



Introduction: Jewish Women in Modern Eastern and East Central Europe

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In their programmatic introduction to a 2005 volume of *Polin*, entitled “Jewish Women in Eastern Europe,” ChaeRan Freeze and Paula Hyman lamented that field’s state of infancy. Most scholarship on the region’s Jewish women, they argued, merely constituted attempts to “fill in the gaps” in an enduringly male-dominated East European Jewish historical narrative. They called on the present generation of historians to integrate new findings about women into “the master narratives of the past, to deconstruct old paradigms and models, and to rethink East European Jewish history with the aid of new insights gleaned from the research on gender.”¹

Over the past decade, Jewish historians have responded resoundingly. Today it is difficult to imagine a rigorous social historical study of Eastern and East Central European Jewry that neglects the workings of gender. Nevertheless, it seems necessary to proceed yet further, acknowledging finally that crucial aspects of the region’s Jewish modernization process cannot be sufficiently understood without evaluating the functioning and constitution of gender. The articles in this special issue of *Jewish History* demonstrate that only through the experiences of women can one fully understand key phenomena such as the momentous changes occurring in Jewish education, conversion waves, postwar relief efforts, anti-Jewish violence, Soviet collectivization projects, and, more broadly, the acculturation process that animated Jewish modernization.

The latter process seems to form a salient theme throughout this special issue. Rather than present a scenario in which secularism simply displaces

¹ChaeRan Freeze and Paula Hyman, “Introduction: A Historiographical Survey,” *Polin 18: Jewish Women in Eastern Europe* (Portland, OR, 2005), 3–24. See also Paula Hyman’s *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Seattle, 1995).

traditionalism, the articles here suggest a mutually transformative secularist-traditionalist encounter within which Jewish women were both prominent and instrumental.² Some authors examine the lives of Jewish women who broke with the patriarchal religious tradition and either embraced forms of Jewish secularism or converted; while others draw attention to numerous, hitherto neglected, women who remained “traditionalist” (Hasidic, Religious Zionist, non-Hasidic Orthodox) and favored a more selective and defensive acculturation process. Neither path could guarantee Jewish women a significant improvement in status, as it turns out. Yet both paths seemed to offer enhanced agency, especially when compared with the experiences and choices available to non-Jewish Eastern and East Central European women in various socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts.³

The complexities of modernization and secularization can only be fully appreciated in light of the shifting expectations that Jewish women came to shape for themselves. At times these expectations meshed with those of their families and communities; but women increasingly challenged the prospects that their fathers, husbands, and brothers imagined for them. Looking back on her own life, Sofia Dubnova-Ehrlich, daughter of the dean of Russian Jewish historiography and pioneering thinker Simon Dubnow, pondered these expectations and limitations: “[We]’ve been learning for years to be daughters, sisters, friends to our loved ones, wives, mothers. We learn to become—but never learn. It was not always easy to be a daughter . . .”⁴ Sofia embraced a career of political activism side-by-side with her husband, the Bundist activist Henryk Ehrlich, and emerged as a renowned poet and memoirist.

The new demands of Jewish women for agency, independence, and social empowerment also tested the expectations that the surrounding majority societies reserved for Jews in general. To be sure, non-traditional expectations and choices made by Jewish women not only triggered deep anxieties

²Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity* (Chicago, 2002), 26; idem., *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000), 46; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, 2005), 5, 17, 45, 51; Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi’i Lebanon* (Princeton, 2006); Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, 1998), esp. 50. On pro- and anti-*haredi* (“partisan”) bias in scholarship on Orthodoxy, see Moshe Samet, *He-hadash asur min ha-torah: perakim be-toledot ha-ortodoksiyah* (Jerusalem, 2005), 15, 23.

³Comparative studies of the modernization process of Jewish and non-Jewish women in different geopolitical contexts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Eastern Europe remain a desideratum, and could greatly enhance our understanding of the dynamics between the constitution of gender and the essence of the Jewish modernization process.

⁴Sofia Dubnova-Ehrlich, *Khleb i matsa* (St. Petersburg, 1994), 20.

among Jewish men, but also disquieted non-Jewish men and women, who often found the socio-economic empowerment and public role played by Jewish women threatening.⁵ Perhaps even more than for Jewish men, therefore, the encounter of Jewish women with modernity meant coping with new forms of persecution and violence that could target them more than their male counterparts. In a way, the responses to the modernization and secularization of Jewish women became the very testing ground for Jewish integration and perhaps the ultimate measure of Jews' fitness for citizenship.

