuania and how quickly that could occur depends on the current and future Jewish identity of children from mixed marriages. Our task is to identify which factors support or hinder a Jewish woman in her mission of transmitting Judaism in the domestic environment, to ascertain how influential these factors are and to determine how influential religious affiliation or the absence of non-Jewish parents are on the formation of children's Jewish identity.

Our first hypothesis assumes the existence of two groups of factors:

The factors supportive of a Jewish woman’s mission include a communal spiritual atmosphere returning to national and religious identity; a governmental policy of tolerance sympathetic to the preservation of Jewish heritage; and growing Jewish self-consciousness in the post-Soviet era. These factors nurture the creation of a Jewish society and many Jewish organizations including a Jewish national school, close contacts with Israel and international Jewish organizations, an educational program for Jewish children from Lithuania in Israel, and a Catholic-Jewish dialogue supported by the Vatican and international Jewish organizations.

The negative factors hindering a Jewish woman’s mission include several factors. First is the strong influence of secularization. For example, Jewish social and cultural life is very active in Lithuania. At the same time a Jewish women living in an intermarriage is usually far away from the synagogue. A second factor is a relic of the Soviet idea that the family is a “microenvironment for ethnic integration and natural assimilation.” Other important factors are growing domestic nationalism and a concomitant low level of tolerance to “otherness” in interpersonal relationships; the absence of a Reform branch of Judaism, and the traditional anti-Judaism of Lithuanian and Polish Catholics.

Our second hypothesis will assume that the incidence of mixed marriages will grow in Lithuania. The reasons for this include the fact that the parents of the young generation are spiritual products of compulsory assimilation during the last 50 years and, as a result, have lost most of their Jewish heritage and religion. The Jewish community is very small and the possibility of finding a marriage partner within this small pool very limited. After the restoration of the Lithuanian State, contacts with Jews from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine have become more difficult. The new governmental requirements of visas and higher travel expenses limit the possibilities of choice. Jews who decided stay in Lithuania mostly aspire to integration and to adapt to Lithuanian culture and society.

The fact that our subject of research is the role of the Jewish woman in the creation of Jewish identity of the children doesn’t mean that we are ignoring the Jewish man’s part in this process. It only means that our subject is woman. We are very carefully analyzing the participation of both Jewish men and women in the creation of children’s Jewish identity.
We propose that the role of the Jewish woman in the creation of her children's Jewish identity depends on many factors: her level of Jewish identity or her assimilation and secularization; her relations and contacts with her family, the Jewish environment, the reasons for which she decided to marry a non-Jew; and the national and religious status of the non-Jewish man she married. Jewish women must also depend on the general spiritual atmosphere of society, the level of tolerance, objective conditions for Jewish education; and their plans to remain in the country or to leave Lithuania in the future. The Lithuanian Catholic influence over the mixed family is more powerful than the Russian influence, which often has lost its own historical and cultural roots after the break-up of the Soviet Union and is no longer associated with the Orthodox church.

We are undertaking an ethnographic study, which will include interviews with Jewish mothers, interviews with children from mixed families where the mother or father is non-Jewish; and a content analysis of student essays from Jewish schools titled “How I understand my Jewish identity and who/what has an influence on this perception.”

It is important to find out the real indicators of Jewish identity in a country where more than half of the Jewish population is not affiliated with a synagogue but simply feels “Jewish.” In the case of the Lithuanian Jewish mixed family, our task is to find this list of indicators, which explore the personal Jewish expression of people who often unite their personal identity with ethnic, national and traditional issues rather than with religious issues.
The study of the Canadian Jewish community and its social history is still in its infancy. If I might continue the metaphor – the academy here is just now pregnant with this new topic of Jewish women – we do not have a live birth yet.\(^1\) Certainly, the focus on gender is not advanced. But researchers have begun to ask the questions, focus their curiosity and gather stories. They are dealing with three veiled particularities; Canadian, Jewish, and female.\(^2\)

The first map that needs to be charted is the difference between Canada and the United States of America. Many Canadians do not like to be called Americans. People such as my adult children who have two passports usually choose to travel with their Canadian one. They do not want to be associated with that stereotypical “ugly American.” Having said that, it is very difficult to tell you what is Canadian about Canadians and how being Canadian distinguishes the Jewish community from its American counterpart. Periodically, the Canadian press ponders the question “What is Canadian?” Nobody seems to know. That we are not Americans hardly suffices. And yet that is very much the story of the Jewish community here. Jews – when not contemplating Israel or dwelling on the Holocaust – do look south for much of their Jewish substance. The similarities between the American and Canadian communities and the chronological lag in developments in Canada require careful articulation. Plainly, Canadian Jews are not carbon copies of American Jews.\(^4\) To illustrate and interpret their differences I have chosen ten individual case studies to present. I will use segments of these ten women’s lives to try to delineate what is distinctly Canadian, specifically Jewish, and uniquely female in their stories.\(^5\)

Today, there are roughly 350,000 Jews in Canada. Most live in Toronto and Montreal, with pockets in Ottawa, Vancouver, St. John’s and Winnipeg. Most are recent immigrants, who arrived in Canada after the second World War. Linguistic and ethnic differences are the norm. There is no overriding patriotic fervor; no one was ever taught “my country right or wrong.” Immigrants were expected to become Canadian but that did not entail giving up their ethnic identity. There was no requirement to fit into a general American mold. Significantly, Jews found that they did not need to justify Jewish ethnic allegiance.\(^6\) Of course, there is antisemitism and it has affected the Jewish communal agenda. But it is not an ever present force and varies chronologically and geographically.\(^7\)

---

\(^1\) There are a number of significant articles such as those by Paula Draper, Nora Gold, Sheva Medjuck, Yael Gordon-Brym and myself.

\(^2\) My observations here are merely the beginnings of reflection; mostly personal and anecdotal. These stories or recollections attempt to present an accent for future studies.


\(^4\) I recall a marvelous dialogue between Professors Irving Abella and Jonathan Sarna addressing just these distinctions. Their reference to daily events and cultural codes was most convincing.

\(^5\) All of whom are alive.

\(^6\) Much of this distinction is a matter of degree. American Jews accepted an American form of patriotism that allowed for religious differences, but limited ethnic diversification. To be an American was a goal not just of citizenship but also of culture. Canadian culture was definitely less uniform or defining.

The Canadian Jewish community is not quite as old as that in the United States of America. The official history begins in 1759 with the first congregation, Shearith Israel of the Spanish and Portuguese custom, being incorporated by 1768. But there were individual Jews here earlier. Aron Hart, a British subject, settled in Quebec in 1740. The daughters of these early settlers were sent to convents for schooling. According to local tradition, the first Jew on Canadian soil – before there was a Canada – was a woman, Esther Brandeau who arrived from France in 1738. She came doubly masked; pretending to be a Catholic male. When discovered, she was to be sent back for no females and no Jews were allowed. The colonial authorities however, would forgive her femaleness. They told her she could stay if she converted. Refusing to do so, she was deported. And so begins our story. 8

Leah Roback is famous in certain sectors of the Quebec community. Born and raised in Quebec in 1903, 9 she was an early activist for worker’s rights; a Jew raised with strong socialist principles. She went to work in the needle trade world of Montreal and found it unfit. Like so many of her immigrant sisters in the USA, she could not accept the appalling labor conditions. With help from her brother and help from ILGWU representatives from New York, Leah worked tirelessly in Quebec against the manufacturers, many of them Jewish. She was a pioneer union organizer for ILGWU in Canada. So far this story repeats the American pattern. But, the differences are telling.

The unionization movement here took place in the thirties, later than in the States. The Church backed the factory owners – ignoring that some were Jews and pointing its finger at those Jewish upstarts, the foreigner union organizers. Antisemitism and Church involvement shaped the story in Canada. The strikes were not as dramatic as those in the states; there was no Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, no deaths, no newspaper accounts of the suffering workers. There are not so many stories in Canada and fewer memories of Jewish women sparking the strikes. If the memoirs were ever written, most have not come to light yet. It is a significant part of this story that so few Jews today know about or acknowledge that part of their history or Leah’s role in it. There are few studies of the labor movement and even the children of the owners and workers do not know their parents’ stories.

The contemporary Jewish world knows little about Leah. Leah worked in the unique French Canadian world of the Quebecois, 10 French is one of her many languages. She joined with her co-workers and never left their circle. She remains a friend of the working class “east enders,” those French Canadians who live east of Saint Laurence street, the great divide of Montreal. The role of the Jewish minority within this bi-national province of Quebec is a subject that needs careful historical investigation. Leah offers us a variant reading of the pattern. And its terms are quite different from the American one.

---

8 Historians disagree about the facts of this episode. I begin with this initial anecdote as a symbol of the stories yet to be discovered, investigated and reported.

9 She was born in Montreal but the family moved to Beauport almost immediately.

10 Many Jews worked in that milieu but few remained involved socially and politically as did Leah.
Leah is still alive and is an active feminist in the francophone sector, even today when the overwhelming majority of the Jewish community has chosen an anglophone identity. The political and linguistic divisions in Quebec have not only shaped Leah's story, but have certainly molded a different context and content for Jewish integration. She did not renounce her Jewish community, but neither did she abandon her worker's identity. Recently a documentary film was made of Leah's life. It was made by a francophone film maker in French. It highlighted a commemorative banquet in Leah's honour that did not take place in the Jewish community. But the film did have a showing in the Jewish public library. She is part of the Jewish community and has maintained her ties to family, culture and friends. She straddles both worlds in her own unique way.

Dora Wasserman, born in 1919, almost of the same generation as Leah, is the renowned founder of the Yiddish theater in Montreal, founded in 1956. Both women spoke Yiddish, but Dora's world was the Eastern European one of Leah's Polish parents. Significantly, Dora's upbringing in Europe shaped her contribution to Canadian Jewry. It is due to Dora's passion and determination that Montreal is the only city in the world that has a permanent Yiddish theater company. She came to this city after World War II in 1950 and began her illustrious career by reading stories in Yiddish to children at the Jewish Public Library – a unique Montreal institution, preserving a heritage and serving a community in four languages. The Yiddish theater is an amateur group with a permanent home in the Saidye Bronfman Centre of the Arts. If Leah's story reflects a Jewish social ethic, Dora's singular accomplishment revolves around Yiddish and theater.

At a time when many were singing the blues over the demise of Yiddish in the seventies and eighties, it was alive and well in parts of Canada. Linguistic perseverance is a norm in Quebec. Nationally, Canada is officially bilingual. But the effort to maintain a strong French culture and linguistic tradition is concentrated in Quebec. As a result there is a linguistic school board – replacing the denominational divisions of the “public” schools – in place and language laws to ensure the prevalence of French in all sectors. Although many political commentators emphasize the struggle between French and English, the reality created by two language groups is the empowerment of linguistic diversity. Thus, Yiddish speakers, secular and religious, found a home within Quebec society. Specifically, there is even a school organization, primary and secondary, in Montreal which teaches Yiddish in the secularist socialist tradition.

Remarkably, Yiddish survived and flourished on this fertile ground. Ethnic groups were never encouraged to leave behind their cultural baggage. Civic loyalty did not require homogeneity. Canadian multiculturalism finds many expressions including long lasting linguistic retention even in the enforced French policy of Quebec.

Canadian Jews, like their American cousins, did well in the entertainment industry. Yet none were as successful as Dora in maintaining a Yiddish face to the contemporary art scene. Many people, Jews and non Jews, who attend her plays, and even some of her actors, do not understand Yiddish. But through the medium of theater, she has introduced the classics of Yiddish literature to a new generation. Through musicals, dramas, comedies and tragedies, her traveling company has explored and exposed a Yiddish side

---

12 She was its sole director and engine until a recent illness. Her daughter is now the director.
13 It should come as no surprise that Aron Lansky, founder of the National Yiddish Book Center, was trained at McGill University in Montreal.
to a complex Jewish identity. Significantly, she has also collaborated with French Canadian playwrights, such as M. Tremblay, and translators, such as P. Anctil, to bridge the world of francophone and Jew.

During a tour of Russia in 1997, she reintroduced Yiddish classics that originated there. In all her activities, Dora's company embodies and re-creates a Yiddish Montreal.

Elyse Goldstein, rabbi, educator, and feminist activist embodies a contemporary generation. Born, raised and trained in the USA, Elyse's career path resembles that of her male colleagues. Jewish Canadian clergy are all trained in institutions in the USA. Most are Americans. But Elyse is unmistakably female, feminist and an anomaly in Canada.

Unlike the Americans, the Canadian Jewish religious community is noticeably traditional. There are few Reform congregations – Montreal has only one Reform and four Conservative synagogues. The rest are Orthodox. Many non-practicing Jews prefer to maintain membership in the traditional synagogues of their parents. There are few female clergy in Canada. Toronto has three female rabbis. Montreal had one working cantor and one pulpit rabbi. Neither one is working in those congregations any longer. Halifax benefits from the services of a visiting female rabbi from Vermont. That's it.

Rabbi Goldstein came to Toronto in the beginning of the eighties, to work within the corporate organization of Holy Blossom Temple, one of the pre-eminent Reform institutions in Canada. She left after a few years for a small congregation of her own outside Boston. And then she returned to Toronto to head the new Kollel, traditional study center, there. In a radical move, staid old Toronto became the scene of a great innovation in denominational Judaism with the creation and staffing of this new institution. Elyse is the Rosh Kollel of a school for liberal adults wanting to increase their text based Judaic learning. Modeled after Orthodox institutions such as Aish HaTorah, reaching out to the uninitiated and using the traditional format of a yeshiva style enterprise, the Reform community created something unprecedented and hired a feminist to pilot this new project. Tradition and innovation, conservative and progressive, predictable and unconventional; all describe this moment within Canadian Jewry and Elyse's contribution to a new mosaic.

Born into the Holy Blossom family, the next portrait is of a woman older than Elyse and younger than Dora, whose commitment to social justice appears to replicate that of Leah. Michelle Landsberg, journalist, socialist, feminist activist adds another element to this composition. Having established herself as a journalist and author (Women and Children First), Michelle decided to seek a renewed Jewishness in feminist ritual and Zionist activity. Along with many energetic women, she helped to create the Sukkah by the Water festival, a community celebration of Succot, created by and focused on women. Rather than reproduce the widespread Jewish feminist practices such as Rosh Hodesh services or a Passover Seder, she brought a new pattern to Jewish life. Supported by the New Israel Fund, the Sukkah by the Water Festival connected interest in feminism, Israel, charity, and Jewish ritual with a focus on women's experience and expressions. Another unique development in a North American Jewish landscape.

Many Jewish women have taken on critical causes working within a decidedly non Jewish environment. For some, like Dorothy Goldin, environmentalist extraordinaire, their Jewishness is background fueling their activism. Like Leah and Michele, there is an elemental background of Jewish tradition devoted to social justice and individual responsibility. For some like Phyllis Lambert, champion of architectural integrity and heritage sites, their Jewishness is irrelevant, an annoying presence. Yet, Lambert cannot escape
her inclusion in our sketch, for she is the only daughter of the famous and highly visible, Jewishly involved Bronfman clan.

Francine Zuckerman, on the other hand, used her Jewish interests to launch a film career supported by the Canadian government. The Canadian arts community receives a great deal of its funding from various government programs and Jewish creativity has benefitted.

Francine’s first documentary (1989), Half the Kingdom, took six years to make and told the story of seven Jewish feminists in three countries. It was the first (and only) film to focus on feminist Judaism by presenting diversity and conflict rather than consensus and uniformity and is still shown regularly today. Her last film, Punch Me in the Stomach, (1997) again introduces the unusual within a familiar context. It explores the Holocaust, a nearly universal Jewish preoccupation, through a comedian’s artistry and personal narrative. For this film maker, being a native Jewish Canadian has played out repeatedly in her work and empowered her to work. Again, the Canadian context enables a unique female Jewish perspective to be aired.

But Canadian’s political position and activism differs markedly from the practice of Americans. The small Jewish community of Canada seems very organized with one national Jewish paper and one representative body, the Canadian Jewish Congress. But community and politics are not vigorously placed on any community agenda. Canadian Jews prefer quiet diplomacy and usually refrain from public political confrontations. Notably, Canadian Jews are not highly visible as elected officials. Sheila Finestone, a native Montrealer, has made it. She was a federal MP for the Liberal party and has just been named to the Senate. Sheila has not shied away from representing specifically Jewish or women’s issues on the national agenda. She rose through the Jewish organizational ranks, first through Women’s Federation of Combined Jewish Appeal, and then through the French Canadian equivalent. There are a number of younger women, such as Yolande Cohen, a Moroccan born professor fo history, who have begun their arduous route to enter the intricate world of local politics. Their accomplishments remain to be chronicled.

Other political individuals such as Sharon Wolfe, worked in non institutional settings such as the “group of 35.” This informal association of thirty-five Jewish women forged the Canadian Jewish approach to Soviet Jewry. Although there were many different players and formats for this activism, Sharon, on her own, created in Montreal a structure for maintaining contact with and sending Jews to the former Soviet Union. With nick knack sales in her own home, she raised the funds to send many of us covertly to teach and reach the refuseniks. Incredibly, she trained herself to brief and debrief us and ran one of the most successful networks. We used to laugh when we called her since her phone was tapped by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to protect the Russians from her!14 Despite that intervention, Canada, with its mediator role in world politics, proved to be a productive context for Jewish individual activism.

The Canadian government was easily and frequently persuaded to intercede on behalf of endangered Jewish communities and Canadian visas were often made available for whole communities such as the one remaining in Iraq in the eighties.

14 It is perhaps worth noting that women were singularly effective in Jewish rescue operations in Canada. See Wendy Eisen, Count Us In: The struggle to free Soviet Jews, a Canadian perspective published in 1995, and H. Tropper’s 1999 book, The Ransomed of God: The remarkable story of one woman’s role in the rescue of Syrian Jews, on Judy Feld Carr’s unique role in the rescue of Syrian Jewry. In all of these narratives, Jewish women and men were able to convince the Canadian government to play a decisive role.
Apparently, the Canadian government has played an interesting role in the careers of Jewish women. My last tale is not of one of a woman but of a group of women, actually of groups of women. The Canadian Coalition of Jewish Women for the Get is one of the most successful non-government organizations. Representing all the major Jewish women’s organizations across Canada and working with Canadian Jewish Congress and B’nai Brith, these women lobbied for a federal bill to protect women in search of a Jewish divorce.

Canada was the first country to enact legislation that gave women a measure of protection in the mine field that is Jewish divorce. Yet, because Canadian Jews are Canadian, the first impulse was to avoid the political route. People were afraid to lobby for uniquely Jewish interests. I had been teaching and reminding the community about the plight of the agunah (woman unable to receive a Jewish divorce) for ten years before I met up with two different groups of women interested in the same problem. One was a group of unaffiliated women in Toronto that joined forces with a lawyer, John Syrtash, to generate legislation in Ontario. The other was a group in Montreal, headed by Evelyn Brook of Jewish Women International, who decided to form a coalition of national organizations so that we could work together on a federal solution.

The women in Montreal created partnerships across the nation with different organizations, political parties, and denominations, and put the get (Jewish divorce document) issue on the national and even international scene. Not only did they put organizational turf issues aside, they worked consistently to create a unique forum that has continued its activities way beyond legislative intervention. Thus, the Coalition has continued its educational and activist agenda. And the government of Canada has continued its support of some of these programs, the latest being a documentary film Untying the Bonds. Jewish Divorce. American and Israeli colleagues are repeatedly amazed at our successes, aware that government here works differently. So do Jewish women.

I have not given you any synthesized picture of Jewish women in Canada. Indeed, I have only shared with you the lives of women I have known and worked with. But there was a purpose to this procedure. These vignettes are substantive and genuine – bits and pieces, voices of the past and present. They articulate a disdain for stereotypical uniformity. I offer a passion for distinctiveness – especially our own – yet recognize the binding tropes of our lives as Jews. Perhaps these stories illustrate segments of what will become a fully adorned quilt. They re/present Jewish women in their Canadian setting. Different from American women; distinct and at times separate from men. Plotting their interconnecting stories, constructing Jewish identity through private lives, and developing a gendered perspective on their shared spaces are future tasks.

---

55 Member organizations are: Canadian ORT, Emunah Women of Canada, Hashassah WIZO Organization of Canada, Jewish Women International of Canada, N’amat Canada, National Council of Jewish Women of Canada, Status of Women Committee of Canadian Jewish Congress, Toronto Jewish Women’s Federation, Women’s Federation of Federation CJA/Montreal, Women’s League of Conservative Judaism.

56 The only other country to enact such legislation to date is South Africa. New York has a local ordinance that is surrounded by controversy.
HOMING PIGEON: A SEPHARDIC JEW

Ruth Knafo Setton

I'm about three in the last photo taken of me before my parents and I leave Morocco for the United States. Curly blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. Tiny white dress, sturdy bare legs. Light eyes that look questioningly at the photographer, or at the street ahead of me. A small wanderer through life, I clutch a black purse, and pause, only for an instant, on my journey. I am resolute, firmly rooted, feet in black patent leather shoes gripping the tiled outdoor corridor. My lips are dark, as if I’ve just eaten a plum, and traces of the juice have stained my lips. Unsmiling, confident that in a moment I will continue on my path to the future, I can afford to let the photographer freeze me. What he doesn’t know, what I don’t yet know, is that in another moment, my patent leather shoes will be lifted from the tiles, will dangle in the air, as I hover between two worlds – the New and the Old, belonging to neither, clinging to both.

What happened to that girl? Did she live a parallel life to mine in the dim, powerful Morocco of my memory? Did she study? Was she married off early, as soon as her blood came? Was she afraid of the Arabs? Mistreated for being a Jew? Did she fall in love with a boy at school? Sneak out to meet him at the souk? Did she walk along the sea with him? I want that girl, I want to smell her flesh, to kiss the back of her knee, to see if her ears are dainty whitled seashells like mine, her eyes as wide, her hands as yearning. What became of her? I feel the pain of exile. I was ripped from her. The girl who crossed the ocean is already the shadow of myself. Right now when you think I am looking at you, I’m looking for her – across the mountains and seas – wondering if she even knows I exist, if she misses me at all.

Sometimes I think I’ve been writing her story all along, the girl I might have been, the girl who could have been me. Which door would she have chosen? Which would I choose?

*

My first memory is of looking into my grandfather's smiling face as he winds a rose around my ear. We are on his roof terrace – the paradise he constructed for himself in Safi, Morocco: the place where he can study, play the lute, compose music and write poetry in classical Arabic. Where he can brave the wind coming from the Atlantic Ocean, and raise his pigeons. Fifty, in two huge brass cages, the gates never closed. “That’s not how you hold someone,” he told my mother who struggled to understand, as she walked to and from the Alliance Israélite school four times a day, always on the lookout for the Arab boys who threw stones at the Jewish kids. But my mother wasn’t allowed on the roof terrace. Neither was my grandmother. Only me, his first grandchild.

Saadia Cohen, of the flaming red hair and brilliant green-gold eyes. Tall, handsome and lusty, a pirate blown into the claustrophobic tiny streets. He brought the memory of the sea with him. He played the lute on his roof. He sang in Arabic at weddings. He smoked kif with his friends, and cigarettes as he brooded over his poems. When he set the pigeons free that last time, he didn’t have to tell them: they sensed it.
He tied secret kabbalistic messages to their legs, stood on the roof, surrounded by his roses and geraniums, his books and lute, his silver teapot, the small Berber carpet on which he sat and meditated. The notorious Safi wind blew at him as he urged the pigeons to go, to fly away, find a new home, explore the world. I close my eyes and see Saadia there, a mountain of a man, a dreamer who created his own small universe. Some of the pigeons are reluctant to leave him, this man who seems to understand the soul of birds, who flies with them even though he remains on the roof as they soar. He admires those who leave quickly, with no sentimentality, who don’t circle and hover in useless longing to return. He hardens his heart, stands against the wind, watching his birds fill the sky with a hiss and whirr, and disappear, until the two large brass cages are empty. The cages remain on the roof, gates swinging open and shut in the wind, until Saadia carries them down the narrow circular staircase that he built himself, with his own hands: I built the stairway to my soul, he is fond of saying.

Later, long after I am gone with my mother and father to America, he replaces the pigeons (those birds who knew him, who returned to him after their every flight) with a large aquarium filled with strange species of fish. “I have to watch life,” he wrote to my mother.

In Morocco, the roof is traditionally the woman’s sphere, the street the man’s, but my grandfather turned the world upside down. He built a low wall around his roof so the women on the adjoining roofs couldn’t watch him. In the beginning he glared at them – fierce eyebrows and flaring nostrils – until they backed away. The moment he returned home from work which he detested no matter what it was, he tore off his street clothes and put on a white djellabah and climbed the winding staircase and shut the door behind him. The wind carved a cavity in his soul.

When I returned to Morocco for the first time since we’d left, I accompanied my mother because she was scared to go back alone, dangers magnified. I saw the grandfather I remembered only in dream and memory. He lay in bed, nose large as a bird beak, hair sparse and white. He held out a blue-veined hand from which flesh hung. He breathed in rasps and ragged coughs. When our hands touched, he smiled. I cried in my heart, tears knocking against walls I didn’t know existed, breaking through doors. My mother motioned for me to turn around. On the wall facing his bed was a painting of me as a child. My uncle, my mother’s younger brother, had painted me from a photograph. His last words were spoken to me. Mon tresor, he said. My treasure.

In the small house, shiva began. The women in black, then men unshaven and barefoot. The professional mourners – black ravens – terrified me with their unearthly wails, their faces seared with their fingernails as they slashed at themselves and pulled their hair, shrieking with uncontrolled primitive grief. I wandered through the house. In each room, people sat on the floor and recalled Saadia in Arabic and French. The legends about him. The women he conquered at a glance. The music with which he charmed enemies. The words he wove into nets and wings that swooped and soared.

In another room the women bemoaned his constant smoking, the cigarettes that led to his lung cancer. The nights he stayed awake alone on the roof doing who knows what. His other women. The mystery and emotional solitude of the man.

In every room he remained unknown. An enigma.

*
Freedom, my father said. We came to America to be free. We followed his sister who had married an American GI, and who had been slowly punished and exiled by his family until she no longer remembered who she was. The GI’s Christian family mocked her Jewish faith and locked her outside in the snow on their holidays. A Jew shouldn’t participate in our festivities. He beat her when she was pregnant, insulted her constantly. By the time my sister and I knew her, she was a full-fledged witch out of horror stories.

She waited for us after school. When we began the walk home, surrounded by kids in our classes, she emerged from the trees, red hair wild and tangled, screaming: “They’re Jews! They’re from Morocco! They’re lying to everyone! Jews! Morocco!”

My sister and I had nightmares about her, loathed her for years, not understanding until much later that when she exposed us to the hatred of our classmates, she exposed her own pain at being punished for being what she was.

If we’d been telling the truth about being Jews from Morocco, maybe my aunt’s attacks wouldn’t have carried so much weight, but we had transformed ourselves. Upon seeing his sister’s hellish life with a non-Jew who still tortured her, and sick to death of the years of fear and humiliation, my father decided to change us with a stroke of the wand: from Moroccan Jews to Christians from Paris. Paris will explain the French accent, and Christians will eliminate centuries of hardship, he told me. “Wherever we go as Jews, we’re going to suffer. Let’s start over.” Besides, he added, it will be easier for them, our small-town Pennsylvania Dutch neighbors, to understand who we are. One of my teachers asked me loudly in class: “Is it true you eat people in Morocco?”

The kids, thanks to the teacher and my aunt’s accusations, called us Jungle Jews. I became afraid to leave the house. We moved to the adjoining town, wrenched ourselves from our dark bloody religious heritage and disassociated ourselves from the somber mosque’d landscape from which we had emerged. Too much to cram down unwary throats: Moroccan and Jewish. So we prettified it, civilized it, until our story hardened and fastened about us with the implacability of myth. In an inspired touch, Safi became Paris, and in a reductio ad absurdum, Jewish became Christian, and then dwindled to nothing. The disguise: from horned usurers storming out of a savage jungle into placid, sandy-haired farmers. An attempt as ridiculous as it was doomed, as impossible as my childhood desire to become a seagull. I’ve examined this switch often in my fiction, the confusion of identity it caused, the daily terror at being found out.

The magic mood of the dinner was gone, Mom and Gaby were silent, watching Dad, his hands usually bunched in his pockets, spread before him. “Jews! When we first came here, I went to my so-called brothers, the Jews. The President of the only synagogue in Horsens, with fewer than fifty members, asked me: ‘Did you ever hear of the Torah in Morocco?’ Me! Raised to be a rabbi.” He set down his glass and rubbed his eyes. The sight of them-green-brown, narrowed, naked in the light-always gave me a start. “He told me: ‘You’re better off going back to Africa. There’s no place for you here.’ Not one of them offered to help us find a job or a place to live. Not one of them even offered me a cup of coffee! I didn’t ask them for a penny. I didn’t ask for a damn thing!”
I couldn’t look at him at that moment. I felt shamed, enraged.

He smelled his hands, then thrust them from him. “I stink of meat! Am I killing myself at the supermarket, packing beef and chicken in freezers everyday, every night, so Brit can become like the rest of you?” He pointed at me. “Sheba tells you that sainted idiot Suleika is your second mother. Well, I’m going to tell you about your grandmother. My mother:”

“Dad!” He was starting to scare me, his eyes like pinpoints of light, his hands still out in the open.

