
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
<i>by Helen Epstein</i>	
JEWISH WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES.	13
<i>by Riv-Ellen Prell</i>	
WOMEN AND RESEARCH ON WOMEN IN ISRAEL.	21
<i>by Hanna Herzog</i>	
ITALY	31
<i>by Micaela Procaccia</i>	
LATIN AMERICAN JEWS.	39
<i>by Judith Laikin Elkin</i>	
IRANIAN JEWISH DIASPORA WOMEN	49
<i>by G.B.</i>	
JEWISH WOMEN IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA	59
<i>by Ana Lebl</i>	
BEING A JEWISH WOMAN IN FRENCH SOCIETY	65
<i>by Regine Azria</i>	
SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH WOMEN	71
<i>by Sally Frankental</i>	
MIZRAHI WOMEN IN ISRAEL: THE DOUBLE ERASURE ...	79
<i>by Pnina Motzafi-Haller</i>	
JEWISH WOMEN IN MEXICO	97
<i>by Paulette Kershenovich</i>	
ISRAELI WOMEN AND HEALTH	109
<i>by Susan Sered</i>	
REPORT FROM LITHUANIA	117
<i>by Basia Nikiforova</i>	
CANADIAN, JEWISH AND FEMALE.	123
<i>by Norma Baumel Joseph</i>	
HOMING PIGEON: A SEPHARDIC JEW	129
<i>Ruth Knafo Setton</i>	

continued



TABLE OF CONTENTS, *continued*

THE MOTHERS OF PASTEUR STREET: THE STRUGGLE FOR PLURALISM IN ARGENTINA	137
<i>by Edna Aizenberg</i>	
IRANIAN JEWISH WOMEN DISCOVER THE POWER OF WORDS	145
<i>by Farideh Dayanim Goldin</i>	
TESHUVAH AMONG FRENCH JEWISH WOMEN.	161
<i>by Laurence Podselver</i>	
JEWISH WOMEN IN CHILE	169
<i>by Marjorie Agosin</i>	
ISRAELI WOMEN: COLLECTIVISM AND INDIVIDUALISM	173
<i>by Eetta Prince Gibson</i>	
HUNGARY	183
<i>by Katalin Taliygás</i>	
BOOKENDS.	187
<i>by Pamela S. Nadell</i>	
JEWISH WOMEN IN BRITAIN	191
<i>by Marlena Schmool</i>	
GENDER AND LITERACY AMONG YOUNG ORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN	199
<i>By Tamar El-Or</i>	
JEWISH WOMEN IN LATVIA	233
<i>By Ruta Marjasa</i>	

.....

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.



EDITOR'S NOTE



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?

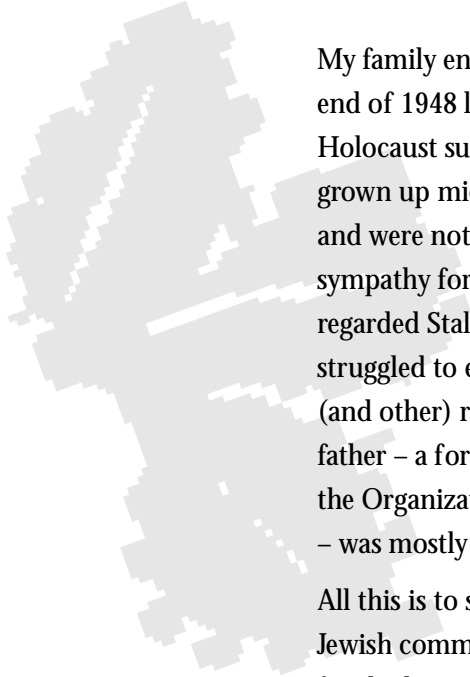
I viewed many of these working papers as such snapshots that raised some of these and many other questions.

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.

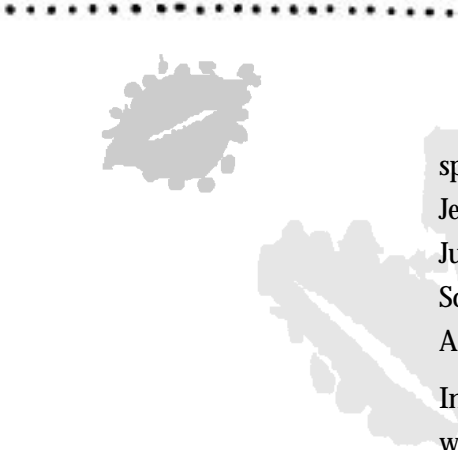
.....



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 Talyigas 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 *nissu'in*.' 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 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 a 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 Esphira 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 '*Hasefer*;' '*Simha*' and the '*Davar*.' All these groups are led by women – Elena Bragilevska, Gita Umanovska, Ester Andreyeva, Elza Chausovska, 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 – Rahamim*,' led by Hanna Finkelshtein, 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.

Lija 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.