By the end of the eighteenth century over three-fourths of the world's Jewish population had settled in Eastern and East Central Europe, predominately in the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Kingdom of Hungary. By the end of the next century, increasing numbers of Eastern and East Central European Jewish women, now living primarily in the Russian Empire and in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, exhibited a powerful desire for improved status and agency within and beyond traditionalist communities. Their mothers and grandmothers had found modes of empowerment mainly in the economic realm, in which the participation of women was fully sanctioned by the Jewish male elite. Some, especially wealthy widows, had become benefactors and patrons of yeshivas and Hasidic courts.⁶ But for many of the younger generation, regardless of class identity, this kind of fulfilment was no longer considered sufficient.

Some women embraced acculturation, assimilation, or left Judaism altogether through conversion. The latter phenomenon has often been treated as the by-product of an encounter with secular education and literature. Yet as Elena Keidošiūtė demonstrates in her contribution to this volume, impoverished and less educated women opted for conversion, too. In contrast to men, who were more likely to resort to "labor emigration" to escape poverty, Keidošiūtė argues, less privileged women sometimes embraced conversion as a kind of "virtual emigration" or emancipation.⁷ At the other end of the spec-

⁵On charitable initiatives led by women, see Natan Meir, *Kiev, Jewish Metropolis: A History, 1859–1914* (Bloomington, IN, 2010), 239. On female leadership in the Socialist "Bund," see Daniel Blatman, "Women in the Jewish Labor Bund in Interwar Poland," in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven, 1998), 68–84.

⁶See, e.g., Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation*, 67; Moshe Rosman, "The History of Jewish Women in Early Modern Poland: An Assessment," in Freeze and Hyman, eds., *Polin 18*. See also Glenn Dynner, "Those Who Stayed: Women and Jewish Traditionalism in East Central Europe," in *New Directions in the History of the Jews in the Polish Lands*, ed. Antony Polonsky, Hanna Węgrzynek, and Andrzej Żbikowski (Boston, 2018), 295–312.

⁷See also Rachel Manekin, "The Lost Generation: Education and Female Conversion in *Fin-de-Siècle* Kraków," *Polin 18*, 189–220; Freeze, "When Chava Left Home: Gender, Conversion, and the Jewish Family in Tsarist Russia," *Polin 18*, 152–88; and Ellie R. Schinker, *Confessions of the Shtetl. Converts from Judaism in Imperial Russia, 1817–1906* (Stanford, CA, 2016).

trum were women who remained traditionally observant but also strove to achieve a higher secular education. Two trailblazers in this regard were the sisters Chaje (Anna) and Leonore (Leja) Kluger, whose struggle to study at university level (and eventually, in Chaje's case, at doctoral level) ignited a lengthy legal battle with their own parents. Rachel Manekin argues that this court case, which attracted international attention, was an important impetus for the creation of the Beis Yaakov school system for girls. The modest, controlled secular education available in Beis Yaakov schools was, Manekin suspects, intended to siphon off any desire for university education among traditionalist women and prevent another scandal like the Kluger case.⁸

Yet Beis Yaakov schools did provide traditionalist young women with important new tools and outlets for self-expression in Western literary modes, as did political groups for Orthodox women and the newly emergent Orthodox press. Joanna Lisek, in her article in this volume, introduces us to the manuscripts of Bronia Baum from the years 1912–1921, which include a diary in Russian and numerous poems in Polish and Yiddish. Baum's trilingual body of work sheds light on the inner life of a young Hasidic woman as she confronted anti-Jewish violence, experimented with Zionist ideology, and developed a poetic voice, all the while remaining committed to Jewish traditionalism.

In the aftermath of World War I, much of Eastern and East Central European Jewry found itself divided between Hungary, a newly independent Poland, known as the Second Polish Republic, and the Soviet Union. As Ilse Lazaroms shows in her article, involvement with institutions like vocational schools and orphanages became an important way for Jewish women to navigate a tumultuous, increasingly antisemitic Hungarian society. In Budapest, women like the activist and communal worker Rosika Schwimmer consciously chose to buoy their Hungarian, Jewish, and female identities by supporting local aid work and public projects. Their expectations and choices were ultimately rejected in the wake of a rising Magyar nationalist movement.