“Picture this, Brit. And Gaby. And don’t give me any more garbage about being Jews.” His voice shook.

“In 1912, when the French were about to take over Morocco, they ordered everyone – Jews and Arabs – to give up their weapons. The Jews, dummies as always, handed theirs in. But the Arabs of Fez were angry at the French. Do you know how they showed their anger?” He paused, thin lips gritted tight. “They held onto their weapons and stormed through the mellah for three days. Three days, Brit. They looted and burned the houses. And they killed every Jew they found.” He jerked his thin wrist. “They called it the Fez Massacre. To distinguish it from other massacres.” He jerked his wrist again, more sharply. “My mother was a girl then, a kid. She hid under a table and watched the Arabs shoot her parents and brother. When the killers left, she ran down the stone street through pools of blood filled with human bones.”

I clenched my hands so tightly on my lap that my fingernails cut into my palms.

“She ran past hills of corpses to the Sultan’s Palace right outside the mellah. The Sultan was basically a good man. When he realized that his people were wiping out the entire mellah, thousands of Jews, he decided to help save those of us who were left. You know what he did?” Dad leaned closer to the candle. The flame flickered, sent shadows creeping along the darkening walls. His face was concentrated in fury. I smelled the raw meat he’d complained of and more: I smelled his rage, pure, undiluted.

“He opened the gates to the cages of his menagerie in the courtyard, where he kept exotic, wild animals. And the Jews filed in. Can you see my mother? A little girl, cowering in a cage next to pumas, tigers and leopards but safer there than in the street.” He made a soft, spitting sound. “The Sultan’s zoo: beasts and Jews. That’s what I see when I hear the word: Jew.”

I shut my eyes and saw my grandmother, Alice, in one of my mother’s cracked yellowing photographs: a long-nosed, dour-faced, kercieved woman. Behind her weary eyes, I saw the orphaned girl who ran down a bloody street to a cage. The cage was crowded, filled with barefoot Jews in black, lamenting and wailing to their invisible God. I saw Suleika, black eyes glinting with tears, as she shook the bars. The cage was packed to bursting with wild animals and Jews. Sardines in a can, they slid over each other, trying to find a firm grip.

“Don’t please, Joseph.”

I opened my eyes at the sound of my mother’s voice and saw Dad crying, tears covering his thin cheeks in an instant. Fierce, trembling, he whispered: “Now do you understand, Brit? I’m setting you free from that cage.”
I lived in my own perpetual fear of an Inquisition. Torquemada stalked me. He was the neighbor boy. Cold-eyed and chinless, he suspected us from the start, cross-examined me, tried to trap me.

J. H.: What church do you go to?
Me: Uh, the one on the corner.
J. H.: What corner?
Me: The one with the big cross. You know.
J. H.: That’s my church. How come I never saw you there?
Me: We’re very busy. We only go sometimes.
J. H.: You’re going to go to hell! My dad says you’re kikes. That’s why you don’t go to church. You better come to Sunday school with me and my sister next Sunday. Unless you’re scared.
Me: Scared? Me? Ha!

I went to church with him. Felt eyes on me from all sides, from the Gothic arches, from the pale-eyed Jesus and Madonna. Everyone watched and saw through me. I was the sinful one, the dark evil one, the Jew from hateful Morocco, wherever that was. In my soul I knew I was no Christian from Paris. No matter how carefully I disguised myself, my pieds noirs peeked through. And yet I carried on with the disguise, pretending until I was in high school that I was a Christian, an honorable and true American: I belonged here. I dated non-Jews, had no idea what gefilte fish was, rarely entered a temple, never went to a bar mitzvah.

Then the Six-Day War erupted into our living room. I remember kneeling in front of the TV, stunned by the faces of the soldiers, Moshe Dayan with his eyepatch, the shy pride and glowing eyes of the young men. I am a Jew, I realized, just like that. I can’t lie anymore. I can’t keep running. I broke off my engagement to the son of a minister who had tried in vain to engage me in conversation in a Hebrew I didn’t recognize or understand—and flew to Israel. From the moment I landed at Lod and breathed in the heat, dust, flowers, human sweat and desire, I knew that Israel wasn’t just a country; she was mine the way no other country could ever be. She was Jewish, Mediterranean, smelled of sand, sea, roses: my memory come to life.

Here, I was home. Proud to be a Jew. But I soon learned that Israel was an ashkenazi nation constructed in the Middle East. We mizrahim were (in Ben-Gurion’s words) Israel’s “cooie labor,” monkeys from Africa, uneducated, primitive beasts with no need for education or plumbing. I found myself passing yet again, this time as an American Jew (hence, ashkenazi) but I couldn’t bear the lie. I insisted on thrusting my Moroccan identity into everyone’s face. On a date, when the young Israeli man began mocking the way mizrahim speak Hebrew, I said coldly: “I am Moroccan.” He thought I was joking. When I went for a job as an English teacher—and was by far the most qualified person with a Master’s degree in English, I didn’t get the job but a high school graduate from California did. Why? Mr. Goldberg, the director of the language institute, told me bluntly: “I don’t hire Moroccans. Some of my best friends are Moroccans. But you’re not good workers, not reliable.”
I returned to the States, determined to find out more about what it meant to be a Jew from Morocco. Suleika was my way in. Her name caught me: illuminated like the letters in a medieval manuscript. I tracked down her story. A seventeen year-old Moroccan-Jewish girl of almost unearthly beauty, she was beheaded by the Sultan of Morocco in Fez in 1834 for refusing to convert to Islam. Although all the variations of her brief, tragic life end with her execution, the road there differs with whoever is telling the tale. I spent the next fifteen years researching her life, working on a novel about her, The Road to Fez, and at the same time coming to terms with my own identity. Through those years I confronted American-Jewish self-hatred, often directed against Sephardim/Mizrahim; I was told our experiences didn't matter, that our history was painless, our Hebrew accents ugly, our customs barbaric. An early draft of The Road to Fez was returned from an American publisher with a note: You write well. Next time try writing about the real Jews.

The real Jews. Who were they? Who are they? My ancestor, Maklouf Knafo, one of the legendary nisrafim who chose to burn to death rather than convert to Islam on a sunny spring morning in 1790 in Oufran, a Berber village in the Anti-Atlas Mountains? My uncle who was tortured in a Moroccan jail for suspicious (i.e., Zionist) activities? Another uncle, a parachutist in the Israeli army, a POW, tortured by the Egyptians who came back with the mental abilities of a child and constant headaches and nightmares? My mother who cooked cous-cous and listened to Jo Amar and tried to keep Moroccan-Jewish traditions alive while my father ran as fast as he could from everything he'd been? My aunt, after growing up the lowest of the low in Morocco, and coming to America to find she was still the lowest of the low, attacking two little girls, maybe the only creatures even lower than she was? Suleika, a seventeen year-old girl with her entire life in front of her, offered everything under the sun if she would convert to Islam but who was beheaded on another sunny day in Morocco because she couldn't change what she was? For Suleika, to convert and live a lie was a death-in-life.

I'd been living a death-in-life. I realized that my childhood and adolescence were nothing more than the Marrano lifestyle transferred to a small Pennsylvania town. A little girl told to say the words, as if words are enough to change who you are. Odd as it seemed, I had been brought up in the most Jewish way imaginable: denying my Jewishness in order to survive and flourish.

*
I watched them lower my grandfather into the ground in the Jewish cemetery. The wind blew more sharply that day. Pigeons circled my head. My tears were frozen inside. A cousin with a blue bandanna tied around his forehead screamed like a wounded beast. The graves were piled helter-skelter, in no apparent order, up a steep grassy hill. The wind blew us back as we climbed up. My great-grandmother, a wrinkled mask from which two blue eyes of astounding beauty peered out, wailed the entire way up the hill, “What has become of my beauty? Oh, my lost beauty! My beauty, where are you? Why did you leave me?” The men wore sneakers, their unshaven faces adding a sinister, romantic aura to the wild cemetery, the fierce wind. As they threw dirt in over him, I remembered my mother telling me how he had longed to go to Israel, to dig his fingers into the dirt: “the same dirt David touched.” To press his ear against the stone of the wall of Solomon’s Temple and hear the words of captured dreams. To wade into the Mediterranean, naked and free, “until I touch the black line. To go deeper and farther until there is nowhere to advance but directly into the past.”

* 

My grandfather finishes twining the rose around my ear and kisses my forehead. Leaving his kingdom above the world, I descend the winding staircase on chubby legs. By the time I reach the bottom step, I am ready to open the front door and step out onto the street, a woman barefaced, openhearted, secrets sifting through my fingers.
THE MOTHERS OF PASTEUR STREET: THE STRUGGLE FOR PLURALISM IN ARGENTINA

by Edna Aizenberg

On July 18, 1994, at 9:50 a.m., a powerful bomb blew up a square block in downtown Buenos Aires. The immediate objective of the explosion was the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina, known as the AMIA, the building housing most of Argentina’s major Jewish organizations.

I say the “immediate objective,” because, despite its primary intention to murder Jews and burn Jewish property, the bomb did not discriminate: Jews and non-Jews, some one hundred of them, were killed that day, and apartment houses, schools, and stores in the area were destroyed. Images of the block on Pasteur Street where the AMIA stood resembled cities like Sarajevo or Beirut or Kosovo, their guts ripped out by ethnic violence.

I dedicate this paper to all those who perished, most personally to my friend Susy Kreiman, who was crushed to death by falling debris while she fulfilled her humanitarian duties – helping the needy and unemployed find work as head of the AMIA’s Employment Bureau.

Argentina prides itself on being the most “European” of Latin American nations. The long-prevalent official image paints Argentina as a homogeneous country peopled by inhabitants of European, Catholic stock, with only a smattering of “other bloods” – Native American, African, Jewish. Until very recently, any president of Argentina was constitutionally required to be a Roman Catholic. The armed forces, major players in Argentine politics, rarely looked kindly on those they perceived as outside Western, Christian civilization. Custodians of the fatherland’s “fundamental values,” they defended – by “disappearance” and torture, if necessary – a cluster of essential Hispano-Catholic ideals ultimately derived from medieval Iberia. Those who are not born with these essential qualities cannot be “true” Argentines, Santiago Kovadloff explains in his powerful essay, “Un lugar en el tiempo: La Argentina como vivencia de los judios” (A Place in Time: Argentina as a Jewish Experience).

“We in Argentina are lucky,” a debonaire citizen of Buenos Aires once told me, voicing a generalized attitude. “We don’t have racial or ethnic problems like in the United States.” I, perhaps not so politely, answered: “Of course not. You killed the Indians and marginalized anyone who wasn’t white or Christian enough. That’s why you claim to have no ‘racial’ problems.” Women, needless to say, are not equal players when the machista, military-Catholic ethos prevails. Jewish women even less so: in the terrifying secret detention camps run by Argentina’s fascist dictatorship of the nineteen seventies, Jewish women received doubly brutal treatment, as women and as Jews. Alejandra Ungaro’s testimony says it poignantly and directly, better than I ever could: After beating me on my head and back “they drew swastikas all over my body with a very strong marker.” (Nunca Más, 69)

The bomb that exploded at the AMIA is painful testimony to the fact that Argentina, like many other Latin American countries, has yet to develop a pluralistic national polity. Despite its manías de superioridad, its European airs, its capital, Buenos Aires, styled the Paris of the South, Argentina is painfully Latin American, still struggling with issues of human rights, diversity, and equality for peoples of varying social, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, of different genders and sexual orientations. The mask of European-
ness that Argentina wears not only erases the existence of indigenous and mestizo peoples (derided as cabecitas negras or blackheads) but also the presence of non-European immigrants, such as Afro-Asians, sephardic Jews, and Arabs. The current president, Carlos Saul Menem, is the son of Muslim-Syrian immigrants, who had to convert to Catholicism in order to run for the presidency. The mask of European-ness further erases the differences among so-called Europeans; not all descendants of Europeans have similar clout.

Most of Argentina’s 200,000 Jews, the largest Jewish community in Latin America, are of Yiddish-speaking Eastern European stock, but Feierstein, Steinberg or Aizenberg do not have the same ring as Rodriguez, Anchorena, or Borges, nor do their cultural-linguistic heritages, even if they are immigrant, have comparable weight. Argentine-Jewish intellectuals, men like Ricardo Feierstein, and many, many women, like Silvia Plager, Reina Roffé, Ana María Shua, and Alicia Steinberg, caustically take on this linguistic and onomastic bigotry in some of their best works. Here is Steinberg from her novel, Cuando digo Magdalena (When I Say Magdalena): “Remember how Borges used to say that he would speak to one grandmother in one way and to another grandmother in another way, and that those two ways of speaking were called Spanish and English? [Borges, the famous writer, had an English immigrant grandmother.] Well, something similar happened to me, except that in my case one way of speaking was Spanish and the other Yiddish. But since Yiddish sounded harsh and unpleasant to me, I refused to speak it. It was a mysterious language that could reveal to me who I really was. From childhood I was expected to hide, to cover up, who I ‘really’ was and to pretend that I was someone else, who, strangely, I also was” (61). Feierstein presents his attack in a piece entitled Aventuras de un apellido (Adventures of a Last Name), written as a dialogue between an office employee and a man named David Schnaiderman, who needs to fill out a form: “Last name? Schnaiderman. How’s that again? Always the same story; over and over since elementary school.... Schnaiderman, you repeat. ... Don’t worry, I’ll spell it for you.... Why don’t you write it out. It’s hard for me to write down foreign names... What’s your name, sir, you ask the employee. Héctor Gómez, why do you ask? Is that an Argentine, not foreign name.... Of course. You mean to say that you descend from a tribe of Mataco or Toba Indians? That there were... Araucanian Indians by the name of Gómez? Of course not, he answers sharply, getting red in the face. I meant that I was born here. Right here. So was I, you answer back...” (4-5). And so it goes until the employee calls the next one it line, and David Schnaiderman muses: “Forget the verbal pyrotechnics... You’re still the Jew, the minority, for many, a marginal being” (6). Steinberg’s Magdalena, too, is a marginal being, with a Jewish and womanly identity so questioned that even her name is unstable: “When I say Magdalena” it’s just a provisional name.

For one hundred years, since the time Argentina pursued a pro-European immigration policy aimed at populating and modernizing the land, there has been an ongoing battle between those forces who wish to retain the discourse of exclusion and those who wish to embrace a discourse of inclusion that mirrors what the nation really is. The events surrounding the AMIA bombing, especially the subsequent investigation, give a good picture of the struggle. First, who planted the bomb? Apparently, international terrorists, under the direction of Iran. But nothing is sure. Four years after the explosion, there is “still no justice,” to cite the painful title of a report just issued by the American Jewish Committee: “Despite ongoing assurances from Argentine officials that the case is being pursued diligently, those who destroyed Argentina’s main center of Jewish life... have not been brought to justice... Nor, for that matter, have those who perpetrated the bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires two years earlier” (iii).
Why? Because, most observers believe, powerful local Argentine interests are implicated such as groups with ties to the military, to neo-Nazis, to right-wing activists – in short, to those elements in Argentine society who have always viewed Jews as an alien, diabolical body, and who have attacked Jewish institutions and denounced “Jewish” professions, such as psychoanalysis. The depth of the animosity was driven home to me personally in a chilling anonymous letter I received shortly after I published an op-ed article on the bombing in the New York Times. It read in part: “Listen to me Jewess: It is an affront to all Spanish peoples, esp[ecially] to we Argentines, to even remotely imply that there is such as thing as an Argentine...Jew... As a former Argentine army officer I am insulted by your inferences that these creatures [in other words, Jews] have done anything positive for Argentina. They are known throughout the world as pariahs and manipulators...Viva Perón.”

The author of the hate missive – who unashamedly signed his name – was surely among those heartened that soon after the bomb several important sports clubs refused to compete with Jewish clubs; that neighbors of Jewish schools and synagogues signed petitions asking them to move out; that the suggestion was floated to have all Jewish institutions in Buenos Aires moved to a remote area on the abandoned Buenos Aires docks! The fires of discrimination had been fanned, and after one group is singled out, it does not take long before another follows.

After a memorial mass for the victims of the bomb, the cardinal primate of Argentina, in answer to a journalist’s question on the matter of right for various groups under a new Argentine constitution being debated at the time, responded that homosexuals might want their own country on an island, with their own constitution! During the same period – July, 1994 – a government planning committee drawing up a new national curriculum was forced to erase references to sex education, and to replace the word “gender” with “sex,” since “gender” was perceived by conservative and Church forces to be anti-marriage, anti-family, and anti-social [Franco, 281]).

On the other hand, soon after the bombing there was the mass march of tens of thousands of Argentines of diverse backgrounds and creeds to show solidarity with the victims and to repudiate the violence. There were also the many expressions of support from the intellectual community, a community that understands all too well the dangers of murder and destruction as forms of political coercion and cultural censorship. The novelist Tomás Eloy Martínez reminded Argentines on the pages of the daily Página Doce that it was not so long before that Argentines disappeared under a brutal military dictatorship, and death squads roamed Buenos Aires. The current evil, Martínez insisted, could not be disconnected from the past. Argentines wanted to forget what happened then, to “pardon” the perpetrators, and they want to forget now as well through cowardly calls for isolating Jews. But repressed horrors return with a vengeance, Martínez warned. Let us not fear; let us not forget (32).

Many Argentines have not forgotten. “By mid-1998,” Argentine journalist Sergio Kiernan writes in the report, Still No Justice, Argentines – Jews and Gentiles – hardly consider the terrorist bombing “an affair of exclusively Jewish concern. Its resolution,” he continues, “has become a top priority for society at large, a symbol of what is wrong with Argentina” (12). The most vocal group in the fight to remember and to bring those responsible to justice is Memoria Activa, the significantly-named grassroots organization of private citizens, most but not all Jewish, most but not all relatives of the explosion’s victims. Women are
the motor behind *Memoria Activa*, so much so that they have been called “las madres de la calle Pasteur;” the mothers of Pasteur Street, in analogy an with the now-legendary *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, the mothers of the disappeared who during the seventies dictatorship weekly circled Buenos Aires’s main square clamoring for information about their children, clamoring for justice (*Memoria Activa: cuatro años de impunidad*, 46).

Led by Norma Lew (president), Diana Malamud (secretary), and Laura Ginsberg (treasurer), three mothers and wives who lost children and husbands in the AMIA catastrophe, *Memoria Activa* refuses to play ball with the government, unlike Argentine Jewry’s official representatives. It dismisses the authorities’ so-called investigation as a sham that diverts attention from local culprits by concentrating on the supposed Iranian connection. Every Monday since the bombing, *Memoria Activa* members and sympathizers gather at another Buenos Aires Square, across from the Supreme Court, under the banner of the command from Deuteronomy, tzedek, tzedek tirdof, justice, justice you shall pursue. As the years have passed, *Memoria Activa* has garnered considerable media attention and significant moral weight (Kiernan 9). The list of those who have stood with *Memoria Activa* on so many Mondays, and who have spoken at the vigils, reads like a who’s who of democratically-minded Argentina. Here is what Laura Bonaparte of the *Madres de la de Mayo* said on Monday, October 20, 1997: “Yesterday was Mother’s Day. And this society is trying to put together the broken body of its mother institution. And we have to do this together. Because what happened happened in each and every one of our homes. All of us discovered that state terrorism was alive and well. How can we call it anything else when it’s the state that keeps us from putting that body back together again, the state whose silence makes it complicit? The AMIA didn't abandon us, it was assassinated. Those responsible for the act and for the silence are right here. The legacy of the crime will be perpetuated until such time as the testimony of truth becomes part of the search for justice” (*Memoria Activa*, 58).

The conflict between *Memoria Activa*, the Jewish establishment, and the Menem government became public at the 1997 ceremony marking the third anniversary of the bombing, when the crowd of thirty thousand gave a rousing ovation to the tough speech delivered by *Memoria Activa’s* Laura Ginsberg, and, in the presence of several government ministers, repeatedly interrupted Rubén Beraja, president of the DAIA, Argentine Jewry’s representative agency. After the fiasco, Beraja was summarily summoned by the Minister of the Interior, Carlos Corach (who, incidentally, is Jewish) to explain the embarrassing protest. In May, 1999, barely two months away from the fifth anniversary of the bombing, a new AMIA building was inaugurated on the same spot, built like a bunker meant to withstand any future assaults. The dedication of the gray building, made of doubly-reinforced concrete brimming with the latest high-tech security equipment, was hardly a healing occasion, since *Memoria Activa* and other groups of relatives boycotted the event. Calls to turn the page and begin anew were overshadowed by the lack of justice for the murdered and their survivors (Young 18).

It is clear, then, that the explosion at the AMIA raises serious questions about pluralism in Argentina as it attempts to enter the late twentieth century by overcoming outmoded legacies. To some, “overcoming outmoded legacies” largely means “privatizing,” selling off unprofitable state-controlled industries to transnational investors. But to others the “overcoming” goes much deeper, to the shape of Argentina as a society. Argentine cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo puts it bluntly: Can we find an idea of nation that doesn’t derive from fundamentalism or dictatorship? (109). Will Argentina at century’s end be a space of
oneness – one religion, one language, one color? Or will it be a kaleidoscopic space of multiplicity, where different ethnicities, religions, and races are celebrated, where women no longer need to grieve over their shattered dead?¹

WORKS CITED


¹ NOTE: My sincere thanks to Jacobo Kovadloff, Latin American Consultant, American Jewish Committee, and Anita Weinstein, Director of the Mark Turkow Library of the AMIA and a survivor of the bombing, for their help in gathering material for this article. My translation of Salo Lotersztein poem, “In Memoriam,” follows this article.
IN MEMORIAM

To Marisa and her smile,
receptionist only
to the world’s goodness;

To Jaime, dean of workers
and culture makers.

To Marta, Yanina, Noemi, and Silvana,
the girls in Social Work,
young and open,
ready to alleviate others’ sorrow and pain;

To those who met us
at the door
and watched our coming and going
with a human touch:
Carlitos, Naum, Ricki, Gregorio and Mauricio;

To Rosita, the operator,
who will never again say:
“AMIA, JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER OF
BUENOS AIRES, MY NAME
IS ROSITA, HOW CAN I HELP YOU?”

To Susy and Dorita,
who kept the Job Exchange going
and suffered the anguish of joblessness,
opening doors of hope
with their search.

To the people of the Burial Society,
who brought comfort to the bereaved
in their loved ones’ final hours;
to the tireless Kuky and his stoic assistants –
Nober, Claudio, the young Agustín and Fabián –
who were taken away, together with Rita,
the one with the bright blue eyes.

To Mirta, trapped
under the rubble,
who after that day
can never again take care of her kids.
To Cacho Chemuel, who was saved and brought back to life,
only to be caught by death this time around.
To the memory of the men in Maintenance:
Olgario, dragged down by his ailing heart;
Buby, who brought the hot coffee every morning;
Avedaño, who came from Chile
to fix lights
but was swept up by the dark.
To Jorgito
who was just coming
from the corner coffee shop
feeling so alive
when the deadly bomb
caught him
and blew him apart
with his tray full of cups;
to Paola, so young and perky,
who was coming to pick them up
and picked up death and desolation instead.

To the Bolivian workers
who came to find
a better future
and didn’t
because the terrorists “decided”
what was to become of them;
to the passerby who just happened to chance
into the valley of death;
to the girl
who signed up for college
and took only one final exam;
to the architect
who designed for Life;
to those who were there to take care of some matter
or to find work so that they could go on living;
to all those who fell or suffered
simply because they were close by,
in next door stores and houses,
paying for the horrible desire to harm.

To all of them:
our anguish, our pain,
our solidarity as those who survived.

Salo Lotersztein
Iranian Jewish Women Discover the Power of Words

by Farideh Dayanim Goldin

Iran, a country famous for its literary heritage, is known both for beautiful poetry and for a rich oral tradition. Yet, until very recently, Iranian Jewish women had no place in this history. What kept them from writing and from becoming writers? Before we discuss, criticize, or praise the literary works of Jewish women of Iranian heritage, we need to understand the women’s long silence, the conditions that constrained them in the past, and those that constrain them now.

For many centuries, life for Jewish women in Iran meant poverty, early marriages, and illiteracy. Although this destitution was the lot of most Iranians, Jewish women suffered the most by having the lowest social standing. Bernard Lewis, a scholar of Jews under Islam, explains, “the rank of a full member of society was restricted to free male Muslims” (8). Slaves, women and nonbelievers were not equal members of society. Jewish women were classed the lowest, suffering the double jeopardy of sexism and anti-Semitism.

Like other groups of severely oppressed people, the Jewish community itself pushed women down even further. During World War II, Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Levy witnessed with a “violent shock” the unbearable lives of Iranian Jews, “where girls of nine or ten years of age were permitted to marry” (Cowan 259). Under such circumstances, young girls became perishable commodities. Unless married at a very young age, they “spoiled” and were no longer of value. My paternal grandmother, Tavoos, used to tell the grandchildren the story of her first engagement:

I was only nine years old. Your great grandmother, Bibi, would take my hand and lead me to the streets of the mahaleh (the Jewish ghetto) to my fiancée's house. There, his mother would sit me by a pile of vegetables and herbs to clean for dinner. It was my test to see if I was clever and a good worker; if I was obedient; if I was not zabon deraz (a girl with a big mouth).

My fiancée, a man is his twenties, would come home for lunch and put me on his lap and play games with me – and everyone would laugh. But as soon as they were busy and I had a minute alone, I ran away...

Every time I escaped, Bibi would scream, beat her chest in exasperation and cry, “You are ruining your reputation! Who would marry you now?” Finally, the family returned me one day saying I was not suitable for their son. I had to wait until I was 15 since no one came to ask for my hand. I was married to your grandfather, who had recently lost his wife in childbirth. He had three children from the previous marriage that I had to nurture. But your grandfather was a tsadik, a righteous man, a respected Rabbi. He was a good man.

Whereas my grandfather was a learned man who had mastery over Hebrew, my grandmother never learned to read or write even her own name.

The custom of early marriages made the Jewish women of Iran, “farming models,” as Andrea Dworkin labels them, “to plow for the purpose of growing crops [of children]” (Tong 81-2). Lacking birth control, they gave birth to numerous children without the benefit of medical care and, in the process, many lost their own lives. Jewish women nurtured babies when they were children themselves. They raised their
children in dark hovels of Jewish ghettos, worrying about food and medical care. In the 1930s, a traveler to Iran observed with horror how young Jewish women aged early, their energies focused purely on survival (Landshut 62). The slave-like labor to which Jewish women were condemned created a slave mentality: a loss of desire for power, for improving their lives and for control over their own destinies.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins writes of the power of the “blues” to lift black women’s spirit and to help them endure the hardship of poverty, racism and gender-bias (99). Jewish women in Iran did not create any “soul” music to comfort them. In fact, with cultural restrictions against (nice) women’s singing, they often went about their chores in silence. Neither did they possess the knowledge to pray for comfort. Electrical services were not available until the 1950s. Access to television came much later, not until the 1970s outside Tehran. Jewish women were cut off from the progress of world Jewry and at times even from other Jewish communities around the country.

The women of the royal harems were writing poetry during the Qajar dynasty in the latter part of the 19th century (Moshir Salemi). Often more educated than those in the rest of the country, some had the opportunity to travel abroad and to hear poetry recited in the Persian courts. They were also affluent: their cooks, maids and nannies allowed them much leisure time to ponder life. Music, song and poetry were familiar to the many princesses. Some even ventured into writing poetry themselves.

Jewish women had no such options. Facing oppressive poverty, illiteracy, early marriages, and a heavy burden of housework and child care, they had no opportunity to write during those years. When Moslem women were trying to express their literary creativity, even if under many political and religious restrictions, Jewish women missed the era completely, too busy with the drudgeries of life.

What then sustained Jewish women through these years of total desolation and isolation? The strain of hardship was often lessened through the cherished *dard-e del*, talking of the “aching heart.” Iranian Jews lived in multi-family homes until the latter part of the 20th century. Women gathered in the kitchen or around the washtubs exchanging gossip. Visiting the synagogue, dropping the *khaleh bibi* (*cholent*) by the community oven, collecting water from the public water spouts also became occasions for seeking advice, sharing new stories, and embellishing the old ones.

My grandfather and his fathers before him were rabbis and *dayanim*, highly respected judges in Shiraz, who tried to resolve disagreements in the community to avoid the Islamic courts. Their wives commanded much respect among the Jewish women of the ghetto. On many afternoons, the children spread a *kilim* by the front door for my grandmother, where she would make herself comfortable. The younger women of the family served her tea, *sharbat* (a fruit-flavored drink), limeade, and of course the *qalyan* (waterpipe). After cleaning up from the big afternoon dinner, women would stop by, sit, gossip, and “talk of the aching heart.” The old matriarch always reached into her bag of memories for advice. In the Iranian tradition, these women used *zarbolmasal* (fables) to communicate their feelings. Thus, they created new stories by mixing myth with reality.

