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

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MICAELA 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 Comunita 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 Oufran 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, f/m, CrossConnect, International Quarterly, Tikkun, 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 Lóránd 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.

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 aquaintances 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

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 *Pedagogium* (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 *Pedagogium* 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 anything 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 physicial 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.