Poland emerged as a democratic and constitutional state that formally guaranteed Jewish rights, religious freedoms, and political representation. Yet most of its citizens suffered from the widespread devastation wrought by the Great War, and official and unofficial anti-Jewish discrimination was continually manifested in economic and educational realms. For Jewish women of more secular-oriented backgrounds, the path to achieving educational fulfillment was less hindered by familial or societal disapproval.⁹ Yet by the

⁸On the Beis Yaakov school system more generally, see Naomi Seidman, *Sarah Schenirer and the Beis Yaakov Movement: A Revolution in the Name of Tradition* (Liverpool, 2019).

⁹See Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation*; Blatman, "Women in the Bund."

1930s, as Natalia Aleksiu shows, university campuses in Poland were becoming extremely inhospitable to Jewish women and men alike. Physical assaults became increasingly common in the post-Piłsudski era (after mid-1935), which witnessed the breakdown of civil society and an increase in violent anti-Jewish boycotts, vandalism, and pogroms. Aleksiu examines the gendered public debate that emerged around the phenomenon of physical assault against female Jewish students on university campuses. By the end of the interwar period, university education, the surest path to empowerment for secularist Jewish women, was virtually closed off.

In Ukrainian territories, the ongoing waves of brutality unleashed by the Great War, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Russian Civil War of 1918–1921 destroyed the moral order, communal networks, and kinship structures, precipitating an unprecedented outburst of anti-Jewish violence. As Irina Astashkevich argues in her article, a key feature of the Russian Civil War pogroms was extremely wide-scale sexual violence against Jewish women. Mass rape took place in nearly every community touched by the conflict. Based on reports gathered by male doctors, Astashkevich argues that the emotional response to rape was determined not only by gender but by the degree of a victim's exposure to secular humanistic education.

Nearly three million Jews became citizens of the newly formed Soviet Union. Jewish men and women living primarily in the cities and towns of the Soviet Socialist Republics of Ukraine and Belorussia, as well as in the two largest Soviet metropolises of Moscow and Leningrad, experienced modernization along Bolshevik lines, meaning a violent push for state-sanctioned secularization and urbanization. Unique in the encounter of Soviet Jewish women with modernity was the emergence of two different and fundamentally opposed female types: one remarkably radical, the other staunchly traditional. According to this polarized model of acculturation, the more radical some women became the more consciously traditional other women seemed to become.¹⁰ This secularist-traditionalist tension was particularly noticeable between Soviet Jewish mothers and daughters.

Soviet authorities and activists (mostly male) often measured the success of the Soviet experiment on the Jewish minority according to the real or imagined ability of women to adapt to the new system. Deborah Yalen's article in

¹⁰On questions of gender and modernization in the context of the female experience of the Bolshevik experiment, see, for example, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine, eds., *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War* (Princeton, 2000); Tarik Cyril Amar, "Reframing Sovietization: Sovietization with a Woman's Face; Gender and the Social Imaginary of Sovietness in Western Ukraine," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 64 (2016): 363–90. On the specific path to Sovietization of Jewish women in the interwar period, see Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington, IN, 2013), esp. ch. 6.

this volume entails the first attempt to understand the Soviet productivization project in the Ukrainian and Belorussian *shtetl* (the small, markedly Jewish town) through the lens of gender. As Yalen shows, in the interwar period the *shtetl* population was disproportionately female and thus women were usually blamed for preserving the traditional economy. Accordingly, women could also be blamed for the failure of Soviet Jews to productivize the *shtetl*, which had emerged as the quintessential symbol of East European Jewish backwardness.

In the wake of Operation Barbarossa and the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, more than two million Jews were murdered in occupied Soviet territories. Anika Walke's article records the powerful voice of Masha Rol'nikaite, a witness to the Holocaust and a chronicler of life and death in the Vilna ghetto. As Walke shows, Rol'nikaite's work captures not only the daily ordeals of sexual exploitation and rape experienced by Jewish women during the German invasion, but also the silence imposed by the Soviet regime in commemorating that violence. Her work is a reminder of the highly gendered nature of memory and the importance of viewing war, violence, and genocide through the eyes of women.¹¹ This article is a fitting, if tragic, conclusion to a volume that emphasizes how scholarly attention to gender can enrich and transform our understanding of the Eastern and East Central European past.

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¹¹See Elissa Bemporad, "Memory, Body, and Power: Women and the Study of Genocide," in Elissa Bemporad and Joyce Warren, eds., *Women and Genocide: Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators* (Bloomington, IN, 2018).