*Dard-e del* had many functions. It was a healing tool, a source of empowerment, and a Middle Eastern version of a “support group.” The custom created a reservoir of stories that circulated among women as yet unaware of the power of written words. Generations later, Iranian Jewish women reach back to this collection of oral histories to record their mothers’ stories, to cross over from talking themselves free to writing themselves free.
The lack of formal education for Jewish women and their reliance on oral tradition encouraged superstition. In a survey of the Iranian Jewish community in the 1950s, Siegfried Landshut observed that a common occupation of women was “the selling of charms and amulets against illness, danger of one sort or another, and to ward off the Evil Eye” (64). Lacking knowledge of prayer, women often relied on superstition and witchcraft to control the events around them. They used esp�nd (wild rue), salt crystals and amulets in the shape of an eye to avert the evil eye from a new baby, a pregnant woman or a sick family member. Women did not leave babies alone, fearing jhǐn, or az’una (harmful spirits) could take their souls. The belief was that the az’una is a cat’s friend or a cat could embody its spirit (Loeb 219). My paternal grandmother, Tavoos, always warned that warts were a result of splashing water on cats. A remnant of that strange folk belief appears in the contemporary novel Persian Brides, by Dorit Rabinyan, an Israeli writer of Iranian heritage.

When she was a young girl, it was her second nature to persecute cats... “Avoundareh, poor things,” the villagers threatened her, shaking their hands in the air. “The god of the cats will take terrible revenge on you, avoundareh, bad girl.”

But Miriam Hanoun did not heed their warnings, and when at last she married and bore her first child on a hot night, her arms were scored with scratches left by the claws of dead cats. . . . A hate filled embittered alley cat stretched his lithe body, climbed in through the open window, padded up the baby, and crouched on top of it, covering its nose and mouth. When the baby stopped breathing, the cat rose quietly and slunk back out through the window. (32-3)

Rabinyan adopts many of the folktales told by her Persian grandmothers, exemplifying how superstition thus became a part of Iranian Jewish women’s oral history, supplying future generations with stories to enrich their literary creativity.

The only thorough study of Jewish literary creativity in Iran has been done by the Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, documented in three volumes: Yahoudian Irani dar tarikhe moaser (The History of Contemporary Iranian Jews) and two volumes of Padyavand. There were Jewish poets writing in Judeo-Persian, Hebrew and Persian as early as the 12th century, according to Amnon Netzer:

The Jews of Iran gave expression to their spiritual world and conveyed their religious and social experience in the language of poetry. It seems that this form of artistic and aesthetic expression served as a source of emotional strength, ameliorating the physical and mental agony of the centuries of suffering and persecution. (41-114).

None of these poets were women.

Jewish men worked as entertainers at weddings and various simchas. They wrote poetry and music in imitation of the great Persian poets as well as their own originals. Jewish women entertainers, often singers or dancers, had the reputation of being harjaee (whores) for daring to step into the public arena. Is it possible that a few Jewish women might have written poetry which they were afraid to call their own, fearing slander?

Jewish women of Shiraz sing vassonak (wedding songs) to the bride in various ceremonies connected to weddings. A young bride was often accompanied to the public baths with close female friends and family.
Food and music was an important part of this tradition.

Ay hamouni, ay hamouni, ab-e hamoum tazeh kon
Khaom aroos miad hamoum, sharbatesh amadeh kon

Bath keeper, bath keeper, refresh the water at the hammam
The bride is coming to the hammam, prepare for her a refreshing drink

Vasoonak are sung during banandazi (removing body hair), at the ceremony of examining the bride's virginity, during the wedding ceremony itself, and at hajleh (taking the bride to the wedding bed):

Shab gozasht o nim-e shab gozasht,
o chashme doomad entezar
Kheir bebini naneye aroos,
in gol az khoonat dar ar

Night has passed and midnight has approached;
the groom still awaits
We wish you the best, mother of the bride,
Allow this flower to leave your home

Ki be hajleh? Shazdeh doomad ba zanesh
Ki begardeh dor hajleh? Doshmanay dor o baresh

Who is at the hajleh (the marriage canopy)?
The bride and the groom
Who is orbiting the hajleh?
The enemy around them

“Being orbited by the enemies,” places the bride and groom in the center of the world. It symbolizes the kapora. Another stanza expresses the bride's anxiety about her new home:

Man namiraftam be qorbat to ferestadi mana
Gar bemiram man be qorbat khoun-e man girad tora

I would not have ventured to unknown places as you have sent me
If I happen to die there, my blood will be a stain on you.

The mother of the bride prays:
Che konam chia konam keh roud-e joonam mibaran
Ey khoda nazret konam keh rahe dourash nabaren

What should I do, what can I do?
they are taking my loved one.
Please God, I pray that they (the groom's family)
will not take her far away
Yet another poem, sung by the women of the groom’s family, comforts the bride and her mother:

\[
\begin{align*}
Omadim aqdess konim \quad o naymadim saktshes konim \\
Rokhsat az babash begirim farda shab aqdess konim
\end{align*}
\]

We have come to betroth her 
and not to harden her life 
We have come to ask her father 
his permission to betroth her tomorrow night 

Thus, the purpose of *vasoonak* is to praise the bride, to comfort her and her mother and to reassure them that the unknown world the young girl is entering will be safe. The almost complete version of *vasoonak* in *The History of Contemporary Iranian Jews* is described as Shirazi folk wedding songs (238-251). During the twenty two years that I lived in Shiraz, I rarely heard the poems sung by anyone but women. The same holds true for wedding ceremonies held by Shirazi Jews in the U.S. 

It is my hypothesis that the poetry was created by women over time, and that it served to include them in a ceremony that was otherwise not theirs. Men signed the wedding contract and argued over its legal and financial terms. Men performed the religious parts of the ceremony, said the *brakha*. Women, I believe, found their own words and ways to include themselves in this crucial life event. They created their own unique community and gave it importance and dignity with songs and poetry. *Vasoonak* is a part of Shirazi woman's oral tradition, created by women who probably could not read or write.

Three different movements were responsible for creating equal access to modern education to Iranian Jews. First, various Christian missionary schools reached out to the poverty-stricken Jewish community in Iran in hopes of converting them to Christianity by acts of kindness. In the second half of the nineteenth century, according to Abraham Cohen, not only did they offer free education for those who could not afford it, but they also fed the students and gave their parents financial assistance. They attracted girls to their institutions by offering vocational training (23-4). 

Second, *Otzer ha-Torah* schools were established in Iran in 1947 with the help of the Joint Distribution Committee, American Sephardic Jews and the philanthropist Yitzhak Shalom (28). The program was led by Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Levy. The main purpose of the school was Jewish religious teaching. However, its narrow focus on *ashkenazi* rules and customs and its lack of respect for and understanding of Iranians' unique beliefs and needs, made it irrelevant and unpopular among the majority of Iranian Jews. Additionally, the school for girls that was established in Tehran only was “small and poor”(Cohen 29-30). 

The third movement was the *French Alliance Israelite Universelle*. The efforts of this organization, started during the reign of Naseredin Shah of Qajar dynasty in 1872, did not bear fruit until 25 years later. The king feared that the establishment of a Jewish school would provide its enemies with an excuse to lead the masses against a “Jew loving” government (Nateq 116-8).
The French-based Alliance was led by Joseph Cazes who at first expressed his hesitation about opening a school for girls as well:

_Since the day I arrived in Tehran, the Jewish community requested opening of a girls' school along with the boys. I was speechless and told them that it was not impossible but it needed patience and time._ (132-33)

Cazes finally opened both a boys' and a girls' school in 1898, the latter with an enrollment of 150 girls and a faculty of female teachers from France (Alliance 42). Later, he noted that the school not only helped the girls but also prevented them from the attraction of missionary schools (Nateq 132-33, translation to Persian from _Les Juif d'Iran_). Alliance elementary schools later opened in the cities of Isfahan, Shiraz, Hamedan, Kermanshah and Sanandaj (Cohen 24).

Unfortunately, each school opening sparked waves of anti-Semitic activities and pogroms. For example, Moslem clergymen in Isfahan complained that the newly established school had hidden two Moslem women under “suspicious” circumstances. In reality, the two women had been hired to teach sewing to the Jewish girls (Nateq 136). There were also reports of Jewish women being accosted or even kidnapped by agents of the Garland Christian Missionary on their way to Alliance (136).

Missionary zeal and the desire of the Moslem clergy to incite the people against Jews for political reasons made the already difficult educational situation even worse for Iranian Jews. However, the Alliance schools were successful in changing the direction of Jewish women's education in Iran.

Just after the turn of century, _Alliance_ had 150 female students in Tehran; 270 in Isfahan by 1904; 250 in Hamedan; and 90 in Shiraz, the site of most anti-Semitic riots. The girls' school in Kermanshah was established seven years later after the boys' school there. Most girls attended school until age 14. In preparation for their marriage, they studied sewing, knitting, carpet making, cooking, reading and writing (Nateq 139).

Jewish life improved in 1925 as the Pahlavi dynasty came to power in Iran. Reza Shah eliminated the clerical influence in government and the legal barriers for religious equality. During the reign of his son, Mohammed Reza Shah (1941-1979), Jews started to leave the ghettos. Schooling was no longer the privilege of the elite. Many Jewish women were allowed to postpone early marriages in favor of higher education. As the rate of literacy increased among Iranian women in general during the “White Revolution” of the 1960s, the pace of Jewish women's education accelerated.

By 1970's the overall rate of literacy among Iranian women was 31% (Lanczowski), but few Jewish women had received higher education. Azizeh Baral attended Tehran University in 1939, “I was the only Jewish girl,” she remembers, “and I was distraught that so many capable high school friends could not find their way to college (Yahudian: vol ii, 63-265).

However, Jewish women were soon in schools of higher education in large numbers. They chose a path of knowledge that could provide them with financial security, in which the study of literature was almost never included. Given this situation, it is understandable that no poems, short stories or novels are known to have been written by a Jewish woman in Iran until recently.
There are two possible explanations for this lack of enthusiasm. Even during the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty, “words” were dangerous. Expressions of free thinking, diversity or dissatisfaction would lead to prison sentences. Rivanne Sandler writes that for serious Iranian writers “freedom of expression meant the freedom to depict society as it was.” He adds, “writing about certain aspects of Iranian life thus became a political act in itself ” (247). Having recently left the ghetto, Jews feared the government. They also felt indebted to the regime. They did not desire to forfeit their newly founded comforts by being critical.

Additionally, Jewish women were expected to keep their opinions to themselves. Parvaneh Saraf writes, “it was not long ago that women were not called by their own names. They were someone’s mother or wife” (27). For years, she adds, their questions were responded with “khase shalom (God forbid),” which silenced them (28).

In the 1960’s, an outspoken Shirazi woman, Ashraf Cohen dared to ask the men congregating for worship on Rosh Hashanah to approach the government authorities and request Jewish holiday leaves for their sons from the army. She was booed and jeered by male worshippers and asked to retreat to the balcony with other women.“Do you see the other women voicing an opinion? Go sit with them, where you belong!” A female spectator remembers feeling small and humiliated (Sabbar). Her husband’s recollection is of an immodest woman, a zaban deraz (one with a long tongue), stupidly talking of matters of which she had no knowledge. Such silencing of women’s everyday voices, I believe, had a direct impact on their literary creativity.

Many women were still forced to marry young. Those who aspired to write had to either delay or forgo of their creativity. Mahin Amid, a poet living in Los Angeles, remembers writing poetry in high school and hoping to continue her work in college in the 1960s, but her parents insisted on marriage instead. She was married at age 18. Her training in poetry comprised a few private lessons.

Shokouh Darvish, an aspiring writer, unwillingly married a cousin at age 15. Her sons’ struggle with the genetic disorder Hereditary Inclusion Body Myopathy, which is the direct consequence of marrying a close family member, is at the core of her writings. Homa Sarshar, another Iranian Jewish writer, was also married after high school. “Parents were afraid that their daughter would not get married if they were too educated,” Sarshar said. “Get married first,” Sarshar’s parents told her, “you can always have higher education later in life.”

Furthermore, secular education in Iran stressed rote learning rather than comprehension. Geography was taught without a map, history without class discussions. If taught, art was a direct copying of another artist’s work. World literature and philosophy were systematically eliminated from the curriculum. Teachers disapproved of critical thinking, which is the basis of literary creativity and mocked students who dared to ask intelligent questions.

Additionally, students in high school majored in either tabiee (earth science, biology & chemistry), riazi (mathematics and physics) or adabiat (Persian language & literature). Whereas English was the second language taught to biology and math students, Arabic was the foreign language for those studying Persian literature. Studying Arabic and Persian literature, most Jews thought, was not Western and would not help them in life. There was also the fear of facing a more severe form of anti-Semitism from teachers of Arabic and Persian language and literature. A Jewish woman, who chose to study math instead of literature in the
1990s, blames her anti-Semitic literature teachers. Looking back over the lost years, she questions, “Will I ever write?” (Broad Minds 110)

For those who studied math or sciences, writing classes did not exist and there were no instruction given for ensha (essay writing) in language classes. Subject matters were often tightly controlled to muffle any sign of individuality and free thinking. When I was a junior in high school, a stubborn classmate in Namous high school in Shiraz was sent to the office for writing about her religion, Baha’ism. She was reprimanded and was threatened with expulsion.

The few Jewish women who studied English literature in the institutes of higher education later did not have a chance to pursue writing. They were mostly encouraged to work as translators. In college, the most motivated women often chose sciences over literature. Gina B. Nahai was encouraged to take a course of study that would give her financial independence. Her father said, “I sent Gina to a Swiss boarding school so she could learn to be independent, knowing that some day she would live in a different country. I never thought she could reach her potential as a Jewish woman in Iran (Barkhordar).” Nahai was awaiting her acceptance to the law school when she started recording family stories in order to pass time. The tales became the start of her first novel, Cry of the Peacock. By the time her admissions papers to law school arrived, she had decided on a change of career and instead studied creative writing.

Michelle Koukhab's parents had assumed that she would study medicine like her father. They wanted her to have a job with financial security. Michelle did not share her poems with them at first, fearing their disappointment. Shirindokht Daqiqian, a successful graduate of the Alliance School, Etchad, is a well known translator still living in Iran. In an interview, she credited her brother for pushing her to study chemistry instead of literature in Meli University in Tehran. “Science gives you a different angle in life and expands your mind,” Daqiqian said. She is only one of many women I have interviewed who write for “themselves,” shying away from calling themselves poets or writers, never considering publishing their work.

Yet another pattern of withdrawal from creative writing appears in the career of Homa Sarshar. After leaving her job as a translator and immigrating to the United States, she worked as a journalist for an Iranian radio station in Los Angeles. She edited three books on the history of Jews in Iran and published two volumes of books consisting of her editorials for the Jewish monthly magazine, Shofar.

Sarshar views the Iranian revolution as a “catastrophe” that “paralyzed” her “pen” and silenced her “tongue” (preface). The Revolution was also an impetus for a different kind of creativity in her. Throughout the two volumes of her memoirs and essays, dar koocheh pas koochehay-e qorbat (In the Back Alleys of Exile), Sarshar includes her poetry, which is a reflection of her deep sorrow for leaving her homeland. “These writings reveal my natural passage through the five recognized stages associated with loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance,” she writes.”I started to search for a new identity, and even began to compose poetry with a boldness which surprises me today....”

Sarshar wrote the first known play by an Iranian Jewish woman. “From Esther to Esther” is an account of the heroine's internal struggle with her new American identity (Terua 5-28). She strives to define the Persian queen's strengths and weaknesses as a woman and to define her own image in the process. The play examines the dichotomy of Queen Esther's story: was she manipulated as just a “beautiful body” or was she the mind behind a courageous act to save the Jews? Some Iranian Jews shunned the play, Sarshar
said, believing the Queen's image insulting. The message of the play, the role of Iranian Jewish women in keeping the family together in exile, was lost on many.

The criticism may show that, as the novelist Nahid Rachlin once observed, “Iranians have not learned to read for fun.” Although Sarshar’s play reaffirms her courage at the end, the mere fact that she has dared to examine the Queen’s motives is shocking to Iranians Jews. Sadly, partly because of this criticism and partly because she has become comfortable with her new identity as an Iranian-American Jewish woman, Sarshar has ceased to write creatively. In an interview, she emphasized that she is a journalist – not a poet or a playwright.

This silencing, both voluntary and forced, of talents is evident among many Iranian Jewish women. They often lack formal literary education that could enhance their confidence in their writing. I interviewed Mahin Amid, a poet who immigrated to California after the revolution. Her poetry was published in various journals in Iran. One of her poems, celebrating women’s expanded role in society, was displayed at the tomb of Reza Shah in Tehran. When, after the Revolution, she was approached by the government to write a poem in praise of Khomeini, she refused. “I told them I don’t write poems for kings or government leaders. I write poetry as an expression of my feelings.” Amid’s house was ransacked, her jewelry and money confiscated by the government agents. The Iranian government pronounced her “mamno ol qalam,” the one with a forbidden pen. She soon left Iran for the United States.

Amid’s poetry has matured in the United States. Her poems, often in style of classical Persian poetry, were of love and its miseries. Now, social consciousness gives them a soul. She wrote the following poem out of anger for a government that dictated her moves and her disappointment at those who followed without asking:

At the end, chains on feet I danced
though informed, feigning ignorance I danced.
With their rhythm I danced
not, but in punishment, chains on feet I danced.
Though everyone watched my dance of death,
they did not see, for invisible I danced.
I did not enliven the night of those drunk with wine,
alone and rejected, for those without feet or head I danced.
There was a mirror reflecting me and the likeness of others,
broken heart, weary, and anxious I danced.
Music and song reached the world from the baths,
in darkness for the deaf I danced.
I set forth with lofty purpose and reached out with good wishes,
so I would not be accused, for passersbys I danced.
In the evolving world, like a captive in a cage,
wings folded one over another, flying with tied feathers I danced.
Like a breeze in a flower’s hug, I am a companion and a confident,
but in a gale with tattered clothes I danced.
From sunrise to sunset I have seen a ray of hope,
searching for it from border to border I danced.
I looked and saw others looking with wonder,
without knowing, for the satisfaction of others I had danced.¹

¹ This is a simple translation of the poem without attention to poetic form and rhyme.
A book of Amid’s poems was published in 1987. The rest of her poems are scattered in various journals or unpublished. Two Jewish-Iranian magazines, *Shofar* and *Chashm Andaz* publish poetry and short stories, and there is a literary circle among Iranian Jews living in the Los Angeles area that encourages women to write. But most poets and writers I interviewed seemed astonished that anyone would be interested in their writing.

Michelle Kourkhab is a promising female poet. “For me, poetry has been an outlet to create a new language where I can understand all my cultural parts,” she says. Poetry fuses Michelle’s two cultures, her life in America as a woman with many opportunities and her Iranian world, which she has seen only through her parents’ stories and the tastes and smells of Persian food at home. She writes about her borrowed memories:

I ask for stories of purple onion domes and auditoriums with red velvet chairs.
Men in mustaches and women without faces.
My mother tells me about community bathrooms:
shriveled bodies standing close,
stained flesh, puddles
of dead skin and water.
Chickens she raised in her back yard ran reckless, their heads still red.

I would have liked to go to market:
A woman vends seedless grapes;
a man sells sabzi for homemade dinners,
and the street’s breath is of rotten meat, garbage.

Today in Iran, door closed
a Persian woman copies
television screens of Madonna.
Her thick black hair
hangs in her glitter eyes.
Silver blouse half-buttoned, naked shoulders, one nipple.
Slinky legs parade over
Persian rugs. Her mouth
painted strawberry,
kisses vacant air.

Michelle’s interest is a new phase in her life that has taken both parents by surprise. “Growing up in the United States, she avoided Iranian music and literature, trying to integrate into American life,” Michelle’s mother said. Michelle now combines the two diverse and sometimes opposite cultures to recreate herself.

In 1946, William S. Haas wrote that the novel was a form of literature that did not exist in Iran:

“For, of the two great subjects of the novel, the first (love between man and woman) could not, in view of woman's status, become the object of literary description and analysis – except in lyrics – while the second (the social problem) did not present itself at all. It would not be surprising if some women writers would appear on the scene, as they have done in Turkey and India, to contribute their part to the literary effort. (186)
Hass predicted accurately that education would be the catalyst for women writers' interest in prose. However, as in poetry, Jewish women did not keep step with the rest of Iranian women. Simin Daneshvar, Iran's first female novelist published her first novel, Savushun, in 1969. Since then, Iranian women have written short stories and novels in a fast pace, many of which have been translated into English.

Considering the small Jewish community of only 25,000, I was amazed to find a Jewish woman now writing in Iran. She is Ilham Yaqoubian, author of Daryay-e Khamoush (The Silent Sea) and Tondbad-e Sarnevesh (The Strong Wind of Fate). The inaccessibility of Yaqoubian's books is a major obstacle to her recognition. Jewish female critics both in Iran and abroad ignore her work as mediocre. Shirindokht Daqiqian, a literary critic and a well known translator in Iranian circles, would not acknowledge Yaqoubian as a writer: “How can one begin to compare her work to Toni Morrison's Beloved or Nadine Gordimer's July's People;” the two books Daqiqian has recently translated into Persian. I asked her if it was possible for Iranian writers to be social critics without fearing reprisal from the government. She emphasized that one of the qualities that distinguishes a superb writer is her courage. Persian, she said, is a flexible language that can accommodate ambiguities. She added that Yaqoubian's topic and style need improvement; that she needs to read more of the masterpieces and to educate herself in the techniques of good writing in order to set herself apart.

Unfortunately Yaqoubian was denied a visa to the United States, where she was hoping to participate in various conferences for Iranian writers. Her work is not included in the annual publication by the International Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History.

When criticized for writing in English, the Indian writer, Anita Desai explained, “to me the English language was the key to a world literature” (The Other Voice 64). In fact, many Indian authors have claimed international recognition by writing in English (Dharwadker 237). Yaqoubian needs the English language market. Unless translated, Yaqoubian's books will fail to have an impact abroad.

Lack of recognition, however, is not the first impediment Yaqoubian has faced in publishing her novels. She wrote her first novelette at age 16 and submitted it for publication at age 20 at the insistence of family and friends. The publisher was hesitant. The author had three elements against her: youth, gender and religion. The book was heavily edited without the author’s permission to pass the ethical, social and political requirements for publication. The only original copy is still held by the publisher who refuses its return.

In her second book, Yaqoubian had to manipulate both her language and themes to avoid similar censorship. The very first words in Tondbad-e Sarnevesh are “benam-e khoda (in God's name). Throughout the story, God’s name is evoked as responsible for many of the events. Fate determines Shaqayeq Amini’s life, and faith in God propels her toward the future. She is incapable of controlling events and instead stays passive in the face of natural and supernatural forces. She allows family and friends, who are wiser than a single woman, to make the important decisions for her.

Another author of Iranian heritage is Susanne Pari, the daughter of an Iranian Moslem father and a half-Jewish American mother. Pari’s life was divided between her home in Iran, where she never had contact with Iranian Jews, and her home in a predominately Jewish neighborhood in New York City. She felt that her mother was alienated from both sides of her family. Pari’s father once told her, “you understand that no one here knows that your mother is Jewish,” implying that it should be an “unpleasant”
secret between them. Although her mother had converted to Islam for sake of her husband’s family, Pari realized that her mother’s Jewish background was a liability for the entire family in Iran. However, the Jewish community in the United States has claimed Pari as one of their own. She is often invited to speak to Jewish groups.

A comparison of Yaqoubian's book with Pari’s *The Fortune Catcher* underscores the gift of freedom of speech that Pari enjoys. Both books contain love stories and end with happy marriages. In the following scene, Leyla and Dariush realize their love for each other in *The Fortune Catcher*:

When he kisses her, he feels their bodies trembling. She tastes like cinnamon. He kisses her neck and she presses her hands against his back. He feels as if they have done this many times before, as if he does not have to think what comes next, as if that had also has already happened before. He feels her nipples against his chest and pulls back to look at her. She is perfect, he thinks. They stand there staring – breathless, expectant. He puts his hand over her breast. She closes her eyes. (70)

In contrast, Shaqayeq in *Tondbad-e Sarnevesht* meets the husband her mother has chosen for her.

Her mother greets her after school:

We had a guest today, a very nice and wise woman. I had heard about her before. She has a nice son with a good job who has seen you and has approved of you.

I know you will like him. I have seen the son from a distance. (64)

When facing her daughter’s refusal, she adds coldly and with indifference: “Anyhow, I have given them a positive response and we have made all arrangements” (65). Shaqayeq feels like a sacrifice. However, when she meets Farhad in a room full of chaperones, she realizes that he is handsome. At the end of the chapter she recognizes that she has misjudged her mother, who has made the right choice for her happiness (83-5).

Whereas Pari’s only concern is writing a viable book that would please her readers, Yaqoubian worries about censorship and even the threat of judicial punishment. However, she is amazingly clever in manipulating the language. She creates two voices: one serving the heroine's needs and the other society's ethical and moral codes of conduct.

Although morality dictates the necessity of an arranged marriage, it is Shaqayeq who chooses her husband. She finds Farhad to be a kind and open minded man who encourages her to continue her education. Their private communications are wrapped in a shroud of small events and endless conversations to divert attention from the transgression of ethical codes. In the end, Shaqayeq marries Farhad for his looks, his intelligence, his unquestioning respect for her and their compatibility. The author conveys a love that simmers just below the surface of the book.

In Yaqoubian's novel, time and events are never identified. The setting is Tehran and the northern cities along the Caspian sea. Is it before or after the Revolution? Only “the clock” and “the seasons” tell us the time. There are no religious clues. The weddings and funerals are devoid of any ceremonies. The names are all Persian. Ironically the only one with a religious connotation is her own name, Yaqoubian, meaning a descendent of Jacob.
While Yaqoubian was trying to find a publisher for her first novel, another Iranian Jewish woman was writing her first novel, *Cry of the Peacock*, in the United States. Gina B. Nahai was born in Tehran. She studied in a Swiss boarding school and emigrated to the United States with her parents in 1977. She has her Masters in Creative Writing from University of Southern California. Nahai has just finished her second novel, *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, and is currently working on her third novel, *Sunday's Silence*.

Nahai is the first novelist to write of Jewish women's experiences across the last two centuries in Iran. Her two published books are the first known novels to portray Jewish life in Iran from a female point of view. She concentrates on women's lives in the Jewish ghettos, their victimization by the Moslems, abuse by their own male co-religionists, and their unbroken will to survive. The author's masterful use of myths and the traditional style of exaggeration give her novels a Persian flavor. Nahai explores the web of customs and traditions that suffocated girls in marriage to older men in *Cry of the Peacock*:

Joseph the Winemaker had never slept with a woman before. He came into the room that night to see his wife, and found a child crying in his bed. Behind the door, a dozen people had gathered to see the marriage consummated. They were the bride and groom's parents, the rabbi who had married them, the elders who commanded authority solely by their age and years of suffering. They would wait there until Joseph had conquered his bride and proven his manhood and her chastity. (79)

Through such scenes, the author draws clear pictures of Iranian Jewish women's lives in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Another writer of Persian heritage is the Israeli author, Dorit Rabinian. Her first book Persian Brides is written in Hebrew. She depicts two young Jewish brides from the small fictional village of Omerijan, recapturing Jewish life in countless forgotten corners of Iran. Many women of my generation have heard similar stories from their grandmothers.

The bride was expected to display her skills at cleaning and chopping the *sabzi*, the seasoning herbs that Janjan sold in the bazaar. Nazi was nine years old and Flora thirteen when the joyous ululation, *li-li-li*, burst out around Homa, and the bride's kohl-painted eyes widened in alarm. The women of the family and the village formed a circle around her, pressing their breasts together and shaking them as they danced with widespread legs, laughing and beating on drums.

Nazi was tense as if it was she and not Homa who was going to marry the singer's son. She ignored the teasing and observed everything closely, learning and absorbing, so as not to fail the *sabzi* test when her time came. (141)

Nazi, who has not menstruated yet, is taught to value life only within the boundaries of marriage. She looks like a child playing “house” at her wedding night. Her dress is many sizes too large; the shoes slip off her feet. She needs to urinate but is too shy to ask permission.

Mousa came in and at once kissed Nazi's lips. His eyes were shut, and his lips tinkled on hers like a teaspoon stirring sugar in a glass of tea. Putting his hand to the front of her dress, he unbuttoned it slowly, until the damp feather breasts fell out with the strip of bed sheet and rolled on the floor. He tickled her with his fingers. Nazi giggled, and the stream of urine that flowed into her underpants spread a pleasant warmth between her thighs. Mousa did not notice the odorous circle that spread slowly through her damp dress. He only opened his eyes and saw Nazi laughing in the dark when he heard his mother’s jubilant voice shouting:
“Well, you finished, Mousa, you finished there?” Miriam Hanoum thumped on the door enthusiastically.
“You two finished now?” (236)

Dorit Rabinyan ends the book with these words, showing her preoccupation with our Persian matrilineage. The author poses harsh questions about women’s lives in patriarchal societies. How could it have happened to our mothers? How would anyone allow a child to marry? Is it rape or matrimony? Why did mothers encourage the horrors that had been once theirs?

Rabinyan’s stories are drawn from her mother and grandmothers’ bags of memories. Unlike Nahai, she has not researched Iranian history. There are errors in her novel such as the presence of camels in northern Iran. She mixes real-life stories with tales of superstition to recreate imaginatively the country she has never seen. The result is a fascinating mystical story.

