

# THE SOCIAL ROLE OF JEWISH WOMEN IN THE *GRUNDERZEIT* OF THE CAPE JEWISH COMMUNITY, 1896-1930

by

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## *Opsomming*

### Die sosiale rol van Joodse vroue in die *Grunderzeit* van die Kaapse Joodse gemeenskap, 1896-1930

Deur hoofsaaklik van kontemporêre, primêre bronne gebruik te maak, ondersoek hierdie artikel die effek op die tradisionele, voorskriftelike funksie van Joodse vroue, wat veroorsaak is deur die oorskakeling na 'n moderne geïndustrialiseerde gemeenskap. Hierdie funksie was aanvanklik ontwikkel onder die totaal verskillende omstandighede van die Russiese Ryk en sy opeenvolgende state. Anders gestel, probeer hierdie artikel die mate waarin, nie alleen die drang en strewes nie, maar ook die werks- en opvoedings geleenthede van die vroue verander het, vas te stel. Hierdie verandering was die resultaat van hul emigrasie na 'n Britse kolonie tydens die laat negentiende en vroeë twintigste eeu.

Oor die algemeen wil dit voorkom dat die ondergeskikte rol van die vrou ten tyde van Joodse godsdienstige herdenkingsgeleenthede onveranderd gebly het, terwyl die invloed van die omringende sekulêre gemeenskap selektief begin het om hul tradisionele sosiale gedrag te wysig. Twee faktore het 'n belangrike rol in die laasgenoemde ontwikkeling gespeel. Eerstens het die toepassing van verpligte primêre opvoeding van wit kinders deur die plaaslike opvoedkundige owerhede verseker dat Joodse dogters en seuns in 'n hoofsaaklik Engelssprekende verwysinggroep geassimileer is. Tweedens het die nuwe Oos-Europese immigrante met die gesekulariseerde, gemoderniseerde Anglo-Duitse komponent van die Joodse gemeenskap versmelt. Hierdie Anglo-Duitse komponent het die Litause immigrante aan die Kaap voorafgegaan. Terwyl hulle alles in hul vermoë gedoen het om die nuwe aankomelinge te help, was hulle ook gretig dat laasgenoemde so gou moontlik die koloniale kultuur moes assimileer.

*Who can find a virtuous woman?*

*For her price is above rubies.*

Prov. 31:10.<sup>1</sup>

The prescriptive role of Jewish women in traditional society as epitomized by the writer in Proverbs, is a subject for not one, but several essays: suffice to note here

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1. King James version.

*Historia*, 43(2), November 1998, pp. 67-85.

that interpretations of that role vary to a great extent in different circumstances and at different times. Contemporary feminist interpretations for example, have precipitated a reassessment by orthodox commentators. Thus Serena Lapin recently asserted that far from being marginalized “philosophically, historically and Halachically”, the Jewish woman’s role has been a central one in Jewish society.

True, *Halachic* law (rules of conduct based on religious principles) gave both men and women virtually equivalent legal safeguards; the husband’s obligations in the *Ketubah* (the marriage contract) for instance were legally enforceable, in order to protect the wife. In matters of religious orthodoxy however, she was clearly subordinate; and by extrapolation, the husband’s social role was therefore predominant. She was not obliged to study Torah, the prerequisite for officially entering the adult community of believers. Thus while she might participate in prayer, she did so as a private individual, denied - to this day - membership of the *minyan*, “the unit for public prayer”. Her strength however, lay elsewhere; in her dominion over the home (the focus of Jewish life), a position traditionally symbolized by the “privilege” of welcoming the Sabbath through the candle-lighting ceremony.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of the present article is twofold: to examine how in the *Grunderzeit* this traditional value system operated in an environment that could broadly be described as “Western, liberal and colonial”; and to appraise the extent to which, in new circumstances (and specifically in the Cape Colony’s main city, Cape Town) Jewish women continued to accept (or conversely abrogated) their prescriptive social rôle.

The demography of the modern South African Jewish community was established in the last few years of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th. By 1913 some 40 000 Jews, largely from the *shtetls*, or small towns, of the Kovno (modern Kaunas, Lithuania) area, had settled in South Africa. In doing so they merged with an older community comprising a small number of German and English Jews who had arrived earlier in the 19th century; and in becoming acculturated had assumed many of the secular traits of their role model, the English-speaking middle class. They had set up the communal institutions associated with the “German” (*Askenaz*) ritual which both they and the Lithuanians followed.