The language is a powerful tool Rabinyan employs to step back in time and place. The Persian words flavor the book and add yet another layer of meaning for Persian-speaking readers. Some of the Persian words are usually used only by the older generation of Jews. An Iranian woman said:

Having left Iran 23 years ago and my grandmother being dead for almost 10 years, I never thought I would hear these words again. I definitely never expected to see them in print. I was told by my parents not to use the unsophisticated Jewish ghetto words. We had left the ghettos, trying to integrate ourselves in the more sophisticated world of educated Moslems. We would have liked to forget “words” that would identify us as ghetto Jews, or simply Jews. The feeling that these same words stir in me is difficult to explain: a combination of sadness, nostalgia and belonging. I feel that my background is important and that my grandmother’s voice, although small, should be a valued part of me. (Zamanian)

No book by Iranian women writers explores life in today’s Iran as closely as The Fortune Catcher by Susanne Pari. The two main characters of the book, Dariush and Layla, are wealthy, well-educated and westernized members of the Tehran elite, like the author herself. Her reference to Jewish life does not go beyond showing the blind mistrust of Jews by the Moslem fanatics and the Israelis’ attempts to help them leave the country to safety. Yet Pari succeeds in portraying various segments of Tehrani culture. Pari is unafraid of criticizing the Islamic regime and exposing Iranians’ unhappiness with their religious leaders, nor is she afraid of using sexuality as a normal expression of human feelings. On both fronts, she is contesting the accepted norms of Iranian society today.

What is the future of women’s writing in Iran and abroad? How will the books written in Iran reach Iranian women abroad, and will books by Iranian women abroad be translated into Persian? There is already a second generation of Iranian women in exile. Will they, as writers, be able to give their books a Persian flavor and theme?

The future of Jewish women writers of Iranian background is unclear. In the United States and Israel, as first-generation immigrants die, as the memories of the second generation fade, will the third generation carry the torch? Of course the descendants of Iranian Jews will write. But will it be of Iran? Will the stories carry the memories through the minds of women writers who do not speak the language, who have never seen the country? Moslem women living in Iran will keep their stories flowing. With the rush of Jewish immigration out of Iran, however, the well will eventually run dry for Jewish women. It is imperative for them to write now before the stories are forgotten.
WORKS CITED

———. Telephone interview. 19 Aug. 1998
Barkhordar, Francois. Telephone interview. 10 Nov. 1998.
Broad Minds Collective, The. Ourselves as Students: Multicultural Voices in the Classroom.
Southern Illinois UP, 1996
Committee to Honor the Alliance Israeliite Universelle: Former Students and Teachers of Ettehad Network,
Daqiqian, Shirindhokht. Telephone interview. 6 June 1998.
Koukhb, Michelle.“Persia.” Unpublished poem.
Landshut, S. Jewish Communities in the Muslim Countries of the Middle East.
———. Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith.
———. Sunday’s Silence.
———. Telephone interview. 5 may 1998.
Nateg, Homa. Karnameh farhangie farangi dar iran. [Records of Foreign Education in Iran.]


———. E-mail to the author. 16 July 1998.

———. Telephone interview. 6 Aug. 1998.


———. Telephone interview. 15 June 1998.


———. “From Esther to Esther.” *Terua*.


———. Telephone interview. 27 Aug. 1998.


Zamanian, F.D. Personal interview. 10 July 1998.
TESHUVAH AMONG FRENCH JEWISH WOMEN

by Laurence Podselver

This paper began with a conversation with a dear colleague, D. Kaufman, while she was in Paris giving a lecture on feminism and Jewish Studies. She spoke in a particularly skeptical milieu as most scholars here suspect that feminism is an invention of American women. I myself had no training in Women’s Studies since it is not taught at a university level in France, but the social group I was studying prescribed a feminine – if not feminist – approach.

Contrary to procedure among American sociologists, for whom the history and sociology of women constitutes a special field of research, I did not expressly choose to study women. It was my fieldwork among North African Lubavitcher Jews in the Parisian suburb of Sarcelles that led me to a specifically women’s subject, the lives of ba’ilot teshuvah. The decision to study women rather than men and to deal with the separation of the sexes was out of my hands. The anthropological method, based on the researcher’s role as participant-observer, demanded that I respect the strict separation of the sexes in every facet of everyday life. I could not have studied Lubavitcher Jews at all had I not participated in meetings organized by women or taken on some of their roles, such as teaching in a kindergarten, preparing meals, preparing for holidays, helping children with their schoolwork, etc. Being an outsider, I was sometimes allowed to conduct interviews with men in public places or in certain families but I had real access only to the female sector of Hassidic society.

My approach then is in contradistinction to both Lynn Davidmann’s Tradition in a Rootless World and D. Kaufmann’s Rachel’s Daughters who make gender category the main focus of their studies. In their work, gender is not only a fact derived from the field of study where the separation of sexes is explicit, but also an intellectual construct.

Sarcelles is a lower-middle-class suburb 15 km north of Paris, with a population of 57,000 people. Developed in the 1960s to resettle people returning from Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco after France withdrew from its North African colonies, Sarcelles is now a city whose population is 15-20% Jewish. This density of Jews is exceptionally high for France and the result of two unusual factors. First, Sarcelles is the site of large, homogeneous housing projects in contrast to the socially diverse urban housing in France. Second, historical conditions specific to the transplantation of North African Jews (Mahgrébins in French) influenced the development of the Jewish population in the city. Today, Sarcelles’ Jews are no longer victims of decolonization, brought to the city by necessity, but Jews who chose to live there because it is attractive to them.

---

There are many Jewish organizations and schools in Sarcelles and their many services enable one to live a Jewish life “according to Torah.” Since the 1980s, the city has attracted neo-orthodox as well as Lubavitcher families. There are so many “men in black “and the city’s complexion has so changed that one might call Sarcelles a French version of Israel’s B’nei Braq.

The phenomenon of North African ba’alei teshuvah may be seen in a larger cultural context, similar to that of the United States in the 1960s. During the 1970s and throughout the mid-eighties, the younger generation in France rebelled against the parental culture, experimented with politics and created a “counter-culture” founded on the ideals of community, solidarity, authenticity, and opposition to the materialism of a consumer society void of spiritual values. Students embarked on travels to distant lands, exploring oriental religions such as Hinduism and practices such as vegetarianism. In the context of this search for the exotic the fervent Judaism of the Chassidim seemed authentic, giving no ground to French lay culture, and even signifying its otherness. Yiddish, the language of the Chassidim, their orthodoxy, distinctive clothing, chanting, and liturgy were all factors that facilitated the development of a social model different from the mainstream.

Young North African Jews, like the rest of their generation, rebelled by choosing a style of life that was at once familiar (they were, after all, Jewish) but also exotic, since it was a culture previously unknown to them. The majority of Lubavitchers now in France come from the families of North African Jews. In becoming ba’alei teshuvah, they managed to remain Jews while breaking away from the culture of their parents. In so doing, they also adopted a form of ashkenazi culture in its most socially visible form. All were born Jewish but religious affiliation had not been a meaningful form of self-identification. In France (where claiming lack of religious interest is very common) returning to religion was also a way to challenge the dominant ideology.

Ba’alei teshuvah of the 1970s, whatever their country of origin, were often on a spiritual quest. The men – more than the women – had been “on the road,” travelling to faraway places on quasi-religious quests. They often stopped in Israel on their way home from the Far East. This stopover in Israel often turned into an extended stay during which they took part in study groups at yeshivot that welcomed alienated youth. Young women, bound more by family tradition, travelled less extensively but went to Israel to visit members of their extended families. The holy places, linked with their discovery of dispersed family, triggered a strong emotional response. An experience at the Kotel often gave them the feeling that, there, they had found their roots and that Judaism provided their fundamental identity. Young women discovered in religion both a past and a foundation for their future, which would begin by establishing a Jewish family.

This born-again Jewish prototype is a familiar figure in socio-anthropological studies and has almost become a cliché of the 1970s. Following that group was a population of young American professional women. Secular, well educated, independent, living on their own, they experimented with sexuality and were in all ways integrated into society. Their main dissatisfaction in life centered around male-female relations and the status of women in society. Kaufman and Davidman argue that orthodox Judaism was

appealing to them because “it offered a clearly articulated identity constructed in the context of an inherited religious tradition and a community of memory.” D. Kaufman convincingly demonstrated that the ba’alot-teshuvah’s choice was a post-feminist reinterpretation of patriarchy – even though they did not formulate it in feministic rhetoric.

The reinterpretation went something like this: Patriarchal society is characterized by male authority; religious thought and life are produced and controlled by men; and women are reduced to their function of procreation. In this traditional patriarchal society, however women are the custodians of values that modern egalitarian society ignores. The secular world has devalued motherhood and the woman’s role in the home in exchange for women’s rights and an uncertain role in the workplace. According to Kaufman, ba’al teshuvah reinvest dignity into the traditional woman’s role.

All this would be relevant for the few ba’alot teshuvah in France with similar backgrounds, that is to say from the askenazi middle class and it is true that in the 1980s, some Jewish intellectuals shifted their commitment from politics to marginal religious groups. But the vast majority of ba’alot teshuvah were coming not from the ranks of the Ashkenazim but were daughters of the wave of sephardi immigrants that arrived in France between 1950 and 1967 most of them belonging to the petit bourgeois and lower class of French colonial society.

At that time, the Lubavitchers were actively recruiting young Jews in order to accelerate the coming of the Mashiah. Claiming at least ten thousand adherents in France, they made Judaism visible, taking it out of the home and into the public arena. Following the American model, the Lubavitchers made use of the media and above all, the streets with Lag B’Omer parades, mitzvah-mobiles and by lighting enormous Chanukah menorahs in symbolic parts of Paris such as under the Eiffel Tower and at the Place de la Republique. In areas known as Jewish neighborhoods (rue des Rosiers, but also Belleville or rue Montmartre) they began a campaign of approaching men and suggesting they don tefillin. This public and ostensibly proselytizing approach was completely unheard of in France where religion belongs in the private realm and its expression is confined to the home or to the synagogue. The “street” in France, as opposed to the United States, is viewed as a neutral zone where no signs of particular ethnicity or religious affiliation are to be displayed. The Lubavitchers behaved like outsiders in a traditionally quiet and discreet Jewish community that had long regarded Jewish identity as a private matter. Their success can now be regarded as an anticipation of the new configuration of ethnicity and religion in the construction of contemporary French identity.⁴

In France, as in the United States, the Lubavitchers attracted people looking for individual commitment, warm relationships with fellow Jews, and a community that filled the needs that their often scattered families did not. As in traditional Hassidism, feelings and emotions were accepted as acts of faith.

By choosing “tradition,” the ba’alot teshuvah could choose tradition of “the other” that is to say, the Ashkenazi. This tradition would erase their own cultural past which they perceived as linking them too

---

³ L. Davidman, Tradition in a Rootless World. Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism, University of California Press, 1991 p.136

⁴ The so-called franco-judaism model which prevailed until today is now confronted by a new one inspired by US society. On that subject see Une Société fragmentée? M. Wiewiora editor, Paris, ed. La Découverte 1996.
strongly with the Arab immigrants who sometimes lived in the same neighborhoods. My hypothesis is to consider their return to Judaism as a part of what Bourdieu calls a “distinction strategy.”

The women “returning” were typically at the end of their adolescence and contemplating the question of breaking away from their parents to forge families of their own or else they were still students deciding whether or not to stop their studies to get married. They often wanted to escape the strictness of their fathers and the old-fashioned ideas those fathers held about women’s lives. Not yet adults, they were having the same conflict with their parents as other children of North African immigrants, trying to honor family tradition as well as wishing to integrate into French society.

Many ba’alot teshuvah regarded the mixed marriages of their brothers and sisters as a major danger to themselves as well as to the Jewish people as a whole. It is important to remember that the Crémieux Decree of 1870 accorded French citizenship to Jews but not to Muslims, who were classified as dhimmi or “natives.” The Decree allowed Jews to escape this inferior status and aligned them with the colonials rather than with the colonized. They were happy to begin their longue marche vers l’Occident, “their long march toward the West” through the integrative mechanism of the French school system and progressively acculturate to French values. In fact, our ba’alot teshuvah thought that their parents went too far: the “Frenchification” of the Jews looked like renouncing Judaism and Jewish identity to them.

Returning to their roots was not a solution because it would leave them in an inferior position. If young women wanted more religion in their lives, they were nevertheless not ready to return to a time when Jewish women were confined to the home. It is a paradox that what appeared as the most traditional Jewish option would finally help them to resolve their problem of integration into modern French society.

For a North African Jewish woman in France, becoming a Lubavitcher was almost like converting. The newcomer would completely change her way of living, her friends, and her family. Young women in their teens and occasionally even women with some university education would drop out of school and begin religious education with the Lubavitchers. Many decided against completing high school and entered their working lives by taking jobs that didn’t require higher education or professional training.

Their North African families practiced a traditional Judaism with ties to local Jewish communities from North Africa. Even if an Algerian family, that had acculturated more than a Tunisian or Moroccan family, had established bonds with French Jewry and its children were attending French schools, their way of leading their religious life involved the whole community in a public way. Since the French Revolution, Judaism, like any other religion, had to be practiced either in houses of worship or at home. Jews were no longer considered a nation but became citizens “of the Israelite faith,” Jews at home, citizens in public. That was the motto of French Jewry.

But in North Africa, the situation was radically different. There, Jews were a protected group but one without full rights (according to the Statut de dhimmi). The differences in situation between North Africa and France resulted in different ways of life. In North Africa, the community rather than the individual was central. This community, geographically circumscribed and visible as the hara or mellah (Jewish quarters)

---

6 A. Chouraqui...
in Tunisian or Moroccan cities, then in the European parts of those cities, embodies the historical changes and evolution of Jewish communities in North Africa. Because the social habits of group life and religious expression go far beyond the domestic sphere, this social visibility travelled with the North African Jews to France and remains one of their characteristics.

In fact, when the North African Jews met the Lubavitchers they shared more commonalities than one could imagine. It is a joke to think of a Tunisian Jew learning Yiddish or a woman with a gefilte fish recipe in her hands when she knows how to cook a tasty couscous. But even though the cultural contrasts were profound, the popular beliefs and some of their respective liturgies make North African and Lubavitcher Jews closer than one might think.

Sociologists David Glanz and Michael Harisson, who observed ba’alei-teshuvah in Israeli yeshivot, proposed a typology of identity transformations dependent more on the process of accumulation rather than alteration. Nevertheless, ruptures in family life are also a consequence of the transformation of identity. In our study, young women found in the Lubavitcher group an honorable affiliation, perhaps in contrast to their family of origin and undervalued culture. In their homes, you see the Rebbé’s photograph displayed among photographs of the children as though he was the true grandfather.

What about the authentic ancestors: the real grandmother and grandfather? They are often very close geographically but their world is off-limits to the children. They are not permitted to transmit their knowledge and experience because it is called into question by the new norms and orthodoxy of the Lubavitcher teachings. One of the critical paradoxes of teshuva is the relationship between those who have “returned” and their family of origin who have not and the refusal of the former to conform to the traditions of the latter.

For the ba’alot teshuvah, breaking with their family of origin begins with strict observance of the Jewish dietary laws. They view their parents as not kosher enough, so that the parents begin to feel as though they are not good enough Jews, that they are almost gentiles. The conflict is also linked to cultural prejudice. Young women, not yet free of their family but rebelling against it, found that by marrying into the Lubavitchers (the group is endogamous) they could find a way to escape contradiction. Caught between the cultural antagonism that undervalues North African Jewish culture and distrusting secular French society, young women choosing a third way were experimenting with individual freedom. Becoming a Lubavitcher meant escape from North African Jewry and escape from family of origin.

The Lubavitch movement started in France in the early 1960s with no means and no scholarly institutions except, eventually, a small yeshiva. Women attended special classes in a room near the synagogue where they learned to keep a kosher home and to observe the laws of family purity. But whatever the benefits of subordination, we found as did El-Or, that this subordination has to compete with some features of a democratic society and behavior in it that ba’alot teshuvah are eager to maintain.

---


8 Regarding generation and family problems, see: Denise Weill et Laurence Podselver (La nouvelle orthodoxie et la transmission familiale), Pardes, n° 22, 1996, pp 149-165.

9 nothing very different from what Tamar El-Or describes in her work about Ger women in terms of their subordination to men scholars (The length of the slits and the spread of luxury: reconstructing the subordination of ultra-orthodoxe Jewish women through the patriarchy of men scholars), in Sex roles, Vol. 29, n° 9-10 Plenum Publishing Corporation 1993, pp.585-598.
None of the women I met would consider themselves hasidot (they would make jokes about the migratory birds!) but only learning to live b’torah. In their everyday life they learn the appropriate way of doing, making, acting. The famous “women's biological destiny”10 concerning the irreducible link between women and substance (feeding and reproducing) is raised by a schedule of Jewish rituals and a system of religious law to the status of knowledge.11 In a Levi-Straussanian view, the women are in charge of the transformation of nature to culture.

However, these two observations do not seem relevant to Lubavitcher ba’alot teshuvah. They do not themselves regard their feeding or table festivity functions as central to their roles. Perhaps because of their first criticism of materialistic society as being “overfed” they have a kind of ascetic behavior concerning food. Maybe this ascetism has developed in opposition to their mothers. They are not reluctant to use the most industrially processed foods and easily made dishes in order to spare their time.

For them – unlike their mothers – culture happens outside the kitchen and they are always attending lectures, conferences, and meetings. Through the dinim (laws) they are trying to reach another realm. The question then presents itself: why are they constraining themselves in such a male-centered society? If there are any answers, one of them could be that the Lubavitcher religious groups provide a culture that the larger society was unable to provide.

At the ba’alot teshuvah’s home, the door is always open. Other women come in, sit down, drink coffee, chat, relate problems, help one another. I once attended a more formal meeting in an apartment. All the women of the block were there listening to a rabbi, or a man pretending to be a rabbi. He was the son of our hostess who had become religious under his influence. His talk was not clear. He spoke in a mixed language of French and Hebrew, using many metaphors and images. But for the women who had come to listen to divrei torah, rational comprehension was not the point. They wanted to share sacredness.

Since the home is considered by religious people to be a second sanctuary, women are conscious of a need to keep it kosher. Still, they don’t want to be confined to it. Historians have shown how civic matters began to infiltrate the shul and how men used to use the beis medrash as a forum. Women have no such institutional place or opportunity, so they decided to have their own meetings. They, of course, have lectures that instruct them in their specific roles in the community, particularly in order to help newcomers adjust to their new life. But they also have workshops where they speak freely and where they are able to continue the hobbies they had in their secular lives such as dancing, painting, or singing, but that they are no longer allowed to practice in public or in a mixed male and female group. Because of their secular background, they have to negotiate with tradition.

10 Yvonne Verdier, a social anthropologist of Christian peasant society made an insight analysis of women knowledge in Façons de dire, façons de faire Paris Gallimard 1979.

For them, becoming Lubavitcher did not mean totally renouncing modernity for tradition. The ba’alot teshuvah want aspects of both worlds. As a result, their duties are growing. They are the mothers of many children (they are religious and for them, more is best), but they still want to work. Then the problem arises of how they are able to hold onto their jobs, being pregnant so often? Having seven, eight, or nine children does not allow for a job, unless you pay other people to take care of them. Even if you can afford it, is it the way to be a mother? They have to give up working outside the home.

Some of the ba’alot teshuvah have continued to work, but inside the community. The messianic activities which were so developed till the Rebbe’s death would meet their need to be active and, as they say, “in the world” (not contemplative). Even if their activities were limited to Jewish society, they were meant to change the world. Modernity means to be an acting power of history and messianic ideology can be regarded as a way to incorporate religion into that agency. For women, it was also an opportunity to open up their assigned space.

Looking at the American and French women’s teshuvah movement, we find social determinants for our explanation of both situations. But we ought to go further. A therapist pointed out to me that contrary to what I saw as the ba’alot teshuvah’s break with the family, particularly with the father, most of the women were in fact accomplishing what their family really wanted for them. They all told me that being a Levi, Cohen, Sultan, Goldberg, or whatever, they could not betray their father’s name. I then thought of a quote from one of our historians. M. Hadas Lebel wrote,“Like our mother Rivka, women have a tendency to carry with them the idols of their father’s homes.”
JEWSH WOMEN IN CHILE

by Marjorie Agosín

So many times I asked my grandmother, Josefinu, if she met other women on her journey across the Andean Range from Neuquen, on the Argentine-Chilean border, to the hilly town of Valparaíso, where she made her home among the rocks and the sea foam. Her memory is frail and she remembers the hardships of the journey and the songs of the muleteers, but not the women. This anecdote is emblematic of the situation of Latin American Jews and especially Jewish women: forgotten in the annals of history, not included in the national consciousness of society and made to feel like outsiders or distant neighbors. To quote the work of distinguished historian Judith Elkin, “Jews do not figure in the post-independence history of Latin America as currently written. Overlooked by Latin-Americanists as too few and too marginal to affect the areas of development, they have likewise been regarded by North American Jewish scholars as outside the course of Jewish history.” Elkin goes so far as to ask “Is there such an entity as Latin American Jewry?” Yet, we must remember that that each republic of the 21 countries is absolutely different, that the Jewish experience in the Latin American republics was diverse and the history of Jewish immigration to Chile is inextricably tied to the politics of anti-Semitism and economics.

I wonder, if I may change the question and ask why such invisibility for the Jews, especially the women, of Latin America? Perhaps the answer lies in their small number: less than one per cent of the population of most Latin American countries. In Chile, Jews barely number 20,000. Yet, even if the numbers are insignificant, Jews have influenced and shaped the destinies of the Latin American countries in the areas of culture and commerce and they exemplify the fact that Latin America is not a monolithic construction of Catholics. The legacy of Spain’s inquisitorial past and the difficulty of living in a profoundly Catholic society has made the presence of the Jews and their alliances ambiguous and complex.

Chile occupies an almost anomalous place in the wide spectrum of European Jewry because of its remoteness. The Jewish community has been very small there since the 1800s and the great distance between Chile and the rest of the world resulted in a slower and later emigration. The first identifiable Jew in Chile arrived in the 19th century. His name was Stefan Goldsscat, an engineer from England. The ashkenazi Jews at this early stage arrived individually in contrast to sephardi communities that arrived as families or in groups and settled in the Araucanian Indian territory of Temuco and called the first sephardi community Macedonia. The first Jew born into this community was Enrique Testa; he went on to become Minister of Defense in the Allende years. There are some Araucanian Indians who call themselves Iglesia Israelita and they practice religious rites. Jewish immigration to Chile was slow and intermarriages between Ashkenazim and Sephardim took place with great hostility. Little is known or has been investigated in the history of the Jewish women of Chile (I found no book-length study) and one can find out the most about Jewish women from archival records only dating from the 1920s in the Departamento de Estudios Judíos. The early documents of the sephardi women are not documented. Only the men appear in these documents. Most of my research was gathered from Pasi Programa de Asistencia Israelita and WISO. The Jewish community has strong leadership from women. There are seven organizations in the country.
exclusively dedicated to women's issues and whose directors are women: WISO, Women's Zionist Organization, the Association of Professional Jewish Women, the Ben Gurion School for Higher Education in Santiago and in the provinces, as well as the Hebrew Institute of Viña del Mar and Santiago are all highly visible institutions by women. I would also like to point out Juanita Leibovich, Chile's first woman judge; Sonia Tschorne, Director of the School of Architecture of the Universidad de Chile, Jacqueline Weinstein, Director of the Agency of International Corporation; and Clare Budnik, Director of Public Libraries – all located in the capital of Santiago. Women have had a great impact on the leadership of the Hebrew schools in which I was educated and I must say proudly that the graduates of these schools were considered the best in the nation. The women that ran these schools at first were Eastern and Central Europeans. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s the leadership moved to the hands of the Chilean-born. We must note, that as in most schools of Latin America, there is an ideological definition of these schools and it is very much defined by socialist tendencies. The Hebrew schools have a socialist ideology.

The older generation of Jewish Chilean women, especially the ones born from the 1900s to the 1930s did not occupy public office, but neither did other women at that time. The great wave of women's participation in the public sector began in the 1950s as Chilean women in general entered the work force. Presently, 97% of young Chilean Jewish women are enrolled at university. The participation of Jewish women between the ages of 25 and 44 in the work force is 71%. 82% of the work force today was born in Chile and they have had an important impact in medicine, law and architecture, as well as the arts. Three Jewish women have been appointed judges of MINORS, directors of libraries, and directors of the Commission on the Status of Women. They have also had a very important role in journalism. Frida Modack, for example, was Salvador Allende's press attache. Today she writes for several national and international newspapers and is considered the most important woman journalist in the country. Two Jewish women have, consecutively, headed the School of Architecture.

In spite of the very small number of Jews in today's Chile, women have important leadership roles. Thanks to the progressive politics of Salvador Allende, an unparalleled number of Jewish men and women were able to enter political life. They included Allende's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Volodia Taitelbaum; Defense Minister Enrique Testa; Minister of Education Enrique Kirbe; and Press Attache Frida Modack. Allende also appointed Lucia Guralnik as the secretary in Chief of the Socialist Party. She committed suicide when her son was murdered by the secret police in 1974. Unfortunately, the participation of so many Jewish intellectuals in Allende's government was looked upon with disdain by the right wing and their propaganda accused Chileans of being involved with Bolshevist commercialism. After Allende's fall, the Jewish community became very divided and I consider this to have been a period of great tension and migratory patterns, similar to the 1930s when the left-wing leader Carlos Vicuña Fuentes wanted to allow more Jews access to Chile while Foreign Minister Miguel Chuchaga opposed this migration. The names of approximately 20 Jewish women can be found on a list of disappeared people in early 1974. One of these women is Dena Arom, a promising young writer who was kidnapped in Argentina during operation Condor. Recently, the Latin American world Jewish community accused Augusto Pinochet of discriminating and persecuting Jews in Chile. After almost 20 years of silence, Chilean Jewish women now occupy a very important and visible place and their art is identifiably very Jewish. One example is the artist Patricia Israel. Her powerfully provocative paintings include versions of Lilith and Eve, and her ethereal invocations
of the Shejina and the Prophets make her the most visible Jewish painter of Chile. In the performing arts, actresses Anita Klesky and S’holmit Baytelman have had an important role in national theaters and in a very small and at the same time extraordinary way they have tried to revive Chilean theater. In the area of literature, the situation of Jewish women is complex. Few writers have identified themselves as Jewish and thus, have not explored their complex hybrid identity – with the exception of Sonia Guralnik and myself. Guralnik came to Chile at the age of ten and began writing in the early 1980s, at the age of 60. Her work, which is not part of the mainstream of Chilean literature, depicts the tribulations of emigration and her life in La Pensión de la Señora Gittle. She also wrote an important collection of stories entitled El Samovar. To date, she has been unable to find a publisher for Señora Gittle.

Sonia Guralnik explores issues of displacement emigration and often the secondary role that women played in the Jewish household at the time of her married life. Chile, by no means, has produced the multifaceted memoirs of Argentine, Mexican and Uruguayan Jewish writers. Veronica Zondek is a Jewish poet inclined to a more abstract and utopian language. She was raised in both Santiago and Jerusalem and returned to Santiago in order to write in Spanish. And yet, both she and Guralnik remain odd, anomalous figures in the very politicized world of Chilean literature. I would also like to mention the work of Lucia Weissert, sculptor of international stature, Lea Klimer, photographer and Lotty Rosenfeld, who has had a very powerful impact during the years of the dictatorship doing Acciones de Arte which consisted of painting crosses on the pavement and stars with powerful statements written in them, such as: “Aquí se tortura.”

These were some of the most daring forces in the resistance movement against the dictatorship. Chilean society until the Pinochet dictatorship was a flourishing artistic community with an important film festival, music and theater. Jewish women had a prominent role as actresses, filmmakers and musicians and integrated themselves in the community. Jewish culture in Chile and, especially in the neighboring Argentina, has survived in spite of political transgressions. We must remember that in both Chile and Argentina, 10% of the disappeared were Jews.

My own story is that I am a Jewish writer who lives in the Untied States and writes in Spanish. My contribution to this field is the writing of two memoirs dedicated to the lives of my mother and my father and through their lives, not only honoring them, but re-writing and reinserting the little spoken of and the little known life of the Chilean Jews. As a child I would always be asked whether I was Jewish or Chilean and thus, my identity became always conflicted, always a matter of either/or and seldom both.

The history of Jewish women in Chile is both transparent and profoundly complex. The lack of archival records in Santiago’s Documentation Centers, the fact that many settlers (such as my own grandmother) changed their names, and Catholic dominance over the country’s political affairs shadows the historical record of the country. Nevertheless, the presence of Jewish women is vital in a society that represents itself as homogenous. To speak and act, as well as to create as a Jewish artist and to redefine one’s origin has been problematic and enigmatic. A constant hybrid existence where identity is not always so clear. The constant question whether you are Jewish or Chilean, but never both, is ever present. The voice for Jewish women as a collective is yet to be created. What is most revealing is the fact that Chile has failed to recognize otherness. It is a society unconcerned with pluralism. The Jewish presence reaffirms the need for alternative options and the legitimacy of their contributions to a homogeneous society. The Jewish presence in Chile has forced the country to recognize the outsiders within.
ISRAELI WOMEN: COLLECTIVISM AND INDIVIDUALISM

by Eetta Prince Gibson

There is, I believe, a fundamental conflict in Israeli society: between the collectivist, national aspirations upon which the Zionist ethos and the State of Israel were predicated and individualism, which is growing increasingly stronger in Israeli society today (Ezrahi, 1997). My current research focuses on a particularly collectivist group, women who have settled in ideological settlements in the West Bank.

Since its inception, the Jewish state has been faced with questions such as: How to reconcile particular group (including gender) interests with larger national objectives? How to integrate into the collective society without sacrificing one’s special needs? How to pursue individual needs and aspirations without defying the community? How to avoid becoming trapped in tradition without being torn from an ancient heritage (Yishai, 1997). These dilemmas can broadly be seen as the dilemma between individualism and collectivism.

On a social level, women have had to choose between participation in the collective at the expense of their particular interests, or adopting a feminist position that would guarantee their rights as women but jeopardize their belonging to the collective. The various resolutions of this dilemma have far-reaching implications for women’s individual and collective political organization and behavior and for public policy.

In this paper I hope to: analyze a critical phenomenon in Israeli society, with specific relevance for women, by presenting two examples of political activity; demarcate the spectrum of women’s individualism/collectivism; explore some of the implications of this tension for Israeli society; and, finally, acquaint readers with some of the political activities in which Israeli women are engaged, especially at the grass-roots level. I believe that these activities do not receive adequate attention in the popular media, in academia, or at the political level. Yet the majority of Israeli women who are at all politically active participate in grass-roots, extra-parliamentary movements and organizations such as the activities I describe below (Chazan, 1993).

My research examines questions regarding the relationship between self and other. It is based on the assumption that each and every person must distinguish between “herself” and the “other,” but that different people in different cultures do so in different ways. The meaning of “being me” is socially, culturally, politically, and economically constructed.

Different cultures provide different models for this distinction. That is, society provides “raw materials” for both the structure of the self and the content. In terms of the relationship between the individual and society, we can conceptualize a spectrum, whose extremes are individualism and collectivism.

*Individualistic cultures* feature a social pattern of loosely-linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives, are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others, give priority to their personal goals over goals of others and emphasize rational analysis of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others.
In contrast, collectivist cultures feature a social pattern of closely-linked individuals who view themselves as parts of one or more collectives, are primarily motivated by norms and duties imposed by those collectives, are willing to give priority to goals of collective over personal goals, and emphasize connectedness to members of these collectives. Furthermore, in collectivist societies, these obligations often do not relate to concrete, specific individuals; unlike the model of the “self-in-relation,” the community which is part of the self is broad and its boundaries are socially constructed and imaginary.

While individualistic societies provide individualistic “raw materials” or models for the structure of the self; collectivist societies offer collectivist models. These models include behavioral proscriptions (including gender norms), normative dictates, and so forth, and so they shape the individual’s sense of ideal self and much of the structure and form of social relationships.

Each individual constructs her own sense of self and the extent to which the collective (however she defines that collective) is part of her identity. This construction is based on social models, familial patterns, personal experiences, individual (and perhaps even genetic) inclinations, etc. In the United States, for example, schoolchildren learn very early that Patrick Henry declared, “Give me liberty or give me death!” In Israel, schoolchildren learn very early that Yosef Trumpeldor declared, “It is good to die for one’s country.” It does matter whether either of these men actually spoke these words. What matters is that they are slogans that schoolchildren learn, and that they are presented as models for ideal selves.

The models are radically different. The American, Patrick Henry, emphasizes the importance of individual liberties. The Israeli hero, Yosef Trumpeldor, emphasizes the importance of sacrifice for the collective. Even on an anecdotal level, Israelis are more collectivist, Americans more individualistic. These models offer more than the content of social interaction; they provide different ways of being. The very meaning and essence of the self in the self’s own eyes is different in different cultures.

At this time, Israeli society is providing radically different models for the relationship between the self and the collective. The model of Yosef Trumpeldor is not the only model, nor is it even the predominant one. On the one hand, increasing individualism and “de-Zionization” have led to the breakdown of collectivist imperatives and given rise to an individualistic, privatized, and sometimes even hedonistic orientation. (Ohana, 1998) On the other hand, the breakdown of the hegemonic society has led others to form “sub-cultures,” many of which are based on strong collectivist orientations.

The following two examples will illustrate one way in which these different orientations find expression in women’s political activity. They are the stories of two women, SN and MD. Both of them are bereaved mothers who have lost their sons in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and both of them have taken political action in response.

The circumstances of the deaths of the two sons are very different: SN’s son died as an infant of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome); MD’s son died as a soldier in combat in Lebanon.

I have also used different methods to collect data regarding these two deaths: I have extensively interviewed SN, an activist member of Gush Emunim, as part of my doctoral research. I have interviewed MD only briefly, as a journalist, and the material in this presentation is primarily based on interviews in the popular media and speeches she, and other who are members of the “Four Mothers” movement to which she
belongs, have made. Despite these differences, I believe that the context, the rhetoric, and the stated and implicit motivations are worth contrasting and comparing.

In spring of 1968, less than one year after Six Day's War, a group of Gush Emunim activists sought to settle in Hebron, which they call “the city of our fathers.” Gush Emunim is a radical religious-political movement that believes that the entire biblical Land of Israel – most of which was captured by Israel in the 1967 Six Day War – was promised by God to the Jewish people. It therefore opposes territorial compromise with the Palestinians and seeks to settle these territories.

Through a political ruse, they managed to gain a foothold and establish a concrete, physical presence in the city. For security, internal political, regional, and geo-political reasons, the government refused to allow them to settle there. After a standoff, the government eventually compromised, allowing them first to live in an army camp on a hill outside Hebron, then subsequently establishing Kiryat Arbah, a Jewish settlement on the outskirts of ancient Hebron. Eventually, a Labor-led government capitulated further and a Jewish presence in Hebron itself was established.

In 1978, when SN became a national figure, the Jewish settlers were still living in the army camps. SN herself was living in a two room, make-shift apartment with her husband and ten children. Although the events I will describe occurred nearly 25 years ago, my research indicates that they are well-known to women who weren’t even born when they happened and have attained a mythical status.

In an interview, SN told me how she discovered the crib-death of her 10th child, who had been named Abraham. In matter-of-fact terms, she describes wondering why the six-month-old infant hadn’t woken up, how she tried to move him and realized that he was blue and heavy, how she called for help. She remembers reciting, “Baruch Dayan Emet,” (Blessed is the Judge of Truth), the traditional ritual response to discovery of a death.

Her husband is away. Neighbors take SN and the baby’s body to Jerusalem, where the doctors can find no explanation for the child’s death; SN refuses to allow an autopsy. While waiting at the hospital, SN spontaneously announces that she will bury her child in the ancient Jewish cemetery in Hebron – which has not been open to Jews since the violent pogroms of 1929, when all Jews were forced to leave the city at the insistence of the British. This, she asserts, will create meaning out of what seems meaningless.

Even the settler leaders try to dissuade her, telling her she is crazed by her sorrow, but she insists. A settler leader calls Prime Minister Begin, who personally forbids the army to allow her to reach the cemetery. SN begins to make her way back to Hebron, in a car driven by a friend, carrying the body of her dead child. By noon, the army has set up a road block at an intersection on the way to the cemetery, and a “stand-off” between SN and the soldiers ensues.

The field commander says to her, “Mrs. N., it is for your own good. Hebron will be returned...you'll want to go to the Beit Ha'almin (cemetery) and you won't be able to. That's the government's policy.

SN responds: “You think they'll return and I believe they won't. That's the difference between us, I live by belief.”

By now, the press and the public have been alerted, and dozens of people have congregated at the scene. SN threatens to walk to the cemetery with the corpse of the child and to dig the grave with her own fingers.
The soldiers, she knows, will not fire at her.

She tells me: “When I saw that I’m standing at the intersection, and more and more soldiers are arriving to stop a woman that wants to bury her son, what law had I broken, what had I done? So I said, OK, I’ve waited, it’s starting to get dark, I didn’t come here to argue with anybody...I know you have orders. I’m leaving you the car, I’m taking the deceased that hasn’t sinned yet, my little son, and I’m starting to march with him, and tonight I’ll get to the cemetery, maybe on all fours, but I’ll get there.”

The army commanders contact the highest military authorities, who, in turn, contact Moshe Dayan, then Minister of Defense, who is in Egypt, negotiating what will become known as the Camp David Accords. Dayan, Begin, and the military authorities confer, and SN is given permission to bury her baby in the ancient Jewish cemetery of Hebron.

A procession of nearly one hundred people accompanies her to the cemetery. Her husband has been located, and he arrives at the cemetery as the child is buried. By now, it is night, and SN looks up at the hills surrounding her and at the sky, and she speaks:

“...And I saw all the lights glittering around, after a long day...I said, history goes in circles. Abraham, our father, bought a piece of land for Sara his wife here in Hebron, and me, my name is Sara, and I am buying today land for Abraham my son, at the same place, with only 3,000 years being the difference.”

In her grief, SN relates to the Jewish people. Jewish history is part of her self and it is in Jewish history – not only Jewish ritual – that she finds solace.

My second example, the “Four Mothers Movement” is a more recent phenomenon in Israeli society.

In 1997, a group of women who identified themselves as mothers organized to call for a withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Israeli-determined security zone in southern Lebanon. They demanded that the military and political leaders think “creatively and strategically,” because “saying we have no choice [almost a mantra of Israeli culture in many realms of life] is no longer a viable or politically acceptable response.”

The movement seems to be growing. Activists have circulated petitions demanding troop withdrawal throughout the country. Prominent women and several wives of prominent men (including the wife of the Commander of the Northern Front [who is responsible for southern Lebanon] and the wife of Rafael Eitan, former Chief-of-Staff and current Minister of the Environment) have signed these petitions.

For a brief period at the beginning of the Intifada, mothers spoke out “as mothers,” but since then, women have rarely asserted women’s voices and sensitivities as legitimate political concerns. The action of the Four Mothers Movement marks the first time that women in Israel are demanding specific military, as well as political, actions as a special, gender-defined group.

In late October, 1998, an ad-hoc coalition of grass-roots activist women, including the Four Mothers Movement, sponsored the First Conference on Conscientious Objection and Refusal to Serve in the Israeli Army. According to newspaper reports, nearly two hundred people attended. Women interviewed by the press described themselves as avant-garde, prophets or harbingers of wider trends to come.

The conference was to have taken place in a kibbutz dining room, but the organizers encountered pained and angry protest. Many of the protesters were aging Holocaust survivors who shouted at the women:
“How dare you hold this discussion in our hall?” “Your sons are not more precious than ours.” “You are trying to turn cowardice into ideology” and “My whole family burned in Auschwitz.”

It may have been the women’s desire to set themselves apart from collective behavior and destiny that was unacceptable and painful for the protestors. “In Israel, probably like elsewhere,” says a participant, “one doesn’t argue with Holocaust survivors.” (Gila Svirsky, personal communication, November, 1998). The meeting moved outside, to an open lawn.

MD was one of the organizers of the Conference. Her son, Y, was killed in southern Lebanon in February, 1998.

In a parody of the formal, dramatic, and meant-to-be-awe-inspiring rituals of Yom Ha’Atzma’ut (Israel Independence Day), MD opens her speech saying, “I, MD, daughter of Y.E. and J. – May their memories be a blessing – and the mother of Y. – may his memory be a blessing – am honored to slaughter the last sacred cows of Israel.”

MD specifically addresses Israeli collectivism. “Being a ‘bereaved mother’ is so important for Israeli society,” she says, “that from that bitter moment on February, 1998, when I was told that my son was killed...I have ceased to be MD the individual, and...I am constantly supposed to be in the role of ‘bereaved mother’. And everyone knows how I must behave, what I think...

“And the first sacred cow that I wish to slaughter is the message that we are like one family, and that these children belong to all of us, and that all of our hearts are crying, as one, over the loss of this child. It’s the longest-running show in town, and it’s about time that we lift the curtain and see what’s backstage. The biggest bluff is believing that ‘we all hurt’. If it really hurt all of us, then we would have stopped this a long time ago.”

She continues: “We are walking out on a system by which we feel severely exploited. And more and more women and mothers are doing the same. All of them are acting on their emotions and their beliefs. I think their community needs to listen...There is a limit to obedience, and every soldier must set this limit for him/herself.”

In an interview, MD presents this rhetorical challenge: “In the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, we don’t know what Sarah thought. I wonder why we never heard her voice. Unlike her, I demand that my voice be heard with regard to my children. We are taught that God tested Abraham’s faith and he withstood the test because he was willing to sacrifice his son. But in my opinion, refusing to sacrifice is the real test. We have already sacrificed twenty-thousand Isaacs. It’s too many.”

These vignettes could be deconstructed, compared, contrasted, and analyzed on numerous levels. Both SN and MD seek solace, of course. But it is worth looking beyond the immediate to their messages and to see the similarities and differences. I will comment on several issues: the sense of self and the relationship to the collective; the source of authority for individual action; the vision of womanhood; and the view of the future.

For SN, the collective is part of her self, while MD not only sees herself as separate from the collective, but she even attempts to limit her membership in the collective in order to be a more complete individual.
For SN, the collective is embedded in her self, and she is embedded in the collective. At her moment of most extreme loss, she is comforted by connecting to “her people.” MD seeks solace by trying to find her “true self” and by being true to her own “pain and needs,” and not those which the public demand.

SN is so embedded in the collective that she insists that her son’s death be seen – and acted upon – as a seminal event for the people of Israel and demands that her personal sorrow be translated into community action. In contrast, MD refuses to allow the death of her son to be turned into an event for the State of Israel and demands to be left alone.

SN says nothing about her baby as a child. We don’t know why he was named Abraham, what kind of a baby he was, or her hopes and dreams for him. We only know of the symbolic meaning of his birth and death. In contrast, MD reveals that she has sent the Prime Minister pictures of her son and letters telling him about his hobbies and loves, and his commitment to a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

SN sees Jewish history as her personal autobiography. Her life and the history of the Jewish people are inextricably intertwined, and she seems to have no existence apart from Jewish history. Both her words and actions convey an epic, almost tragic sense of self; MD speaks in terms of personal autobiography, separate from national, collective history.

SN asserts that the collective, God’s will, and her membership in the Jewish people are the source of authority for her actions. They override such civil authority as the army, and even the possibility of future conflict or war with the Palestinians. In contrast, MD asserts an individual morality, based on the assessment of the individual. Some of her statements echo women’s morality as described by cultural feminists such as Sara Ruddick (1985) as she calls for conscientious objection.

Both SN and MD present a certain essentialist quality to their debate. That is, they believe that the qualities of womanhood that they describe are an inherent, universal, and unchanging part of being a woman. From the radical right’s perspective, SN sees gender as transcendent and inherent. MD, speaking from the perspective of the radical left, describes a “woman’s voice,” believing that women are the ones who should bring emotions to bear on states of war and peace.

Both SN and MD deny the separation between the public and the private sphere. Both assert that private actions and emotions have value in the public, “rational” sphere, and that their actions as women can influence political space and society’s future. MD’s activism is in accordance with the feminist adage that “the personal is political.” That is, she has developed a feminist consciousness that enables her to understand that her personal pain is determined by political events. In contrast, one might say that SN reverses the adage and contends that “the political is personal.” She perceives historical and political events as personal imperatives.

Throughout the extensive interviews I conducted with her, SN saw Judaism as a long history of persecution, perpetual threat, and bitter struggle, and the future as linked to, and dictated by, the past. MD refuses to see ongoing existential threat as a major component of Jewish history. In fact, as part of the Four Mothers Movement, she demands that the widespread Israeli slogan and belief ein breira, (“we have no choice”) must be scrutinized and critiqued. She sees the future as different, as a break with the past, and as a hope
for peace. Although SN’s dead baby was not killed in battle, she imparts eternal life and meaning to him through her peoplehood. MD has no such belief in eternal meaning.

We can extrapolate from the contrasting and conflicting narratives and political actions of these two women to examine several important developments in Israeli society.

SN and MD represent radically different identities. They mark the left and right extremes of the spectrum of identities in Israeli society, especially with regard to collectivist or individualistic selves. Do they represent a fraying of the connecting fibers in Israeli society? After all, despite the theoretical links which I have drawn between them, what do SN and MD really have to say to one another?

To many outside observers, it would appear that Israeli society is imploding, torn apart by its differences and tensions. I would like to suggest that there are some positive aspects to this ostensible breakdown, especially for women.

There has been, and to some extent continues to be, a hegemonic definition of “Israeli-ness,” which has marginalized, ignored, or eliminated other identities. Women, Mizrahi (as we learn from Pnina Motzafi-Haller) and other “ethnic” groups have been excluded from this hegemonic definition, and we can “see” this absence in almost all aspects of public, and many aspects of private, life (Motzafi-Haller, 1997).

This hegemony has begun to break down, and its dissolution enables other groups to claim their rights and to play their role in the determination of the character of Israeli society. At its worst, this process can lead to a total disintegration of Israeli society, but, at its best, it can lead to a truly multi-cultural society. It can lead to an awareness of the particular needs and rights of various sectors of the population, and to the intersections of different, integrated identities: female and Palestinian, for example; or Russian, immigrant, and woman; or female and poor.

Until recently, awareness of these identities and intersections has been obliterated by the hegemonic view. The growth of a multi-cultural society will not only allow for the provision of different models of the self and of the relationship between self and collective. It will also allow for differing group identities. It can nurture greater cultural representation and sensitivity in the creation of public policy for women, for example, and for other formerly marginalized groups.

One of the dangers, of course, is disintegration into identity politics. With such deep, over-riding differences in sense of self, can women form emotional, political, and social coalitions across psychological, and not just party, lines? It is not clear that we can. It is clear that on specific political issues, such as initiatives of the Knesset Permanent Committee for the Advancement of the Status of Women, women (and some feminist men) have been able to cross party lines and to vote for laws considered to be good for women, as in the recent, very progressive, Sexual Harassment Law.

But on the level of self and identity, it is not at all clear that women can get past identity politics at this time. Until four years ago, for example, the Annual Israeli Feminist Conference was seen as a unifying, empowering feminist event. But in the past four years, mizrachi, lesbian, and Palestinian women have criticized what they viewed as the cultural domination and oppression by the ashkenazi heterosexual women, and the mizrachi women have sponsored a separate (or, perhaps it would be more correct to say, separatist) conference.
The growth of individualism as a socio-psychological and socio-political option in Israeli society has also led to heightened criticism of, and distancing from, the State of Israel. Until recently, state power had been idealized, invested with faith and almost blind trust. Governmental agencies and institutions, and even the very fact of their existence, have held a quasi-religious value, for both secular and religious alike, known as “mamlachiut” – they were regarded as the embodiment of national self-determination, the proof of the redemption of the Jewish people (Ezrahi, 1997).

Many things have contributed to a breakdown of this regard. In addition to global processes, it is important to cite the Yom Kippur War, the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, and the Intifada, as well as other public scandals and events that weakened public faith in political leaders and institutions. Once the sense of unity with collective and government has been disrupted, the individual can question policies in a way that she was not free to do so before, sectarian forces that vie for their differing best interests can develop, and women can become one of these sectarian forces.

Israel is the only state generally considered a western democracy which does not offer its male citizens a clear legal option for conscientious objection, and the demand by these “individualistic” mothers is the first time that such a demand has been made publicly. In addition, we note women's increasing recognition that they must struggle against – not with – societal structures in order to achieve social equality. How different this is from the first chalutzot, many of whom believed that their personal transformation and the revolution of the Jewish people would revolutionize gender relations!

The tension between individualism and collectivism can also be conceptualized as a tension between a discourse of rights and a discourse of obligation (Cover, 1985). In a discourse of rights, the individual is paramount, and the authority of the collective derives from the individual. In a discourse of obligation, as in traditional Judaism, the individual derives her very meaning from the community, and to act out of obligation is the “closest thing there is to a Jewish definition of completion as a person within the community.” (Cover, 1985).

Currently in Israel, the discourse of rights, which is a new public discourse, has been expressed primarily as competitive conflict between sectors. The growth of individualism without the communal safeguards that attend to both individual rights and communal responsibilities has led to a too-rapid demise of the welfare state, increasing gaps between the rich and the poor, perpetuation of generations of disadvantage and alienation, and, possibly, the first signs of institutional retreat from the provision of basic human rights such as health care and education.

For women, whose lives are more intricately bound to, and dependent on, community and community structures, this has been particularly harmful. Among other things, it has led to the feminization of poverty, disadvantage in the job market, and loss of economic security even for middle-class women. Can Israel further individual rights and competition and still remain a caring society that seeks and pursues social justice? This is a serious and as yet unanswered question.

Lastly, the growth of individualism may foster a culture of peace. Although women do not fight in combat in Israel, they have played a crucial role in promoting militarism in Israeli society. They have been the mothers, daughters, lovers, and sisters who waited at home, washed uniforms, romanticized the military virility of their men, and cried and mourned according to script. In the past, they have refused to question
the wisdom of their military and political leaders. But if they begin to question, if women refuse to read the scripts as they are written, then, as MD demands, these leaders might be forced to come up with more creative ideas than “we have no choice.”

The tension between the individualist model of self and the collectivist model of self, as illustrated here by the narratives and actions of SN and MD, has implications not only for women’s political activity, but for the very character of the State of Israel. The challenge facing Israel, Israelis, and world Jewry is to find the balance between the two.

REFERENCES
HUNGARY

by Katalin Taliygás

Hungary is a small country in East-Central Europe with ten million inhabitants. The first Jewish settlements there date from Roman times. Sephardi Jews settled in Hungary during the 16th and 17th centuries; they arrived from Bohemia and Moravia in the 18th century, and from Poland in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Between 1938 and 1940, the Hungarian Jewish population grew from 400,000 to 721,000 when, as a result of Nazism and Hitler, the country took over Slovakia, Carpatho-Ruthenia, Transylvania and the Southern Territories. In 1930, Budapest had a Jewish population of 230,000 – the second largest in Europe.

Before Germany occupied Hungary in 1944, the government had refused to deport Hungarian Jews, although racial legislation was introduced after Hungary allied itself to Nazi Germany. Later Jews were forced into ghettos and deported to Auschwitz. About 550,000 Hungarian Jews perished in the Holocaust. Of the 200,000 Jews who survived the war and remained in Hungary, 25% had left by 1957.

Official policy on Jewish issues in Hungary began to be liberalized before the 1989 collapse of Communism. In December of 1990, the major Jewish communal bodies changed their regulations after the free practice of religion was recognized by the government. The legal successors of the former communal organizations were the Federation of Jewish Communities in Hungary (MAZSIHISZ), the Association of Jewish Communities in Budapest, and the Orthodox Community.

Today, the Jewish population of Hungary is estimated at 120,000, of whom some 95,000 live in the capital, Budapest, and the rest in about 28 towns. However the true number of Hungarian Jewry could be much bigger, as many people keep their Jewish identity to themselves. Hungary’s population as a whole is aging but the ratio of elderly among Jewish women is even higher, nearly 75% over the age of 60. This is due to several factors, one of them being that in both world wars more men died than women, and more women than men returned from the concentration camps.

Another decisive factor is that there is a high number of elderly widows in Hungary, where life expectancy for women is 72 years but for men only 64 years. There are no empirical or statistical data to determine the economic and political status of Hungarian Jewish women as it does not differ very much from the status of women in general or the status of Jews in general. This means, however, that they do suffer from discrimination in certain forms: lower salaries, glass ceiling, etc.

A significant marker of the elderly Jewish population is their loneliness. Most have lost their families and at their elderly age, have no family support. For this reason a very important task of Hungarian Jewry is to help and support this population.

There is a wide range of religious, educational, cultural and social Jewish institutions and organizations in Hungary. Many Jewish women work in these Jewish institutions. The majority of leaders of Jewish institutions especially in the area of education, social, welfare and cultural services are women. There is no discrimination in the educational system as a whole.
There are departments specializing in Jewish Studies. In different universities, such as the Eötvös Lóránd University of Science, at the Central European University. The *Pedagogy* (Teachers’ Training College of the Hungarian Rabbinical Seminary), for example, is the only Jewish College in Eastern Europe whose specific function is to provide advanced Jewish education for those aspiring to serve the Jewish Community as professional workers in both secular and religious institutions and services. The *Pedagogy* prepares students – mainly women – to teach Judaism in schools and to become youth leaders, social workers and leaders of social and welfare institutions. The students spend some time in Israel to expand their knowledge of Jewish communal life.

Other university level Jewish education can be obtained at the Judaism and Hebraistic Faculty of the ELTE University. We have the only rabbinical seminary in Eastern Europe, but women cannot become rabbis in Budapest. The first woman rabbi of Hungary, Kata Kelemen was initiated only in March of 1999. She studied in London.

As for personal problems, especially for second-generation women, it is a challenge to be a good mother, a good daughter or wife, a working woman and a member of the community. There is a collision between the traditional role of a Jewish woman and the expectations of modern society. In the last 40 years, under totalitarian rule, most of our parents hid their Jewish identity. We discovered our Jewish origins as young adults, through veiled allusions, at the workplace, among friends, etc. Our children, by contrast, have taken for granted their Jewish identity, and have returned to the Jewish tradition. Their experiences abroad, the influence of their group of friends, and the changed political atmosphere all have contributed to produce this change. Nowadays they are the ones who teach us how to keep tradition. In my family, my daughter was the first who lighted the candles on Friday evening, and my son took me to the synagogue for the first time.

One of my colleagues took her father to the synagogue – his first time after 40 years – to pray and to say a blessing for his grandchild. A process of bridging the gap of these 40 years has begun, but the bridge between generations has not been built by those who are now middle-age generations, but by their children and the younger generations, who are members of the rebirth of the Jewish community. This process is evidence of the victory of democracy, the freedom and the support of the world Jewish community.

There is still in Hungary a hidden kind of anti-Semitism, an “everyday racism” that manifests itself not in the form of political declarations but in everyday reactions. The effects of the Holocaust are still perceptible in the relationship between Jews and Christians. There are signs of anti-Semitism in the way that some journalists express themselves. There are cases desecrating graves, and the open use of Nazi symbols. A legal neo-Nazi party can propagate the ideology of fascism. Some Jews are very much affected by this and are, for example, afraid to put a *mezuzah* on their doors.

I have been working with Jewish women for the past seven years in the Hungarian Jewish Social Support Foundation founded by the AJJDC and have encountered several types of Jewish women. My experience comes from this direct day-to-day work, thus what I will describe is not a result of scientific research but from personal experience.

The first type of Jewish woman I know is the traditional “Jewish Mother,” a role model who holds on to all the traditions, and observes all the rules. These women are not so numerous but they play a very important role in the Jewish community. They have a certain dignity, are leaders and have followers around them.
Examples are Mrs. Ilona Seifert, former Executive Director for 10 years of the Association of Jewish Communities in Budapest, and Mrs. Hilda Barinkai, who is over 95, and still working. The JDC Hungarian Office had employed her for more than 40 years. They are both observant Jews, still keep the traditions, and are indefatigable in helping others, giving tzedakah, visiting those who are ill. Mrs. Seifert is known for her empathy: she feels the problems of others as her own.

The second type of Jewish woman is the assimilated Jew who is strongly attached to Jewish culture, its values and principles, but has developed an assimilated lifestyle. Their story goes back to the turn of the century when they had to find ways to maintain and hold together their families. For example they had their shops open on the Sabbath because the sales were higher that day, or they gave non-kosher meat to their children when there was nothing else to eat. In a society heading into war and fascism, they gave up their traditions to pragmatic questions of survival – and so became the “agents” of assimilation. As an example I could refer to my family, to my grandmother who during the Nazi occupation changed the family name to protect her children.

Finally, there are the women who played a very significant role in helping Hungary to become a civil society, even if they were only in the background as the wives of famous writers and politicians as their wives. An example of this type of Jewish woman is Léda (Adél Brüll), who was the muse of one of the major Hungarian poets Endre Ady. Notable Hungarian Jewish women in their own right include: the world famous pianist Annie Fisher, internationally known sociologist Zsuzsa Ferge, Vera Soós, Teréz Virág, psychologist, and the first Hungarian Ombudsman Katalin Gönczöl. They fill an important part in public life.

In the older generation there are three ways to relate to the Holocaust in Hungary. Some people decided never to talk about what happened, changed their names, and have kept away from explicitly Jewish in an oath of silence to the next generation. In their old age, however, they look back at their lives and want to share this experience with someone. In this case, it is our task to listen and understand them. One woman, lets call her ‘Teri néni’ never told anyone about her son who was torn apart by dogs in the camp in Bergen-Belsen while she was forced to watch. Five years ago, on a beautiful April day, she started to talk about her long buried memory and I, totally unprepared to listen, said: Teri néni, do not say that to me!!!” And she was quiet and said: “of course, I never tell this to anyone because I cannot. This is something nobody likes to hear.” And I had to realize how hard it is to learn to listen. It is difficult for these silent women to look back even to the cheerful memories of their youth, and so they lose their roots in a way. The past becomes a painful and shameful ghost.

Other people cannot help but talk about the past. Their talk keeps revolving around the suffering of the labor-camps, the miraculous adventures of escaping and survival, etc. They are living in a separate world surrounded by memories and cannot get out and relate to the present except for short periods. For them it is essential to live through an experience of the present that will give them internal peace and show them the roads to the future.

The third group of people is active, full of life and energy. They create links to the younger generations, carry on the heritage of the community, are volunteers in hospitals and in home care services. They do fundraising and social work and are full of ideas. A unique group of women grew out of them in Hungary,
the first East European group of the “Lions of Judah” International Women’s Network. They also have to cope with their past and their parents’ past but have dealt with it relatively successfully.

The role of women in Hungary after the Second World War did not make their lives any easier. First they were forced to take an active part in the reconstruction of the country and in industrialization. They worked hard at physical labor alongside men. But when there was no need for an extra work force, they were sent home for years to take care of their children and family affairs.

Our younger generation already deals with different types of problems, mainly concerning their present identities rather than questions of the past. There is a strong sense of both sexism and anti-Semitism in Hungarian society, which was there during the time of socialism as well as since its demise. The political changes after 1989 brought a change in social movements as well. Women’s groups formed and developed from informal social networks into professional helping agencies but there is still not a strong women’s movement in the Western sense.

Jewish women are taking a leading role in advocating for emancipation, because freedom for them also means freedom to publicly articulate their true identities. Being a woman, being a Jew and being a Hungarian is not an easy identity to take on but it is something more and more women consider a worthwhile objective to fight for. Research on Hungarian women in general has only started in the past decade. Except for a recent study by Eva Kahana from Cleveland University, a comparative study of Holocaust survivors in the US, Israel and Hungary where the majority of the interviewees were women, I do not know of any specific project about Hungarian Jewish women.

There are very few Jewish women in Hungary who are formal leaders or decision-makers in Jewish organizations. It is a very traditional male-dominated and male-regulated world. As I have learned in Boston, we have much to do both in Eastern-Europe and in our community for the emancipation of women.

We have taken several initiatives in the area, for example, the training for woman politicians planned by the Foundation for Equal Opportunities. Another initiative is the ESZTER Sewing Workshop program. This program was introduced based on the realization that the second generation of Holocaust survivors was struggling with the constant and continuous social care of the survivors themselves. Among these second generation people, there are many women below 60 years of age who suffer from mounting physical and mental health problems due to their parents’ experiences. Some of them have lost their jobs, causing a state of uncertainty for their families.

The series of failures damages their mental health as well as sometimes causing deterioration in physical health. Allowances like disability pension, social allowance, and unemployment benefits are not sufficient to keep up the survivors’ quality of life especially when there are elderly and young members of the family to support. The Sewing Workshop became a solution to the problems of this target group. We thought that with training and organizing, we could help these women build up a Home Sewing Service.

The name Eszter is an acronym which covers the main objectives of the program itself. It consists of the Hungarian words for Empathy (Empátia), Love (Szeretet), Support (Támogatás), Chance (Esély) and Hope (Remény). Its aim is to operate a workshop where people find employment suitable to their skills and physical and mental condition. Jobs bring routine, dignity and social tolerance into everyday life, as well as strengthening family ties, personal goals, and finances. All these make it possible to regain equal opportunities for a high quality of family life, and the successful upbringing of children.
BOOKENDS

by Pamela S. Nadell

In the United States, women’s studies – especially the writing of women’s history – burgeoned dramatically in the 1970s. Believing that understanding women in the past could advance the place of women in the present, scholars raised a host of questions. They examined shifting gender roles, expanding educational opportunities, female work patterns, domesticity, and the political struggles to secure suffrage, to effect reform, and to win equal rights. They sought to reconstruct the history not only of white middle-class women, but also of women of diverse ethnic and racial identities. As this new scholarship was emerging, the first attempt to synthesize the existing body of knowledge in American Jewish women’s history appeared. In 1975 Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel’s published *The Jewish Woman in America.*

That popular work, now long out-of-print, presented models of Jewish women’s activism in the past to a nascent generation of Jewish feminists. It did so in less than 300-pages. It also suggested to a body of new, then-young scholars, an array of questions about how the roles, places, and responsibilities of American Jewish women had changed over time.

Little more than two decades later, in 1997, a new synthesis of scholarship on Jewish women appeared. *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* required two volumes, contains 1,770 double-columned pages, and weighs in at about four pounds. It reflects the talents of its two editors, esteemed senior historians Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, an editorial advisory board of twenty established female academicians, and hundreds of contributors. These bookends of scholarship on the historical experiences of American Jewish women reveal the explosive growth in this field. In two decades, historians, many of them analyzing questions and topics first broached in *The Jewish Woman in America,* created a wealth of new literature transforming the ways in which we now understand the American Jewish past.

My book *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women’s Ordination, 1889-1985,* places me squarely among those who have teased out new sources to find inventive answers to questions first posed by *The Jewish Woman in America* in 1975. In it, I had read that the Reform National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods lobbied “to secure the acceptance by the Reform movement of women rabbis, at least in principle” as early as 1921. I had also learned that Henrietta Szold was “the first woman granted the privilege of attending” classes at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America “on condition that she not presume to apply for rabbinical ordination.”

---


3 For another example of scholarship delving deeply into a topic posed first in *The Jewish Woman in America,* see Dianne Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997).

4 Charlotte Baum et al., *The Jewish Woman in America,* 53, 43.
Over the course of the decade I spent researching and writing *Women Who Would Be Rabbis*, I discovered a far wider and deeper history of the question of women’s right to enter the rabbinate than either I or, I believe, the authors of *The Jewish Woman in America* ever envisioned. By the time I began my research, others, including Sally Priesand, the woman who first won rabbinic ordination in the U.S. in 1972, had already illuminated a handful of names of those who had once asked: Could not women become rabbis? As I turned to these figures, I had little idea that not only would I uncover others, but that I would also find the debate swirling widely in American Jewish life. My friends, convinced that we had all lived through the debate on women’s ordination in the 1970s and 1980s, kept assuring me that my new book would be very short. But even as they joked about it, I found my sources – rebbetzins’ sermons buried in their husbands’ papers, scrapbooks belonging to Hebrew Union College female graduates gathering dust in various attics – pulling me further and further into the past. Ultimately, I discovered that the debate over women’s right to the rabbinate opened in the United States in 1889 on the front page of the Philadelphia *Jewish Exponent*, when the journalist Mary M. Cohen asked “Could not – our women – be – ministers?”

In the 1890’s, in a era of rising expectations for women in American society, a Jewish dimension of this discourse asked whether or not expanding roles for women meant allowing Jewish women to become rabbis. By 1902, when Henrietta Szold pondered studying rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary, she and those with whom she discussed the matter were well aware that the question of women’s ordination was open in American Judaism. Szold couched her request for admission to rabbinical school with the caveat that she was “not an aspirant after Rabbinical honors.”

In the 1920s and 1930s five women, in America and in Germany, pursued ordination for themselves by spending enough time in rabbinical schools to force their faculties and alumni to question whether or not women could “justly be denied the privilege of ordination.” Even during the supposedly feminist doldrums of the 1950s, American Jews continued to examine that prospect. In 1951, when Paula Ackerman stepped onto the pulpit of her synagogue after the death of the rabbi, her husband, she saw herself as a “pioneer in this movement, which we hope may lead to the ordination of women.”

A later pioneer who set out on this path in the early 1960s succeeded in becoming the first female Reform rabbi. Her success rested both on her remarkable tenacity and on the new wave of feminism challenging the gendered prescriptions of American life. These at last brought home to American Jews the possibilities of female rabbis. As Rabbi Sally Priesand went forth, those within the sector of American Jewish life known as Conservative Judaism turned to the question of women’s ordination.

This time, it came in the form of a generation of young Jewish women, deeply invested in both Conservative Judaism and the egalitarian promises of liberal feminism, who demanded the right to serve their people as rabbis. In the mid-1980s as that question was resolved with the ordination of women Conservative rabbis, those within Orthodox Jewry found themselves asking, as Mary M. Cohen had asked a long century before, “Will There Be Orthodox Women Rabbis?”

---

The long history of the debate on the woman rabbi shows that over the course of a century the women who wanted to be rabbis and their supporters invented over and over again the same arguments. Utterly unaware that any before them had done this, those debating the woman rabbi turned each time to the past, to the weight of tradition and especially to Jewish women's history, to illuminate the roles of women in Judaism. Whether they championed the woman rabbi in the 1890s or the 1980s, her advocates all read the classical texts of Jewish law, finding no statement within it specifically prohibiting women from becoming rabbis. They brought forward long lists of the learned women of Jewish history, including those who had used their sacred studies to teach and to rule. Arguing that such women, albeit without formal title, functioned much like rabbis, they held that these models proved women worthy and serious, fully capable of using their knowledge to become rabbis, teachers, and preachers.

At the same time that I was absorbed in writing Women Who Would Be Rabbis, I joined the scholars creating Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia. My entries on “Women Rabbis” and “Sally Priesand” in this pathbreaking work provide a window for understanding the dynamics of American Jewish women's history since 1975, when The Jewish Woman in America was published. Jewish women and men are still debating women's right to the rabbinate but those currently engaged in this question can now discover that the arguments and strategies they believe they are constructing anew were visited by others a long century before.

The Jewish Woman in America and Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia stand as bookends on one shelf of my library. Women Who Would Be Rabbis, published a year after the Encyclopedia, begins the next shelf. I eagerly await the scholars of the future whose books will fill in the next row.

NOTES


For another example of scholarship delving deeply into a topic posed first in The Jewish Woman in America, see Dianne Ashton, Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997).

Charlotte Baum et al., The Jewish Woman in America, 53, 43.

JEWISH WOMEN IN BRITAIN

by Marlena Schmool

In giving an overview of Jewish women in Great Britain I intend to touch on three areas: Jewish organisations; participation in synagogue life; and the position of Jewish women’s research in Britain. Naturally, what I have to say will scarcely skim the surface of each topic. The main sources for the data I quote are the regular compilations of synagogue membership and estimates of population which the Board of Deputies Community Research Unit has conducted regularly the past thirty years; and two recent large scale-studies: The Review of Women in the Jewish Community in 1993 for the Chief Rabbi’s Commission on Women; and The Survey of Social Attitudes of British Jews conducted by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research in 1995.

In common with other “western” communities, British Jewry is based on immigrants. Its modern history is usually dated from 1656 with the settlement in London of a small group of Sephardi Jews from Holland who were quickly followed by co-religionists of Ashkenazi stock coming either directly from Germany or via Holland.¹ The community continued to grow slowly and by 1800 was estimated at between 20,000 and 25,000.² By the early 1880s, with an escalating influx from Eastern and Central Europe, British Jewry numbered a little over 60,000.³ Immigrant and native-born alike lived mainly in London, originally concentrating in the Spitalfields and Aldgate/Whitechapel areas at the eastern boundary of the City of London. Between 1880 and 1914 the immigrants and their first-generation British-born children led to a community numbering 300,000.⁴ Leaders of the established community responded to increased immigration by attempting “to turn the immigrants into Englishmen of the Jewish persuasion” and if this was not possible for the adults, then certainly it was to be attempted for the children.⁵ From the point of view of acculturated British Jewry, the acceptance they had laboured long to earn seemed threatened by newcomers with strange customs who did not readily blend into the late-Victorian English scene. They therefore tried to mould the immigrants to a pattern of private religion, maintained in the home not in the street, where attendance at synagogue on Saturday mirrored church attendance on Sunday. For immigrants who came from self-contained, often rural societies, the move to the smoky industrial tenements and overcrowded houses of East London and other urban centres must have been traumatic.⁶ This influx has provided the demographic core of British Jewry throughout the twentieth century. No later immigration has been large enough to greatly colour the broad trends of British Jewish development. Concomitantly the values and the patterns of Jewish identity that emanate from that immigration have formed the cornerstones of the modern British community.

² Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
Between 1918 and 1950, British Jewry grew in numbers from some 300,000 to over 400,000. Since the mid-1950s there has been a steady contraction in core numbers caused by both strict demographic decrease and diffuse social movement away from the community. British Jewry in common with other western Jewish communities has had to face the paradox that acceptance by host communities has been at the cost of widespread rejection of Jewish religious and cultural values and of physical departure from the community.

Populations are not static; British Jewry is at present reaching the end of the demographic period rooted in the late 19th century. Later inflows of refugees in the 1930s and immediately after World War II, and between 1956 and the 1970s with incomers from Egypt, Hungary, Aden and Iraq, were not large enough to change the long-term demographic nature of community. However their synagogues and associations (and they as individuals) have become identifiable elements in the communal framework, as have Israelis and South Africans.

In 1995, the British Jewish core population was estimated at some 285,000 persons with just under two-thirds in the geographical boundaries of Greater London and the remainder in smaller regional communities. While there are strong, long-established communities throughout northern England, notably in Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool (and Glasgow), when seen with a broad brush the concentration of British Jewry within (Greater) London has always been its most marked geographic feature. Within this population as a whole, women account for approximately 55 percent. Outside London, the proportion of Jewish women rises to 57 percent because of the comparative longevity of women, internal migration patterns and the resulting age-structure of smaller communities.

The Jewish population of Great Britain is established by the death rates method that has been used since the early 1890s. Over the century, the method has been refined and the England and Wales death rates now used are age-, sex- and social-class-specific but a basic principle is maintained. Anyone who dies as a Jew or has her/his Jewishness recognised by using a Jewish burial authority is covered by this estimate.

This population does not confine itself to the synagogue-affiliated community because many non-members who seek (or whose relatives seek, or who leave instructions that they wish for) Jewish burial are included in this figure. The Jewish population is at present decreasing by about 2000 persons per year.

Most of the population decrease is a measured excess of deaths over births. The remaining decline is due mainly to social or communal erosion, that is to movement out of the community either through intermarriage/partnering, or through reduced communal interest, involvement or feeling. We have to recognise obviously that this is a cumulative effect.

In size, British Jewry as a whole falls somewhere between Philadelphia and Chicago. However it is different in nature being spread among 80 or so ‘communities’ over an area, north to south, from Aberdeen to Torquay (roughly the distance from New York to Chicago as the crow flies) and between the east and west coasts. It is, of course, unevenly spread. Within Britain as a whole, Jews account for one half of one per cent

---


9 Compared with 51 percent for the general population of England and Wales.
of the population but this varies from area to area. Greater London, where Jews make up some 2.5% of the population, and the adjacent areas have a total Jewish population of 196,000 – approximately two-thirds of the national total. Seven other towns have a Jewish population of more than 3,000, while the remaining numbers are found in some seventy locations with populations ranging from 20 to more than 1,000 people.

British Jewry follows a very British pattern: historically, community activities in urban centres have been centred around churches, workingmen’s club and trade unions. Therefore, Jewish community centres on the American model have not developed. The synagogue acts as the community centre. This has been a positive factor in that it has maintained religious cohesion. However, more recently, it has made more secularised Jews feel that there is little place for them in the community.

There are about 365 congregations in Britain (including shuls) most of which are in Greater London, with one in six situated in the main Jewish concentration of North West London. Direct survey findings and indirect estimates indicate that around two-thirds of the population are linked to synagogue life, either through personal or family membership in an orthodox or progressive synagogue. In Britain, progressive synagogues include those belonging to the Assembly of Asrty Synagogues, the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, and the Union of Liberal and progressive Synagogues. This proportion has remained stable over thirty or so years. Most synagogues have religious schools that are attended by about one-fifth of the school-age group. A further 38% of children attend a Jewish Day School.

British Jewry has a panoply of women’s organisations: British WIZO, Emunah (Mizrachi Women), League of Jewish Women, Women’s Division of the UJIA, B’nai Brith Women’s Lodges, many ‘friends’ groups, and synagogue ‘ladies guilds’ which are slowly metamorphosing into a gender-free ‘guild’. The four first major, organisations have a combined, overlapping membership of approximately 22,500. The Women’s Review and the JPR study show a pattern of double-membership where those over 55 belong to a zionist group (such as WIZO) and a service organisation (such as B’nai Brith, League of Jewish Women or Ladies’ Guild). In contrast, younger women tend to be involved with those organisations which lean towards self-development and adult education (such as Yakar, Spiro).

To generalise very broadly, older women participate more actively in Jewish community life while younger ones appear more passive. This may of course be a life cycle effect and it is somewhat mitigated by participation in fund-raising groups (e.g. with Jewish Care, New Israel Fund) which especially target younger people – although such groups are not single-sex groups and, to the best of my knowledge their membership has not been examined in any detail. Over the past 15 to 20 years women’s organisations have been aware of (and are now ready to admit) problems in recruiting younger women, partly because young Jewish women are working more outside the home. One outcome has been that they now welcome husbands/partners to regular, educational type meetings not just to the fundraising events which were directed at couples.

Britain is blessed with a Sex Discrimination Act and an Equal Pay Act that came into force in 1975. The SDA specifically prohibits discrimination in employment, education and advertising and in provision of facilities such as housing. It is unlawful to discriminate because someone is married. Of course, like all such

---

Acts it is not perfectly adhered to but it has obviously affected women's position in the general, and by implication the Jewish community. At base it means that a prospective employer cannot ask, as I was once asked, “Mrs Schmool, you're a young married woman, how much longer do you intend to go on working?”

Now a word about women's contribution to those community organisations that have historically been male strongholds. This is an important indicator of the acceptance and integration of women into mainstream leadership roles. Clearly, any contribution to such organisations depends on the quality of the persons involved – not just the numbers – but as a starting point and lacking survey material on quality of input, I want to say a word about women's representation in these bodies.

In 1994, I reviewed female membership in central institutions, namely the Board of Deputies, Regional Representative Councils and Central Progressive Synagogue Councils (the Orthodox, except for the Sephardim, did not then have women on their central councils). The overall finding was that, for the eleven organisations examined, women made up 25% of the members and 20% of committee members. I have partly updated the figures for this seminar but could not cover all the organisations in the time I had. However, I did find that, in the three main synagogue councils’ of management, women now account for 22% of the membership. Moreover, the council of the orthodoxy London-centred United Synagogue is now included as women were ‘admitted’ in late 1994. Now, 21%, there are women; although of course there are no women honorary officers.

Since 1994 most main organisations have been through management and other structural reviews. Committees have disappeared and councils have been streamlined, so when we look back we are not always comparing like with like. Nevertheless the trends can be informative.

As a short case study, I have brought together data from the Board of Deputies’ records, where currently 24% of the total membership are women. The Board is secular, non-denominational and a prototypical “men's organisation.” Members (Deputies) are mainly representatives of synagogues although there are also organisational members. All the historic barriers to female (and for that matter younger) memberships have been there: certain constituencies only permit election of men; meetings are wrongly timed/placed; plenary sessions are long-winded, talk-shops.

These well-aired problems were confronted in the recent management review. The Board was reconstituted last June and while the proportion of women was unchanged, the leaner Executive Committee and new Divisional Boards (top elected positions of the Board) now have almost equal proportions of men and women (47% women) and 2 out of 5 Honorary Officers are women. The proportion of committee places taken by women has risen steadily ñ although the female proportion of the Board as a whole seems to be plateauing out.

Another example of women’s rising profile is the increased number of women working as leading professionals rather than secretaries. We have women executive directors of charities (Sha’are Sedek, Chai lifeline) welfare organisations, (Ravenswood, Leeds, Manchester), synagogue and central organisations (ULPS, BoD). A very particular example of feminisation is the Progressive rabbinate. The first British woman rabbi was appointed to a congregation in 1977. Currently one in five of all Progressive rabbis are women, as are one in four of those serving in Progressive congregations. This reflects the interest British Jewish women are showing in Jewish learning. The expansion is shown also in numbers of women in the
two mainstream institutions of higher Jewish learning in Britain. The two colleges concerned are: (orthodox) Jews College and (progressive) Leo Baeck. At Jews College, excluding semicha candidates, 45% (32/71) of students are women while at Leo Baeck, women are 65% (22/34) of non-rabbinical and nine out of sixteen rabbinical students. It is unfortunate that, while clearly this is a growing phenomenon in Britain, we do not yet have counterbalancing numbers of orthodox young women who are going to ‘seni’.

As I mentioned earlier, the synagogue is the central British Jewish institution. Seventy per cent of the core community are associated with a synagogue. Of these approximately 93,000 households, 90% have a female membership component while only 87% include a male. This is because 13% of memberships are women on their own, for the most part widows whose membership has been inherited from their husband, compared with 8% of memberships who are single men.

Personal attitudes and ‘opportunity costs’ clearly affect who participates in synagogue life and how often. Attitudes are formed by experience and life-cycle position and opportunity is bounded by available time and local provision. So how much ‘spare’ time do women have? In 1992-3, a British woman in full-time employment had 3.3 hours of free time per week-day and 8.3 free hours per week-end day (Social Trends). But with the competing demands of modern life, a person needs strong motivation to be involved in synagogue activities. And I must stress here that I am not talking about attendance at service, rather about the social/communal activities which proliferate around the synagogue.

Twenty per cent of women synagogue members say they attend most Shabbatot or more often, 19% attend about once a month and 6% never attend. Most of the core community lives within easy distance from a synagogue – if they are not totally reliant on public transport. In The Women’s Review, only 17% described themselves as taking part in synagogue activities and this minority stand out from the others as regards their participation in the community generally: [although one in five of these synagogue activists did not belong to any other communal organisation], 29% named three or more other communal organisations with which they had a connection in the twelve months prior to the study in 1993. They are the backbone of communal life.

As might be anticipated, level of synagogue involvement varied with degree of religious commitment: 2% of those who call themselves Secular compared with 32% of strictly Orthodox say they are active in the synagogue. The larger, intermediate, categories – Jewish/Progressive, and traditional – show broadly similar levels of interest with 15% and 19% of each group being active. The activity level of members of different synagogue ‘denominations’, shows that members of Orthodox and Progressive synagogues are likely to be 46% and 45% active respectively.

The Women’s Review was largely prompted by the realisation that many mainstream orthodox women were dissatisfied with their role in synagogue and the way they were treated in the synagogue – which will of course affect involvement. Both The Women’s Review and the JPR picked up on this issue. The Review probed a range of attitudes including seating arrangements in synagogue buildings, women’s prayer groups, and the need for special women’s blessings.

I have chosen to consider one particular statement included in both the studies. Respondents were asked to say whether they agreed/disagreed (on a five point scale) that “the people who run synagogues sometimes make others feel like outsiders.” JPR analysis showed no difference between the levels of agreement of men
and women – 66% of synagogue-affiliated men and 62% of women, (14% strongly) agree with the statement. The earlier Women's Review found that 65% of women synagogue members agreed with the sentiment. This concurrence of men and women leads me to ask whether they would also agree on another finding that comes to light in unpacking the Review data: 55% of the Review sample had found a synagogue that 'met their needs as a woman' while the remaining 45% had not.

When we compared how these two groups felt about the 'outsiders' statement, we found that 76% of those who had not found a synagogue to meet their needs agreed with the sentiment and even 61% of those who had found a 'suitable' synagogue agreed. These are high levels of agreement about a negative aspect of synagogue atmosphere which may constitute a warning for the future. I would suggest that it is communally unhealthy for 3 out of 5 women, who seem otherwise in tune with their synagogue, to feel there is this element of exclusion. Will women, and by extension men, really continue to go where they do not feel welcome?

In appraising the bibliography of British research on Jewish women I was disappointed to see that there were at most 20 studies. There are, of course, many Jewish women in British cultural life who are not identified with the Jewish community. As a matter of course in my work, I attempt to keep in touch with the activities of various women's initiatives like the Jewish Women's Network, the Board's Women's Issues Action Group and The Half-Empty Bookcase (an annual gathering on Jewish women's literature), and the Stanmore (Orthodox) Women’s Tefillah Group [5 years old in February 1998], but I felt that a few extra telephone calls might bring new information.

While we can justifiably boast that The Women's Review was, in 1993, the most far-reaching Jewish social survey ever undertaken in Britain, it is disheartening to know that there has been no consequent burgeoning of primary research. Indeed, the first footnote references in the latest British women's Jewish book, Under my Hat by Sally Berkovic are all for American studies and there are overall only comparatively few British sources quoted.

This certainly does not mean The Review database has been exploited to the full; and it is encouraging to be able regularly to provide new tabulations to students and communal workers. It is also naturally very challenging to see how far data can be analysed to throw light on communal trends, especially as we now have comparative material from the JPR study (which goes some way to meet the plea we made on publication of the Women's Report for 'similar data about men'). Nevertheless, The Women's Review has not really given a strong push to Jewish women's studies in Britain.

I feel that this lack of follow-up in part manifests a widespread discontent with the outcomes of The Review process. And I would like to close with a few observations about the expectations raised by this research and how far they remain unrealised.

The Chief Rabbi's Commission on Women in the Community was loudly heralded when it appeared in 1993. It attempted to reach affiliated and unaffiliated women, and spread its net as widely as it could. It involved many individuals nationally working in task forces on issues such as family life and Jewish education. The preliminary qualitative research, from written evidence and focus groups, showed that, in launching this initiative, the Chief Rabbi had accurately touched a nerve in the community. Women were looking for change. With hope heightened in this way someone was bound to be left disappointed. And, unfortunately, I would say the main impression left with women is a sense of non-fulfilment, a lack of solutions.
Sadly, the research gave point to efforts (already embryonic when the study was carried out) on behalf of abused Jewish women and children which has resulted in the first helpline and a mother/child refuge. This effort has reached many otherwise 'unattached' women both as clients and, more happily, as supporters.

In the course of community development work, new formats for Bat Mitzvah are being tried: my own synagogue no longer has groups of girls being ‘confirmed’ on Sunday mornings but rather has a Shabbat morning ceremony for an individual (albeit after the main service) where the rabbi addresses the bat mitzvah on her own, directly after the reading of the Torah as he would a bar mitzvah. Other synagogues allow girls to choose the way in which they celebrate this rite de passage.

On a more public front, there has been an art exhibition at a major London art gallery, the Barbican, called “Rubies and Rebels: Jewish Female Identity in Contemporary British Art.” It was accompanied by a catalogue. However, women still ask what The Review achieved. The main source of unhappiness and sense of non-achievement, beside which everything else pales, has been lack of imaginative responses to the seemingly intractable problems of get and agunah. Responses have been slow. The much publicised Pre-Nuptial Agreement (seen as a way of pre-empting possible problems with get) has not been greatly advertised nor much taken up by couples about to marry. With the right/left religious divide deepening, we seem likely to have more, rather than less, stringent approaches to and interpretations of the problems women face here.
GENENDER AND LITERACY AMONG YOUNG ORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN

By Tamar El-Or

The cypresses in Magdiel are tall, like the cypresses in the old towns of Israel. Their gray-green loftiness proclaims the pride of the first settlers who planted these trees in what was Palestine of the 1920-30s. A similar double row of cypresses planted by Magdiel-born Yehezkel Daum when he went up to live at the new settlement of Ramat Magshimim on the Golan Heights in the late 70’s are shorter and less slender.

Rabbi Yehezkel Daum died unexpectedly (at the age of 54) in the summer of 1993 and his family found itself discussing the appropriate place for his burial. Most of the Daums are buried in the cemetery at Magdiel, on the Sharon plain north of Tel Aviv. The new cemetery at Hispin on the Golan plateau had only a handful of graves, and an air of uncertainty hung over them. But, in the end, the funeral ceremony took place on the Golan.

When I paid my condolence call, I approached Yehezkel’s mother and sisters, who were sitting, as the Jewish laws of mourning prescribe, low, close to the floor. “Those cypresses,” his mother said, “they are his Magdiel. You understand, for him the Golan Heights and Ramat Magshimim are like the Sharon and Magdiel for us. The deep mud that was here when they arrived, the delicate seedlings they planted – that was simply his Magdiel.”

His mother, knowing that I come from the non-religious, left-wing, big-city side of the family, was guessing – correctly – that the decision to bury Yehezkel on the Golan raised some serious questions for me. After all, I am among those Israelis who believe that the Golan Heights will eventually have to be ceded to Syria in the framework of a peace treaty – thereby putting Yehezkel’s grave in a foreign country. By comparing Ramat Magshimim to Magdiel, was his mother deliberately translating the family’s decision into language she thought would be more pleasing to me, or that would keep me from completing my train of thought? Or was it she who needed to make the comparison, to make it easier for herself to accept the separation and distance that her grandchildren had imposed on her?

Yehezkel Daum’s grandfather, who was also my mother’s grandfather, had six children. He was one of the first members of the mizrahi movement, a religious Zionist who picked up the members of his family from Warsaw in 1924 and brought them to Magdiel. One of his daughters (following her husband) and one of his sons (following his wife) continued along the religious Zionist road. The others, with the exception of one of the grandchildren, drifted away from it. Yehezkel and his sisters grew up in one of the two religious families.

As a child, I loved to spend long days in the yards in Magdiel, where my mother’s uncles and aunts lived side by side. The orthodox Sabbath observance of one of those homes did not stand out, given that the other two were also traditional. Miriam and Yonit, who were about my age even though they were the

---

1 This is an edited part of a forthcoming book by the author to be published in 2000 by Wayne State University Press.
children of my mother’s uncles, were wonderful companions for long walks and games, for climbing the
citrus and loquat trees and smoking forbidden cigarette butts behind the hen houses. From Miriam
I learned that you have to wait until three stars have appeared on Saturday night before you can collect
the eggs, and she taught me some dirty jokes, too.

Magdiel was a different world from the neighborhood where I grew up on the edge of the big city. As time
went on, the visits became less frequent and the distances became greater. Children’s games were replaced
by politics and life decisions, fashions and images that colored the old ties and love. The history of the
Daum family illustrates the divergence so common in Israeli society, one that put Miriam and me on either
side of a social, ideological, and political barrier. This work took me back to Miriam’s “field.”

I chose to study the women’s seminary at Bar-Ilan University. From here on, I will call it as its students do,
in Hebrew, the Midrasha, because it lies at the crossroads of religious and women’s literacy that is my field
of study. But the fact that at one of our family weddings I pored with Miriam over the class schedule in
order to choose classes worth observing and examining, and that I made use of her name and that of her
brother to improve my foothold at the Midrasha, is part of the same research path.

Study of one’s backyard “home” and not just of distant and foreign cultures, has become the order of the
day in current anthropology. In this work, the home is not just a sociological metaphor but a real home.
In such a home the communication between the women speaking becomes a charged discourse, one that
gathers into it both their private and public lives.

I attended a memorial service for my Uncle Shlomo at the Magdiel cemetery, not long after the Oslo peace
talks had become an established fact. “Did you hear?” Miriam told me. “They said today on Arutz Sheva
(a radio station associated with the right wing of the religious Zionist movement) that our army no longer
deserves to be called the Israel Defense Force because it isn’t defending us any more.”

“I didn’t hear that,” I whispered to her. “I haven’t the slightest idea where Arutz Sheva is on the radio dial.”

At the end of the ceremony some of the participants headed towards the graves in order to instill in their
children something of the family tree and the tradition of visiting the departed. Some of the children, for
whom it was the first visit to a cemetery, gazed at their parents as if to find out what level of sorrow and
interest they were supposed to express. At the gate, next to the faucets provided for washing the hands
upon leaving a cemetery, as religious law requires, Miriam looked at me with her green eyes and said:
“Forget politics. Have you gone to sit in on the classes at the Midrasha that I recommended?”

“I went to some of them,” I answered.

“So, how are they?”

“It’s a long story,” I replied.

I can begin far from the cypresses of Magdiel, fold the beginning into the envelope that arrived from the
Midrasha at Bar-Ilan University. In it I found a sheet of paper made to look like yellowing parchment
notifying me of the opening of the program for graduates of the Midrasha that would begin in 5753 –
that is, the 1992-93 academic year. The studies would be concentrated, six hours on Tuesdays from the
afternoon until eight in the evening, including two two-hour classes and two hours of study in havruta,
independent study with a partner. I looked at the yellow parchment, the curled up heading, and the list
of courses offered, and I tried to figure out how such an invitation had reached me.
I refused to give myself over to the feeling that fate had sent me by mail a field of anthropological study, but it was hard to escape that conclusion. As a social anthropologist, who always needs “a field of study” I was at the time facing a decision on a new research project. I had been considering taking a look at one of the seminaries that offer religious studies for women after they complete their military or alternate national service. This field of inquiry had suggested itself after my study on the link between knowledge and gender among ultra-orthodox (haredi) women. The program I held before me fit my expectations so well that it was hard to relate to it disinterestedly. It promised a concentrated day of study, including teaching women Gemara (Talmud), a class in Bible, and in the writings of Rav Kook in the company of graduates of the Midrasha.

My great luck, I quickly understood, was a product of the Midrasha’s computer, which had me listed as having taken, in 1987-88, a course in Hasidism, in the framework of my Ph.D. studies. All at once a forgotten scene from that year appeared before me. I was standing by the door of the director of the Midrasha, waiting for a personal interview with Rabbi Yitzhak Cohen. For the first time in my life I was being interviewed to decide whether I could participate in a course. I had registered for a class that appeared in the university catalogue as requiring the approval of the director of the Midrasha. There was a long line of women waiting for a talk with the director.

Inside the room, a man with a black and white beard sat behind a large desk on a high-backed chair. There were a few pictures on the walls, and a vase with fresh flowers. Within the space of a few minutes, tactfully and indirectly, the rabbi made it clear to me that this place, where young Jewish women study, was not for me: “It won’t be right for you. The class isn’t on the level of a doctoral student. You won’t get much out of it. It’s not a historical or philosophical class on Hasidism. It’s something else.”

At home, I crossed the class off my schedule, but, as it turned out later, the computer had not done the same. In its memory, Tamar El-Or had registered as a student, turned into a Midrasha graduate, and five years later was invited for another talk with the rabbi. I returned to Rabbi Cohen’s room hoping for a positive answer this time. I mentioned my new status as a scholar, and dropped the names of family members he knew. I was happy to hear that he had read my newly-published book. Rabbi Cohen made inquiries about the nature of my interest in the graduate program, listened to me talk vaguely about wanting to both study Torah and study the women studying it. He understood, I think, that I wanted to join the women in order to observe them. When we parted, he summed up my motives as follows: “I won’t stop anyone who wants to study Judaism.” What had been denied me as a student at the university turned out to be surprisingly easy to get as a scholar.

During the three years I spent in the Midrasha, and in my visits after I completed my principal field work, I enjoyed cooperation from Rabbi Cohen. When I took part in one of his classes, I presented him with questions, thoughts, preliminary analyses, and criticism. I did not take for granted the responsiveness he displayed, and the very real and non-patronizing assistance he gave me. I also accepted with surprise and joy the responsiveness of the students, instructors, librarians, and office staff, and never stopped wondering about why they cooperated with me.
My motives for choosing to study the corner of Zionism at the intersection of knowledge, gender, and religion are complex. They include a natural continuity with my studies of haredi women, an invitation whose source was a computer error, and a family biography that in the course of a generation created boundary lines within my own home. To these reasons was added a realization that this is not the time to search far afield for objects of research, that things are happening at this heavily-traveled intersection, that study among religious women is now in a critical period.

The field and research work produced findings that point not only to a critical and interesting period but to a real revolution. During my years of observation, research, and writing (1992-1997) I followed the beginning of a revolution in real time, and the book I eventually wrote endeavored to portray it. Its central claim is that the spreading practice of intensive Judaic studies among women in the religious Zionist community is a revolutionary phenomenon that will, within a short time, bring about a most profound transformation in orthodox Judaism. Its source lies in a change in the relations between the sexes and in the constitution of gender identities of the members of the community, but its influence is sweeping. Before us is a feminist literacy revolution that bring with it theological and halachic (Jewish legal) changes. These changes will not be traumatic because they are taking place gradually and along with a continual institutional metamorphosis. They will make the community both more religious and more feminist. More religious, because it will contain more people, that is women, who know Torah, and more women who believe and observe the mitzvot (commandments). More feminist, because of the desire to annul the sex-gender of the female believer as a condition for full participation in the life of the community.

At the turn of the twentieth century, religious Zionism shaped itself as an orthodox Jewish movement that decided to link itself with the Zionist enterprise. This decision required social courage and halachic creativity. At the end of that same century, the religious Zionist community faces a no less serious effort to include changes in the system of gender relations within the orthodox way of life.
JEWISH LIFE AND JEWISH WOMEN IN GERMANY TODAY

by Tobe Levin and Susanna Keval

“Jewish women are always in diaspora; being foreign is perfectly normal.”
Vivet Alevi in Nach der Shoah geboren

When we survey the international Jewish community, the Jewish community in Germany stands out as truly dynamic, having nearly doubled in the last ten years to become the fourteenth largest in the world. Compared to the pre-war Jewish population of 500,000, seventy-thousand German Jews may seem a paltry number. But fifty years after the Shoah, Jews have begun to regain visibility in journalism, the arts, and various domains of public life.

The situation of the Jewish woman in Germany after 1945 reflects community history as a whole. Following the Shoah, many Jewish immigrants entered the Federal Republic. Of these, few had been German citizens before 1945. The Jewish women (and men) resident in Germany today have their roots in, among other places, Poland, Hungary, Romania, the former Czechoslovakia, the former Soviet Union, Israel and, since reunification, Eastern Germany. The descendants of those Jews who for over 600 years had lived continuously in German-speaking realms and developed a highly complex culture, including a women’s culture, today compose only a tiny minority of the German-Jewish population. Heterogeneity is the key element – at once binding and differentiating – that characterizes not only Jewish women but the community itself.

The linguistic and cultural diversity characteristic of the post-war German-Jewish community, though appearing problematic at first glance, has inspired productive and creative moments. Our article opens with a brief historical overview of Jewish women before the war, followed by several contemporary voices. Then, in two parts, we will look at the present situation of German Jewish life from a more personal perspective, inspired by our own heterogeneity.

Tobe Levin grew up in the 1950s as an American Reform Jew on the Jersey shore. Her point of view reflects an upbringing which consigned the experience of anti-Semitism in America to the older generations, as the unprecedented receding of Jew-hatred after McCarthy allowed those Jews who were not children of Holocaust survivors to entertain a naive disassociation from Christian society’s past revulsion.1 Levin arrived in Berlin in 1975 to research the German women’s movement for her Cornell Ph.D. in comparative literature. Marriage in 1985 to Christoph Freiherr (Baron) von Gleichen formalized, ironically enough, her previously ‘voluntary’ contact to the Jewish Community in Frankfurt, where she had moved in 1979 to begin teaching for the University of Maryland in Europe.2 At the urging of her philo-Semitic husband, she enrolled their three-year-old daughter Rosa in the Lichtigfeld Schule, a Jewish institution, from which Rosa transferred in August 1999 to an ‘integrated’ public gymnasium, with a nominally Christian majority and

---


2 The licensing procedure requires registering a religion – for tax purposes, as 10% of what one otherwise pays goes directly to the Church or synagogue. Thus officially ‘joining’ the Jewish Community by writing “Jewish” in the appropriate blank brought Tobe all the usual literature, invitations, etc.
a significant minority of Muslim students. Rosa's comment after her first day of school could also have served as our epigram. "Mom," she said, "even though we're Jews, they don't seem to be against us."

Although the contemporary German women's movement offered Tobe friendship and collegiality, she sees in her daughter's distrust a realistic sensitivity to what Letty Cottin Pogrebin has called the anti-Semitic virus, possibly dormant at present, but which can, like asymptomatic chicken pox, develop into shingles. In today's Germany, the conflagration would target not only, or even mainly, Jews, but also 'guest workers' and refugees, especially those from Africa. Recognizing that Jews and (other) foreigners need to make themselves heard, Tobe has been engaged outside Jewish circles, particularly with African diaspora women in the struggle to end genital mutilation. As she will explain in detail below, alliances between Black and Jewish women in Germany may be taken for granted, because, in fact, Jewish women here are not infrequently written about as 'Black'.

The perspective of Susanna Keval, in contrast, is one of an immigrant from the former Czechoslovakia, who has been living in Frankfurt since 1968. In search of her Central European family's tradition, she also connected to the heritage of liberal German Jewry. En route, Susanna not only founded a reformed egalitarian group that after six years has become an anchored part of Frankfurt Jewish life, but she has also discovered the broad field of Jewish women's studies which she is currently striving to establish within the university curriculum. Her recently completed dissertation, Painful Work of Memory: German Resistance Fighters Speak About the Persecution and Annihilation of European Jewry, will be published this autumn, (1) and exemplifies pioneer work in the field in Germany. Finally, Susanna is active in the Trialogue involving Jewish, Christian and Muslim women in Germany.

As German Jews, we are heirs to a distinguished tradition of German-Jewish women. The earliest known German Jewish woman writer, Glückel von Hameln, composed her Memoirs (2) in 1690-1691 in the form of a diary addressed to her children. This housewife and mother opens her narrative with a discourse on theological and moral principles which she encourages her children to follow. At the same time, she documents contemporary life in Hamburg at the close of the seventeenth century: religious conflict during the Thirty Years' War, anti-Semitic persecution and pogroms, arrival of the false Messiah Sabbatai Zvi, the plague, illnesses and the death of her first husband. As a widow, Glückel of Hameln saved the family's property by becoming a skilled businesswoman. The Memoirs, first published in 1896, preserve the record of a woman's daily life. Gluckel expresses her religious principles and opinions so clearly that a "feminine religiosity" and "domestic spirituality" have been attributed to her, in opposition to the public male ritual domain.

Another major historical influence is the cohort of Jewish women in Germany who lived at the end of the 18th century and into the early 19th. Enlightenment ideas and the option of emancipation entered Jewish communities as the Haskalah, and affected Jewish life in Eastern and Western Europe. The French revolutionary era witnessed increasing numbers of Jewish women venturing out into the Gentile world; their wealth and education encouraged their interest in, and made them interesting to, the Romantics whose acolytes were also somewhat socially marginalized. The most famous of these Jewish women, Rahel Levin Varnhagen von Ense (1771-1833), (3) maintained a salon that attracted not only philosophers like Hegel and Schleiermacher but the philologist Wilhelm von Humboldt and the brothers Grimm. Levin von
Varnhagen herself entered literary history as the author of essays and a vast correspondence. She also converted, but at a time when Orthodox practice provided the only Jewish option, we see this as the consequence of her desire for freedom from religious obligations. Levin von Varnhagen remained thirsty for knowledge, however, and produced a penetrating body of literary work. Today, she would be called a public intellectual.

The Jewish woman's presence in Germany's public life is further exemplified by Bertha Pappenheim who, without abandoning tradition, enjoyed a secular education and became the well-known founder of the *Jüdischer Frauenbund* (Jewish Women's Movement). Its passionate pre-war campaigns have been brilliantly captured by historian Marion Kaplan. (4) Launched in 1904, the movement, affiliated with the *Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine* (BDF) (Union of German Women's Associations), attracted mainly middle class un-waged mothers. Like its German gentile counterparts, the JFB believed in a politics of “separate spheres” and women's responsibility for social problems viewed as extensions of the household. It urged improvement in women's education (even if restricted to “female professions”), and organized social work to relieve the elderly, the orphaned, the impoverished and, above all, prostitutes. Bertha Pappenheim's 1927 *Sisyphus-Arbeit* [The Work of Sisyphus] described efforts to stop Jewish pimps and to save Jewish girls from the so-called “white slave trade.”

What interests us most in Kaplan's statistics on the JFB are participation rates. Whereas the BDF at its acme served 500,000, a mere 1% of its constituency, (5) the JFB, in its first ten years, attracted 35,000 and attracted a membership of 50,000, representing a full 20% of eligible adults by the 1920s. Figures from 1933’s record 60,000 adherents in 400 local chapters, clear evidence that Jewish women wanted to act on the world stage, moving beyond a sectarian or religious framework. At the same time, however, engagement in the JFB can be interpreted as filling a spiritual void in an epoch of increasing secularization, civil emancipation and assimilation.

Social work can easily be seen as a *mitzvah*; in fact, the JFB newsletter consistently debated the issue of religious content in project plans. That women had a more conservative than revolutionary role to play in the eyes of the movement's founder is implicit in the slogan “social motherhood,” accompanied, however, by a disinterest in questions of public religious practice. To illustrate: when Lily Montagu, an executive board member of the Jewish Religious Union of England became the very first woman to preach in Berlin's Reform Synagogue, the JFB failed to exploit the occasion to urge amplified authority for women. It would take a few more years before the question of women in the rabbinate was raised and enthusiastically discussed, and before the first female rabbi, Regina Jonas, was ordained in 1935.3 Had 1933 not marked the end of all such liberalizing developments, the unresolved issue of women's spiritual leadership and liturgical role would surely not have remained in the background, as it is today. (6)

*Nach der Shoah geboren*

The problems that Jewish women confronted after the second world war, in the 1940s and 1950s, were existential: founding families, achieving material security and overcoming the immediate trauma of the concentration camps. In addition, many Jews tried to reconnect to pre-war religious traditions, thereby

---

3 by Rabbi Max Dienemann of Offenbach
attempting to graft East-European shtetl practices onto the tree of pre-war liberal, enlightened, exterminated German Jewry. For these East European women, of course, this implied a continuity of gender-specific roles.

A chorus of Jewish female voices collected in the early 1990s by Jessica Jacoby, Claudia Schoppmann and Wendy Zena-Henry (7) initiates us into the perils of negotiating life in a world which, to a degree unlike elsewhere, witnesses the past moving along hand-in-hand with the present.4 Autobiographical sketches from Jewish women whose origins include Argentina, Austria, France, England, Hungary, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, South Africa, Turkey, the USA, and both Germanies identify disturbances in the tranquil surface of mundane interactions while at the same time illustrating that Jews can live (well) in Germany and have even experience a cultural rebirth.

No one writer can speak for the others, yet themes recurrent in many entries come to the fore in Karen Margolis's piece. She finds “the meaning of Jewishness ... in ... rifts” caused by “constant immigration and emigration.” (8) Born in Zimbabwe, she moved to South Africa and London before coming to Berlin to work as a freelance journalist and translator. “When asked what has molded me as a Jewish woman,” she says, first, that “Hitler ... shaped my childhood” (9), as did exclusivity. “My father would sometimes say, ‘Anyone not Jewish will put you in a concentration camp’”(10), from which Margolis concludes, “The Germans may not have succeeded in annihilating us, but they managed to stamp us as victims,” (11) a stereotype magnified in Germany where, to escape the debilitating image, Margolis followed many Jews into radical politics. Typically, she entertains contradictory views of Jewish life in Germany. She believes that “assimilation is perhaps the greatest myth of the twentieth century” (12) while contending that neo-fascism remains unappealing to the vast majority of Germans with whom she interacts.

As Erica Fischer phrases it, “Germany is probably the most secure country in the world for Jews today – as long as you don’t flaunt it.” (13) A journalist, Fischer devotes herself to themes characteristic of Jewish women in this collection: Blacks in South Africa, Slovenians in Austria, foreigners in Germany, women the world over – racism, sexism, and marginality. “Only later did it dawn on me: in a spiraling process I was moving ever closer to myself.” (14)

Although contributors to this volume uniformly stress one thing – that German xenophobia targets other ‘Others’ more viciously today than it does Jews – the tale of Jutta Oesterle-Scherin, an open lesbian in the Bundestag from 1987 to 1990, is instructive. Born in Jerusalem, Oesterle-Scherin is often asked, “How can you live here after all they did to you?” The subtext she hears is: “Why in the world did you come back?” which sounds to her very close to “Why don’t you go home?” Her repartee is: “How can you live here? Does it mean you’ve forgiven the Nazis their crimes?” (15)

If heterogeneity characterizes the community, ambivalence is its attitude. Speaking in Berlin at Israel’s 50th birthday celebration, Ambassador Avi Primor claimed that, “after the USA, Germany is Israel’s best friend in the world.” (16) Many German Jews would agree. What other country has witnessed hundreds of thousands of citizens forming candlelight processions against xenophobia as the Germans did in 1991?

---

4 Nach der Shoah Geboren. Jüdischer Frauen in Deutschland. (Born After the Shoah: Jewish Women in Germany)
5 Since the book has not been translated, we recommend the comprehensive review by Tobe Levin, in Bridges. A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends. Vol. 6, No. 1 Summer 5756/ 1996. 111-118.
And the phenomenon of a Jewish Community College in Frankfurt (where Tobe taught in the early 1990’s) sustained by the enthusiastic enrollment of mainly non-Jewish Germans.

However, the late Ignatz Bubis, head of the organized Jewish Community in Germany, often insisted on “the fine line between anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism.” (17) Similarly, to open his 1997 discussion of German/Jewish relations Munich historian Michael Wolffsohn wrote: “In the beginning was mass murder.” (18) Although they are warned not to limit their reading of German history to the line that leads from Bismarck to Hitler, many scholars do – with good reason. Half a century after the slaughter, the Shoah continues to mark Jews in Germany and Germans of Christian descent, of whatever gender.

Let’s look in on a 1994 board meeting of the Frauen Media Turm, the major archive of the German feminist movement in Cologne. Directed by Alice Schwarzer (the closest German counterpart of American feminist Gloria Steinem) the influential group included Anke Brunn, then Minister of Education for North-Rhine Westphalia; Dr. Rita Süßmuth, then President of the Bundestag; as well as a handful of professors (with women presently at about 3% of the highest rank, you can appreciate the selectivity). I, Tobe, am the only Jew.

After the meeting adjourns and we are enjoying a Pilsner in the cobbled courtyard overlooking the Rhine, sister board member Sigrid Metz-Göckel, head of the Women’s Studies advanced degree program at the University of Dortmund, tells me about her graduate students’ projects. Half a dozen have chosen Jewish themes, she says, so will I come to give a talk? In Dortmund, they have no Jewish women colleagues. Of course, I nod. My pleasure. My real, if clearly ambivalent, pleasure. Though we don’t articulate the reasons why Dortmund has ‘no Jews’, the air thickens as, in 1994, we touch the past. (19)

This past is treacherous. It continues to invade the present, coloring the perception of things. For example, it was April 1990 before I ever “saw” a Jew the way a German is taught to see him, with the heightened sensitivity born of the German context. The Jewish ‘look’ – I picked this up in part from Gentile relatives habitually pointing out how this or that person on TV ‘looks’ Jewish – includes traces of traditional Jewish stereotypes, such as larger than average noses and more than normally nappy hair, but also more subtle elements: the turned-out, upturned hand and the shrug of the shoulder. What I might have perceived, and, in the diaspora, been drawn to as a hint of New York and home, is coded here as Jewish, visibly Jewish. But visibility – an unconscious remnant of the Shoah – poses problems. Just as gentle Germans constantly confront their guilt or, equally consciously, decide not to confront it, Jews constantly face the of trying to keep out of sight challenge when in public or of coming out.

Recently when entering the Friedberger Landstraße branch where I had been banking for the past eleven years, I suddenly – and quite unusually – felt embarrassment. There to open a standing order for my daughter’s fees at the Lichtigfeldschule, a teller I’d never seen before approached. He was short and heavy-set, with olive skin, and tight black curls. He also bore himself in a way that told me “I am a Jew!” Although I was relieved at first, mortification returned with his resonant voice: “Great! So she’s going to the Jewish school?” I could have sworn they heard him in the attic. I felt uncomfortable, exposed, unsafe.

And yet, despite both my sensitivity and the Brandenburg election, anti-Semitism has waned. In 1949, for instance, the Allensbacher Institut für Demoskopie registered anti-Semitic attitudes in 50% of the German population. In the mid-80s that had fallen to 15%. (20) The American Jewish Committee found that in the period 1985-1995, the Germans were the best informed of all nations about the Holocaust after the Israelis
and no more anti-Semitic than Americans, the British, the French or some Eastern Europeans. The *AJC World Opinion Update* of February 1995 reports that only 22% of German respondents rejected hypothetical Jewish neighbors compared to 31% of Austrians in 1991; 30% of Poles in 1995; and 24% of Russians in 1992. Anti-Semitism's lowest scores came from Hungary with 17% in 1991; Great Britain at 12% in 1993; and the United States, with 5% in 1989. (21) Wolffsohn concludes: “Of course Germany produces anti-Semitic acts and crimes, but in comparison to other countries, Germany belongs to the top end of the tolerant nations. For many, these findings don’t jive with the *Weltanschauung.* But they’re true.” (22)

What does anti-Semitism truly mean for us living in Germany today? It is an omnipresent irritation that can appear unexpectedly, even in the least aggressive, unintentional expressions or objects. Leon Poliakov describes this phenomenon as a collective trauma, that comes from as far back as the Crusades, has been incorporated into the Jewish liturgy as well as psyche, and become part of collective memory. The German Jewish sensibility stems from this constant and sometimes unconscious awareness that ‘normality’ remains elusive.

Without doubt, long-term effects of persecution continue to trouble the post-war generation of Jews. Books like *No Grass Grows Over: Daughters of Jewish Survivors* by non-Jew Ingeborg Bohringer-Bruns joins the growing list of testimonies to stubborn trauma and the need to construct post-war identities on ashes. (23) A significant problem here is what Wolffsohn calls the “absurdity of non-religious diaspora Jewish existence.” (24) For the 80% of German Jews (some say 95%) who are secular, the question of identity has been reduced to a “Jewish situation” comprised of “suffering, persecution ... fear.” (25) One response to this dilemma may be pursuit of higher education. By 1990, 31% of Jews completed university as against a mere 8% of Gentiles. (26)

But another response to the question of Jewish identity is the German variant of Jewish renewal, a religious movement that involves a significant number of German-Jewish women. Contemporary reform activity, given post-war impetus only in the early 1990s, proposes full participation of women in synagogue life, increased relevance for Sabbath sermons and a liturgy in German in addition to one in Hebrew. With its organization of egalitarian services launched in 1994, the Reform *Kehillah Chadashah* in Frankfurt has challenged the *Einheitsgemeinde* (like the French Consistoire, the single religious authority covering the entire nation and into whose coffers all tax money flows, that has always been Orthodox) by its insistence on including women in minyanim, integrating male and female seating, and supporting women's leadership. Bea Wyler, the first post-war female rabbi in Germany, is a Conservative Jew who arrived in 1995, despite strong opposition from the Orthodox establishment. She now leads the Jewish communities in Oldenburg and Braunschweig. With 36% of the registered Jewish community in Frankfurt showing some interest in the Reform movement, their number promises to increase slowly. (27) Reform groups have arisen in other cities, too, some of them serving the specific needs of East Europeans deprived of the opportunity to acquire religious learning and allowing women now feeling that lack to become *bat mitzvah* as adults. (28) The more than 100 individuals who attended an April 1997 symposium at the *Evangelische Akademie Arnoldshain* augur well for the Reform Movement and its drive for women's egalitarian inclusion.

A revival of Jewish women's religious practice became evident at a *Bet Devora* conference for women rabbis, cantors, scholars and all spiritually interested Jewish men and women which convened in Berlin
in May of 1999. More than 150 mainly female participants answered an invitation which stated, without equivocation, “Women are standing together with men, on an egalitarian basis, on the *binah,*” for, increasingly, women are exercising important ritual functions” as rabbis. The colloquium asked, “What does this mean for Jewish tradition and continuity?”

Answering was the entire elite of European Jewish Women’s Studies, including scholars such as Judith Frishman (Universities Leiden and Utrecht), Eveline Goodman-Thau (Universities Halle and Harvard), Susanna Keval (Egalitarian Minyan, Frankfurt/M), Diana Pinto (Consultant of the European Council, Paris); and spiritual leaders such as Rabbi Jane Kanarek (University of Moscow), Rabbi Katalin Kelemen (Jewish Community “Szim Salom,” Budapest), Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah (London), Rabbi Sybil Sheridan (Leo Baeck College, London), Rabbi Daniela Thau (Bedford), and Rabbi Bea Wyler (Jewish Community, Oldenburg) who spoke on her “Experiences as the First Woman Rabbi In Germany since the Shoah.” Additional themes included “Female perspectives on Tanach and Rabbinical Literature,” “Women’s Rituals,” and “*Halachah* and Equal Rights for Women.” *Bet Devora,* initiated by Elisa Klapheck, Lara Dämig, and R. Monika Herweg, is planning further conferences and hopes to become established as an institution for exploring Jewish women’s issues.6

Meanwhile, activists engaged in various projects as Jews can be found in the Women’s International Zionist Organization and its junior variant. Frankfurt alone boasts 500 members in WIZO and WIZO-AVIV who raise funds for a myriad of women’s centers, educational institutions and hospitals in Israel. In 1997, there were regional women’s groups in thirteen German cities, and more are in formation. Although the feminist aims of Pappenheim’s movement have not been duplicated, the *JFB* takes pride in its social services and annual symposium. In 1997, 80 women from 19 different towns discussed “Women in a History of Change” for four days at Bad Kissingen’s kosher hotel Eden Park. Among the speakers was Leah Rabin.

Welcome as participation in the new *JFB* is, where are Jewish women in the German women’s movement? They are certainly there, as we have been since the mid-seventies, with experiences mainly positive and encouraging. But others have encountered conflict.

Here are some of the better-known issues:

Susannah Heschel, in “Configurations of Patriarchy, Judaism, and Nazism in German Feminist Thought” critiques German feminist theologians for charging that the ancient Hebrews killed the goddess, authored patriarchy, and have stolen the limelight from women’s suffering by insisting that the Shoah never be forgotten. “The Holocaust of Jews,” Heschel writes, “is classified under patriarchal concerns, not feminist concerns, as if all Jews were male and all feminists were Christian.” (29)

Maria Baader, in “Taking Leave” discusses her attempt to make a place for herself as a Jewish feminist in Berlin’s women’s scene and regrets the competition – for resources, recognition, empathy – from the (mainly lesbian) audiences attending events sponsored by the *Schabbeskreis,* (Sabbath Circle) a group of Jewish and non-Jewish women which met Friday evenings in Berlin from 1984-1989 to discuss anti-Semitism in the women’s movement and Jewish women in history. 16 Jewish members of that group

---

6 Further information from Elisa Klapheck, *Jüdische Gemeinde zu Berlin,* Fasanenstraße 79/80, 10623 Berlin, Germany. Fax +49-30-880 28 26. e-mail: LaraBLD@aol.com
put their Jewish identities on the line at various symposia only to encounter, as Baader notes, rejection or hostility, Christian German women proved so attached to their view of females as victims that they could not accept the potential agency of Christian German women as oppressors. (30) In other words, many interpreted National Socialism as a war against women rather than against Jews. However, it is only fair to add, as Annette Kuhn noted in 1993, that a good number of German feminist historians have moved away from this position toward one which retains a view of gender’s importance in analyzing nazism without insisting on its centrality. (31)

Perhaps reacting to such tensions, a group called WI[E]DER-SPRACHE – the International Working Group of Migrant, Black and Jewish Women for Research in German-language Literature was founded in 1997 and, supported by the Ecology Foundation of North Rhine Westphalia and the Green Party, held a conference titled “Marginal Breaks - Cultural Production of Migrant, Black and Jewish Women in Germany.”

Edited by Cathy Gelbin, Kader Konuk, and Peggy Piesche, a volume of papers due out at the end of 1999 describes conference aims in this way:

“To varying degrees, immigrant women of the first and second generations, as well as black and Jewish women working as artists and academics ... have been marginalized, or consigned to a peripheral landscape within the academy and the arts in Germany. Motivated by the desire to challenge migrant, black and Jewish women’s secondary status in the production and dissemination of knowledge and cultural values, we also intend to displace margin and center.” (32)

Standing out among the dozen presentations are Silke Helmerdig’s “Portraits of Jewish Women in Berlin,” a photo exhibition, which preceded Ekpenyong Ani’s talk on “Breaks – Bridges – Bonding” which analyzed relations between white Christian feminists and various groups of migrant, black and Jewish women.

Continuing the theme, Cathy Gelbin discussed Jewish women's working alliances with migrant and Black women in Germany. Francesca Stafford looked at Jewish German writer Else-Lasker Schüler in terms of marginality; while Ermut Erel treated “Crossing borders and cultural hibridity as anti-racist resistance.” Particularly enjoyable was novelist Esther Dischereit’s writing workshop, which encouraged participants to commit their feelings about marginality to paper, especially in the short-story form. The success of this first effort has encouraged WI[E]DER-SPRACHE to become an official foundation with a follow-up gathering planned for 2000.

In addition to providing nourishing academic papers, the WI[E]DER-SPRACHE conference introduced us to Antje Groeneveld and informed us about Yachad - Vereinigung von jüdischen Lesen und Schwulen (Together: The Union of Jewish Lesbians and Gays) which coalesced in 1995 and now has about eighty members, publishes a newsletter, and hosts two libertarian minyans with a female majority. (33) Its first service in the Jewish Community Center on Berlin’s Fasanenstraße attracted two hundred people. Clearly, the post-war generation of Jews, male and female, is creating alternative institutions, including a Rosh Chodesh group meeting regularly in Berlin.

Does this reassertion of Jewish identity affect relations between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans? Clearly, just as the U.S. lives out its legacy of slavery, so too do the war years continue shaping the destinies of

---

7 WI[E]DER-SPRACHE is a pun meaning contradiction and talking back.
successive generations. One small example is a 1995 article from the newspaper Tageszeitung – a sort of German Village Voice or Libération – whose headline reads “Zurückgeben (Restitution Foundation) awards grants to Jewish women scholars.” (34)

Motivating its launch was one honorable woman's discovery that paintings passed down to her had been taken from Jews. Zurückgeben was launched in 1994 to underwrite Jewish women scholars and artists. It awarded a grant to Eva Lezzi-Noureldin to research the autobiographies of Jewish authors who were children during the Nazi era. A grant of 3000 DM was awarded to Edita Koch for her untiring work as editor of Exil magazine, [devoted to publishing Jewish German-language literature written in exile], and another to Rivka Jaussi to create a Jewish women's prayer book. The Berlin foundation also calls on non-Jewish Germans to confront their 'own biographical involvement.' Not only are those Germans who profited from the expulsion of Jews during the Nazi era being called on to 'give back' but also those born later. Injustice continues in our day via inheritance. This foundation offers the opportunity to distance Germans from that injustice – even if only in a symbolic way – by giving some property back to the descendents of the victims. (35)¹

That research on, for and by Jewish women will benefit from such encouragement is beyond doubt.

Research on Jewish Life and Jewish Women in Germany
To put it bluntly, there is virtually no relevant research on Jewish women in Germany today. What we do have is ongoing documentation of developments in Jewish life here since 1945 but rarely has the specific situation of women been investigated.

Research on the Jewish community in the Federal Republic after 1945 began in the early 1960s and concentrated on reconstruction and perspective, identity and education as well as the central concern: what would be the future of Jews in Germany under the new regime? These were mainly historical/political; psychological/pedagogical; and sociological/humanistic studies(36-38). In addition, we have conference proceedings (39) and individual monographs (40) which represent various aspects of Jewish life. These publications, taken together, reflect the contemporary development of the institutions concerned as well as personal problems experienced by individuals. In addition to the recurrent theme of rebuilding the Jewish community in Germany since 1945, these studies confront questions of identity and education, anti-Semitism, German-Jewish relations, religious orientation as well as relations with Israel.

The specific situation of women is present only in the margins of these works. Oppenheimer, for example, in “On Jewish Youth in Germany” segregates the professional aims of boys and girls of various ages (41). Kuschner also applies sex-specific criteria in her sociological study “of minorities in the Federal Republic” by asking about young people's feelings of belonging and their relations with a non-Jewish environment (42). In monographs by Broder/Lang and Sichrovsky, we find individual women of the “second generation,” but they tend to restrict their descriptions to individual conflict situations in tension with identity formation and integration. (43) Navé Levinson describes the post-war generation's difficulty in finding some way to revive religious tradition as experienced before the war and includes the ramifications of these attempts for women (44). The anthology Erinnerungen deutsch-jüdischer Frauen 1900-1990 (Memories of German Jewish Women 1900-1990) presents diverse social and political experiences women have had in the course of German Jewish history. (45)

¹ Foundation “Zurückgeben,” Fritschestr. 74, 10585 Berlin, Germany.
The situation of second generation Jewish women in the Federal Republic found literary treatment as a separate category only in the mid-1990s. (46) Whereas a few studies are intellectually rich and academic (47), most are autobiographically-oriented monographs in which individual women of the “second generation” narrate their history and lives in the context of their family’s persecution (48). Central to these texts, and influenced by research on minority groups, is the view that Jewish women are “doubly disadvantaged,” as Jews and as women. (49) An exception is the recently published, more popular than scholarly book authored by Rheinz on the broad spectrum encompassing the search for a “modern identity” among Jewish women in the Federal Republic. (50) Jewish institutions and the Jewish press have also begun to pay more attention to the situation of women, in particular pointing to women’s needed but waning engagement in the community itself. (51)

Saying good-bye to her life in the Federal Republic at the end of 1980s, Lea Fleischmann has so far produced the only book-length autobiography by a Jewish woman of the second generation. (52) Laura Waco’s memoir describes the happy childhood and youth of a Jewish girl born in 1947 to East European survivors who leave Germany in the sixties. (53) Since reunification in 1989, Jewish communities in the former German Democratic Republic have received increasing attention, and with borders open to the former Soviet Union, the situation of Russian Jewish immigrants has also been examined (54). Yet here, too, woman’s specific experience, and particularly that of the “second generation,” has not been researched. (55)

Another class of academic research is comprised of psychological and psychoanalytic studies which, beginning at the end of the sixties, examine the extreme *traumata* of the *Shoah* and its ramifications in the “second generation” (56). The field itself is very well developed in the USA and Israel (57) where authors present case studies of Jewish women and men involved in individual and group therapy. In these “second generation” women, delayed reactions and strategies for coping with Holocaust trauma are examined in gender-specific ways (58) although Gampel and Pines (59) reveal the difficulty, even within the therapeutic process, of dealing with such family trauma.

Above all, young concentration camp inmates’ loss of feminine identity produces delayed reactions which Wardi (60) describes. After 1945, given their losses, the destruction of their families and feelings of nowhere-at-homeness, many rushed into starting families of their own. Among these women, Wardi has also uncovered various forms of emptiness and inability to form relationships; they experience loneliness and find it impossible to feel certain parts of their bodies which then present themselves as painful somatic or psychological symptoms in women of the second generation. Pines and Kaminer (61) see benefit, however, in immediate attempts at working through the trauma so soon after 1945, recognizing in such efforts a powerful life force and vitality as well as the desire for normality, without which a new life and emotional survival would have been impossible.

Kaminer finds further proof of that life force in the birth rate in the DP camps between 1945-1948, at that time the highest birth rate among Jews worldwide (62). Kaminer notes possible continuities with life before 1933 among the in their return to religious traditions exercised before the war (63) However, Kaminer’s work doesn’t compare men and women for their coping mechanisms nor to see whether both return to tradition in similar ways. He also fails to speculate about the meaning of these gestures for his analysands’ life plans.
German-language publications are nearly mute regarding academic studies of Jewish women's role and status in a religious context. The few studies addressing this dimension reinterpret Biblical women and females in the liturgy from theological and historical perspectives. Especially worthy of mention are Navé Levinson (68) and Herweg on “The Jewish Mother.” (69) The latter’s analysis of role models and religious attitudes is important for its focus on the influence of collective and individual memory on German Jewish women's understanding of their roles and themselves today. (70) Ambivalence provides the key, manifest in innumerable metamorphoses and psychic strategies. (71) Using a similar approach, Inowlocki examined how survivors passed on religious traditions from mother to daughter to granddaughter. (72)

Only in the field of Women's History has research shown considerable development in recent years. We can claim for this period a profound knowledge and a good number of interesting publications about women such as Glückel von Hameln, Bertha Pappenheim, Rahel von Varnhagen, Hannah Arendt, Lou-Andreas Salomé, and Rosa Luxemburg. (73) American historian Marion Kaplan's ground-breaking study of the *Jüdischer Frauenbund* (1904-1933) inaugurated a field which has included, since the early eighties, historic research on the Jewish women's movement and its leading figures up to 1933. (74) Original texts by Fanny Lewald and Rahel Varnhagen, have also been reprinted. (75) The discipline now stretches back through the Renaissance to reveal German Jewish women's lives during the Romantic era, Imperial Germany, and the Weimar Republic. (76) However, as with so much else, the years 1933-45 show primarily fissures and breaks. (77) Thus, the situation of German Jewish women since 1945 has unfolded along a spectrum bounded by tradition and the trauma of the parents' generation, with lives suspended between continuity and closure.

What does this imply for a research agenda? Glaring gaps are evident. Gender differences have barely been touched upon in studies of Jews in Germany since 1945. Nor have the various disciplines examined continuities and breaks within their own fields. Though surprising, this is true even for psychologically and psychoanalytically oriented work. It was only because proof of the legacy of Nazi trauma had to be provided in late-sixties reparations trials that research began looking at biographical injury. (78) The struggle to “survive survival,” to tend the wounds of persecution, to rebuild community in post-war Germany, and to assure material existence left little room for philosophical or scholarly inquiry into broader questions of discontinuity or renewal. The same is true of reflection on the position of women in a religious context and possible changes in her liturgical status.

One reason for the lack of research on contemporary Jewish women has been described above. The other lies in the history and structure of the Jewish community in Germany. Before 1933, most of the 500,000, having been here for generations, felt German and called themselves “German Jews,” often holding loyal, even patriotic attitudes toward German culture. About 250,000 were able to flee before 1939, thanks to the *Hachscharah* programs launched by Jewish communities as self-help measures immediately after April 1, 1933 when the boycott of Jewish shops, physicians and lawyers took place. The other half was murdered in Nazi concentration camps.

This pre-war German Jewry was overwhelmingly liberal and enjoyed a special structure as an *Einheitsgemeinde*. When, after 1945, the community became broadly heterogeneous, the structure of the *Einheitsgemeinde* was held over from the past, although it no longer fit the situation. East European
Orthodox liturgy became the so-called “common denominator,” although only a fraction of contemporary German Jews were or are Orthodox. Despite the fact that the Reform and Conservative movements as practiced in the USA have their roots in early nineteenth century Germany, their influence here was lost after 1933. Within the Orthodox institutional framework imposed on the community by fiat, there has been little space for personal and religious developments for women – apart from traditional roles.

Despite this fearsome institutional impediment, however, things have begun to change. More and more groups have instituted egalitarian services. Since 1995, we can boast of one practicing Jewish female rabbi in Oldenburg and Braunschweig – an innovation that required a certain length of time to achieve acceptance. And like all German women, Jewish women benefit from a broad range of educational opportunities.

Regarding Jewish education in particular, the College (Hochschule) for Jewish Studies in Heidelberg has existed for the last twenty years. More recently, in 1997, the University of Duisburg began a Master’s degree program in Jewish Studies while in Leipzig the new Simon-Dubnow-Institute offers a major in East- und Middle European Jewish studies. Sadly, Germany no longer provides training for rabbis or cantors, a major disadvantage not only for women. We simply don’t have enough German-speaking teachers or adequately trained religious personnel, be they male or female.

On the positive side, as a scholar at the Gender Studies Center at the University of Frankfurt, Susanna Keval has been researching the career and family ambitions of second generation Jewish women (born mainly after 1945). In addition, for the last five years she has been involved in developing a Reform group in Frankfurt with egalitarian services, as well as lecturing and writing articles on Jewish feminist ideas. Most of her inspiration has come, over the last decade, from U.S. Jewish feminist literature – a real gift. These imported works not only stimulate a positive personal feeling of authenticity as a Jew, but also clearly enhance Jewish life in Germany. It is appropriate to close this paper with lines from a poem by American poet Eliane Starkmann. In “We Are” (1977) she well illustrates the situation of German Jewish woman today:

“we are a generation
seeking tradition
transforming symbols
Jewish women
not yet ourselves.”
WORKS CITED


(8) Ibid., 21.

(10) Ibid, 22

(11) Ibid.

(12) Ibid. 27

(13) Ibid. 142.

(14) Ibid. 138.

(15) Ibid. 111.


(17) Nagoski 206.


(20) Wolffsohn 80.

(21) Ibid. 82.

(22) Ibid. 83.


(25) Ibid. 108.

(26) Ibid. 46.


(32) Gelbin, Cathy. Email message. 7 September 1999.

(33) Groeneveld, Antje. Telephone interview. 7 December 1997.


(35) Ibid.


(40) Broder, Henryk M./ Lang, Michel (Ed): Fremd im eigenen Land. Juden in der Bundesrepublik. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1979; Sichrovsky, Peter (Ed.): Wir wissen nicht was morgen wird, wir wissen wohl, was gestern war. Junge Juden in Deutschland und in Österreich. Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1985

(41) Oppenheimer 1967

(42) Kuschner 1977

(43) Broder/Lang 1979, Sichrovsky 1985

(44) Navè, Levinson, Pnina: Religiöse Richtungen und Entwicklungen in den Gemeinden. In: Brumlik et.al. 1986


(47) Rapaport 1993
(48) Jacoby et.al. 1994; Böhringer-Bruns 1995
(49) Rapaport 1993; Jacoby et.al. 1994
Gütersloh: Gütersloher Taschenbücher 1998
(51) Allgemeine Jüdische Wochenzeitung, Ginzel 164.
(52) Fleischmann, Lea: Dies ist nicht mein Land. Eine Jüdin verläßt die Bundesrepublik.
Hamburg: Hoffman und Campe 1980
(53) Waco, Laura: Von zu Hause wird nichts erzählt. Eine jüdische Geschichte aus Deutschland.
München: Peter Kirchheim 1996
(54) Ostow, Robin: Jüdisches Leben in der DDR. Frankfurt am Main, Athäneum 1988; ———:
Burgauer 1993; Ginzel 1996; Schoeps, Julius et.al. (Ed.): Russische Juden in Deutschland.
Integration und Selbstbehauptung in einem fremden Land. Weinheim: Beltz Athäneum 1996;
———: Davidsren unter Hammer und Zirkel. Die jüdischen Gemeinden in der SBZ/DDR und
Jüdische Wochenzeitung
(55) Goldenbogen, Nora: Jüdinnen in der DDR. Unpublished Manuscript 1997, Solominska, Elena:
(Ed.): Psychoanalyse und Nationalsozialismus. Beiträge zur Bearbeitung eines unbewältigten
Traumas. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1994; Grünberg, Kurt: Jüdische Überlebende der nationalsozial-
Frankfurt am Main, Neue Kritik 1986: Heenen-Wolff, Susann: Psychoanalytische Überlegungen zur
Latenz der Shoah. In: Babylon. Beiträge zur jüdischen Gegenwart. Heft 7. Frankfurt am Main:
Neue Kritik 1990
München: dtv 1979; Bergmann, Martin S./Jucovy, Milton E./Kestenberg, Juditt S.: Kinder der
Opfer-Kinder der Täter. Psychoanalyse und Holocaust. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1982; Faimberg,
Haydeć: In: Jahrbuch der Psychoanalyse 20. 1988; Laub, Dori/Auerhahn, Nanette: Knowing and
not knowing massive psychic trauma: forms of traumatic memory. In: The International Journal
of Psycho-Analysis. Volume 74, Part 2.1993; Wardi, Dina: Siegel der Erinnerung. Das Trauma des
Hardtmann, Gertrud (Ed.): Spuren der Verfolgung. Seelische Auswirkungen des Holocaust auf die
Die zweite Generation der Holocaust Opfer. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1995
(59) Gampel 147; Pines 203
(60) Wardi 83
Institut (Ed.): Auschwitz: Geschichte, Rezeption und Wirkung. Frankfurt am Main: Campus 1996. 147
(62) Kaminer 157
(63) Ibid.152

(65) Rapaport 1997

(66) Bar-On 426

(67) Rosenthal 16


(78) Keilson, Hans: Die Reparationsverträge und die Folgen der Wiedergutmachung. In: Brumlik et.al. 1986
SELECTED WORKS CONCERNING GERMAN JEWISH WOMEN


Dischereit, Esther.


Erdle, Birgit R. “Der ursprüngliche Schrecken. Zur Liaison von Antisemitismus und Kulturkritik.”
Exler, Margarete. “Cora Berliner (1890-1942): Ihre Rolle in der jüdischen Jugendbewegung.”
Gansberg, Marie Luise. “‘Daß ich immer eine Fremde war und sein werde’. Außenseiter als Interpretationsmuster in Charlotte Wolfs sexualwissenschaftlicher und literarischer Produktion.”
Grossmann, Avraham. “The Status of Jewish Women in Germany (10th-12th Centuries).”
———. In Search of a Jewish Heroine: the Legendary Life of Anna O./Bertha Pappenheim.


5. (VERY LIMITED) SELECTION OF GENERAL RECENT WORKS ON GERMANY AND JEWS


6. (VERY LIMITED) SELECTION ON WOMEN IN THE SHOAH
(INCLUDING GERMAN WOMEN)


Women and the Holocaust
http://www.interlog.com/~mighty/
“Extensive bibliography, personal reflections of survivors, Dr. Yaffa Eliach on Women of Valor partisans and other ghetto fighters, Women in the Forest, by Dr. Nechama Tec and introduction by Dr. Joan Ringelheim, and beautiful poetry. Women’s varied experiences during the Holocaust.”]

7. RELEVANT GERMAN PERIODICALS

Babylon. Beiträge zur jüdischen Gegenwart.

Literatur zum Judentum. Edited by Dr. Rachel Salamander. (Förderkreis Literatur zum Judentum e.V.) Literaturhandlung, Fürstenstr. 17, 80333 München. Tel. 089/ 2 80 01 35

8. SEVERAL ADDITIONAL RESOURCE PERSONS, INSTITUTIONS

Rachel Heuberger, Fachreferentin, Judaic and Hebrew Collection, Stadt – und Unibibliothek, Frankfurt/Main.
Salomon Ludwig Steinheim-Institut für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte, Duisburg Geibelstr. 41, 47057 Duisburg
Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle Jüdischer Wohlfahrtsverband in Deutschland, Hebelstr. 6, 60318 Frankfurt/Main
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Bergmann, Martin S./ Lucovy, Milton E./ Kestenberg, Judith S. (Ed). Kinder der Opfer - Kinder der Täter. Psychoanalyse und Holocaust. Frankfurt am Main, Fischer 1995


Broder, Henryk M./ Lang, Michel R. (Ed.): Fremd im eigenen Land. Juden in der Bundesrepublik. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch 1979


Brumlik, Micha/Kiesel, Doron/Kugelminal, Cilly/Schoeps, Julius. (Ed.) Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland seit 1945. Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum 1986


Carlebach, Julius (Ed.). Zur Geschichte der jüdischen Frau in Deutschland. Berlin: Metropol 1993


Goodman-Thau, Eveline. 5. Mose 6,4-10: Hörte Ihre Stimme. In: Schmidt,

Eva-Renate, Mieke Korenhof und Renate Jost (Ed.): Feministisch gelesen, Bd 2. Stuttgart. 1989 63-73


Guttmann, Melinda Given. *In Search of a Jewish Heroine: the Legendary Life of Anna O./Bertha Pappenheim.*


Hesechel, Susanah. Ermordeten die Juden die Göttin? Aus dem Amerikan. von Viola Roggenkamp
In: Emma, Zeitschrift von Frauen für Frauen, Nr.12, Dezember 1988, 26–31


Klausmann, Christina. Politik und Kultur der Frauenbewegung im Kaiserreich. Das Beispiel Frankfurt am Main. Frankfurt am Main: Campus 1997


Ostow, Robin. Jüdisches Leben in der DDR. Frankfurt am Main: Athäneum 1988


Richarz, Monika. Juden in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik seit 1945. In: Brumlik e.t.al. 1986


Sichrovsky, Peter. Wir wissen nicht was morgen wird, wir wissen wohl, was gestern war. Junge Juden in Deutschland und (tm) sterreich. Köln, Kiepenheuer & Witsch 1995


JEWS WO MEN IN LATVIA

By Ruta Marjasa

According to the 1997 statistics, 14,614 Jews live in Latvia – more than half of them women. The subject of Jewish women in Latvia has never to my knowledge been an object of research. This paper is the first attempt in this direction.

Jews began to settle in this small country on the coast of the Baltic Sea in the 16th century. Latvia did not obtain its status as an independent country until the twentieth century – in 1919. Latvia's independent status was short-lived. In 1940, it lost its independence and was annexed by the former Soviet Union. During the second World War, Latvia was occupied by Nazi Germany for three years. It regained its independence in 1990, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

All these dramatic changes, of course, affected the Jewish community of Latvia. More than five thousand Jews were subjected to Soviet repression. During the Soviet period, the wealthiest Jews, the intelligentsia and those belonging to the Zionist and the Social Democratic parties were arrested and exiled to Siberia. Seventy thousand Jews – 70% of the entire wartime Jewish population of Latvia, died in the Holocaust.

This history of anti-Semitism has, of course, deeply influenced the lives of Jewish women. It deprived them of opportunities to realize themselves as an active part of the society. Jewish girls were encouraged to get the best education as possible to the same degree as their brothers, and even right after the war there were already a considerable number of Jewish women working as doctors, pharmacists, and teachers. When the political situation allowed it, a majority of these women emigrated to Israel, America and other countries.

Today, in post-Communist Latvia, anti-Semitism has been minimized. Nobody threatens our lives. There is no official, state-supported anti-Jewish propaganda. Latvia has good relations with Israel. However, anti-Semitism still exists on a daily basis. There are occasional incidents of hooliganism. Sometimes anti-Semitic illegal leaflets are distributed. Occasionally, not very tactful utterances about Jews appear in mass media. It is an unpleasant fact is that the Latvian attitude toward the Nazi occupation is less negative than to the much longer period of the Soviet occupation that brought much more calamity. This is a subject that causes a certain tension between the Latvians and the Jews. But apart from these phenomena, anti-Semitism in Latvia is “harnessed.” This is particularly important considering the difficult social-economic situation in the country as Latvia, like many other countries of Eastern Europe, undergoes a period of transition from the totalitarian socialist regime to a free market economy and is witnessing a dramatic growth of poverty.

This period of transition has produced inequalities in health care and education. Social and political alienation in the society is spreading rapidly. Unemployment in Latvia is over seven percent and growing, with women representing over half of the unemployed. There is sex discrimination in the workplace – newspaper advertisements for positions typically specify that they will hire only men. Many children do not attend school. Twelve per cent of the prostitutes in Latvia are juveniles. A fourth of country's population are pensioners, whose work-life was spent under the former system. They have not accumulated any social capital and now they receive very scanty pensions that do not allow them even a subsistence standard of living. Of course, among them are Jews and Jewish women.
In 1997, the *Guinness Book of Records* designated Latvia as the state with the biggest discrepancy in the number of men and women: there are only 1,000 men to every 1,167 women. There are reasons to believe that this proportion is true also for the Jewish community, because it is growing old and men usually die first. The general birth rate in Latvia has fallen from 2.5 for all women in 1989, to 1.2 for a woman in 1995. The birth rate has also been falling for Jewish families.

Just a decade ago, in 1989, there were 22, 897 Jews living in Latvia. Jewish women comprised 11,737 of this number and 6,000 of them were over 50. Many of them have died, the Jewish birth rate is very low and that, combined with the continuing emigration to other countries has resulted in a rapidly decreasing Jewish population.

There has also been a rapid increase in the number of mixed marriages among Latvian Jews. In 1996, there were 78 Jewish marriages but only 14% were marriages in which a Jewish man married a Jewish woman and only 17% were marriages in which a Jewish woman married a Jewish man. The rest – 69% of marriages were mixed – a Jew to a Russian or a Jew to a Latvian. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact of limited choice – the Latvian Jewish community is very small, but the time for young people to get married arrives nonetheless.

Although Jews have a consciousness of Jewish identity, they feel a connection with people of other nationalities and being Jewish is often only a formal ethnic designation for them. Jews are often considered attractive marriage prospects. Jews are thought to be successful at business. Jewish men are thought to make good husbands because, compared to non-Jewish men, they do not drink, do not cheat on their wives, love their children, take care of their families etc. However, the number of all Jewish marriages is decreasing simply because the Jewish community is growing old.

The unsolved issue of citizenship in Latvia also promotes Jewish emigration. Approximately 50% of Jews now living in Latvia come from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. They are not considered to belong to the free Latvia of the pre-war period and they are not given Latvian citizenship. This is a pressing political issue that I hope will be solved in the near future in accordance with European standards.

The Jewish community of Latvia is well organized. At least one third of its members, that is about 5,000 people, actively participate in various Jewish public organizations. The most active are the Jews living in the capital of Riga, but Jewish activity is felt also in other cities. Jewish organizations are politically neutral – they do not support any of the many political parties or political organizations of Latvia.

The Jewish Cultural Society of Latvia was re-founded in 1989 nearly half a century after all Jewish cultural life was violently ended by the Communists in 1941. Among the founders were three women: administrator Espira Rapina, physician Leva Vater, and myself – a lawyer Ruta Marjasa. At present, the Jewish Cultural Society is led by a talented professional producer and journalist Karmella Skorik. Its Center organizes seminars on cultural issues, sends specialists to study in Israel, and organizes Jewish culture festivals. There is a Children’s Aesthetic Centre called ‘Motek,’ and a Children’s group called ‘Ciri-Biri-Bom’ that has performed in Germany, Denmark, Lithuania, Russia and Ukraine. There is also a dance ensemble, a singing group, an acting company, and clubs such as ‘Hasfer,’ ‘Simha’ and the ‘Davar.’ All these groups are led by women – Elena Bragilevskaja, Gita Umanovskaja, Ester Andreyeva, Elza Chausovskaja, Ina Movshovich, Elena Gorelik, Edit Bloh.
There is a museum and a Documentation Centre at the Jewish Cultural Society. They co-operate with Israeli and German scholars, organize photography exhibitions and publish some materials. The Politically Repressed Jews Group was led by Bella Hofenberg who now lives in Israel, and Leva Slavina, who recently passed away. There is also an Association of Veterans of World War II.

An important organization caring for the Jewish elderly is the Charity Association ‘Wizo – Rahanim,’ led by Hanna Finkelshtejn, a social worker who studied in Israel. The Association regularly serves free meals and provides other services. Members of the ‘Old People's Club' work at this Association. It has a choir of 28 people under the guidance of Riva Heiman and Esphira Tolpin.

Women are active in the health, education and welfare sectors of the Jewish community. There is a Jewish Women's Club Idishe Mame; and the social aid clubs Jad Ezra and Taharat Hamishpaha that are headquartered at the Riga Synagogue. Women work in the Jewish medical Society Bikur Holim and in the Jewish hospital, whose chief is a female physician, Rashel Shats. The Riga Jewish Secondary School has 450 pupils and has been in existence since 1988. There are several Jewish kindergartens. Jewish children attend craft schools, technical schools, Latvian and Russian secondary schools, and study at universities, institutes and academies.

Jewish women in Latvia have never had a tradition of participating in the state government. During the past 50 years it was not even possible. But today, Inna Shteinbuk is a director of the Department of Macroeconomic Analyses and Projection at the Ministry of Finance; Ilana Woltman works as a judge; and one of the country’s most prominent lawyers is Irina Voronova. I myself am a Member of Parliament and Deputy Chairman of the Commission of Legal Affairs. Latvia also boasts many outstanding Jewish women scholars and scientists. Contemporary Latvian Jewish women scholars include mathematicians Elina Falkova and Nina Semeruhin; chemist Regina Zhuk; psychologist Anna Kapelovich, biogeneticist Ekaterina Erenpreis; political scientist Maija Krumina; literary critic Elena Shapiro; physicians Gita Nemcova and Ilana Shapiro. A recent book about Jews of Latvia, Our Own Colour in the Rainbow, notes many outstanding Jewish women in the arts as well.

Liia Krasinska represents a whole era in the development of Latvian music and culture. This remarkable woman, a professor of at the Music Academy of Latvia, has taught students who perform all over the world. Musicologists Regina Buhova, Raisa Smolar, Raisa Grodzovska, Marina Mihalec have international stature. Our musicians include Dina Joffe, Valentina Brovak, Zinaida Tovbak. Inese Galant, now working at the Mannheim Opera House, is one of the brightest personalities in Latvian music life. She has included Jewish national songs in her recital repertoire. Puppet theater producer Tina Hercberg belongs to the older generation of cultural administrators. The well-known cinematographer Valentina Freimane has educated several generations of actors and creative intelligentsia of cinema and theater.

When I think about all these wonderful Jewish women, I see the manifestation of a special Jewish mentality. By preserving their Jewish identity, Jewish women maintain a link with world culture and have a way of resisting the provincialism that so often endangers small countries and their cultures.

The role of integrating the culture of a Diaspora country into the Jewish culture of the world is, in my opinion, a characteristic feature of Jewish women in Latvia working in the fields of culture and science. It is their special mission.