Jewish immigration to South Africa, which slowed down during World War 1, gained momentum for various reasons during the 1920s. Though their numbers were modest, compared to the earlier influx, these immigrants included a significant

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2. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol.16 (Jerusalem, 1971) M.Meiselman, *Jewish Women in Jewish Law* (Ktav Publishing House, 1978, New York), pp 16-17, 34 ff, 65-95, 135 ff; S.Lapin, “The Jewish Women. An orthodox approach for the Nineties” (*Jewish Affairs*, 48(2), Winter 1993); *Zionist Record* (ZR), 10(109) 15.1. 1918, M. Alexander; *South African Jewish Chronicle* (SAJC) 9(44), 3.11.1922, “Social and Fashionable” (Column for female readers).

proportion of urbanized men and women well versed in secular ideologies like Zionism and socialism, as well as modern Hebrew scholarship. The *Quota Act* of 1930 effectively halted Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe (as it was designed to do), so that thereafter the community's growth was a function of natural increase.

In one sense sheer weight of numbers enabled the Eastern Europeans to become the dominant component in the community. At the same time they were subjected to the secularization and modernization which typified Anglo-German culture by the end of the century, so that within a few decades the two groups were almost wholly fused.

Female immigrants generally accompanied, or subsequently joined the male breadwinner.<sup>3</sup> The secular, modernist message of the *Haskalah* (Hebrew Enlightenment) in the Russian Empire, did not long survive the 1881 pogroms; and thus it impinged little on the orthodoxy of the majority of women who came to South Africa prior to World War 1. Consequently they brought to their new surroundings centuries-old continuities in observances and attitudes forged under totally disparate conditions; but initially maintained in the security of the informal Cape Town "ghetto", where most of the immigrants lived in the first two decades of the century in poor, but not impoverished, circumstances.

In traditional Jewish teaching marriage was:

the ideal human state and [was] considered a basic social institution established by God at the time of creation.<sup>4</sup>

Companionship and procreation were its bastions: and because female sexuality was acknowledged (but sexual relations condoned only within matrimony), an early marriage was desirable. The marriage records for 1903-1924 of the Roeland Street Synagogue (established in 1900 by Yiddish-speaking traditionalists) reveal a preponderance of women in the 20-30 age cohort, substantially outnumbering males in the same group.<sup>5</sup>

Marriage soon became an important point of intersection between the Eastern

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3. See for example, UCT Libraries (UCT Libs) BC 809, Board of Guardians (BOG), 3.10.1923; BC 792, South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBOD), Q, Immigration Reports, Register of Arrivals, 1924-1929. In the late 1920's the pace of entry intensified as immigration legislation became imminent. For requests for aid in joining husbands in the earlier period, see UCT Libs, BC 160, Alexander Papers, List 3,4(b) Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society (CTJPS), 22.12.1896, 25.1.1897, 15.12.1902. E. Bradlow, *Immigration in the Union 1910-1948. Policies and attitudes.* (Unpublished Ph. D, UCT, 1948), Part 2, 'The restrictions of Jewish immigration'; E. Bradlow, "The anatomy of an immigrant community" in *South African Historical Journal*, 31, 1994.

4. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 11, col.1026; ZR, 14(155) 30.11.1921, M. Alexander.

5. UCT Libs, BC 798, Schoonder St. Hebrew Congregation Archives, incorporating Roeland St., B, Marriage Register 1903-1924.

Europeans and the older Anglo-German communities. As World War I and the accompanying growth in industry and commerce accelerated socio-economic mobility, the initial class distinctions and animosities between the two groups were dissolved and "intermarriage" became the norm.<sup>6</sup>

While during the 19th century exogenous marriage was increasing among Westernized Jewry as a function of acculturation, it was an infinitely rarer phenomenon in the homogeneous Lithuanian *shtetl*. Once the immigrants began arriving at the Cape, tension was implicit in the convergence of traditional East European exclusivity and modernist civil tolerance, of which outmarriage was one of several similar metaphors.

Though the actual number of cases was small, such marriages (generally involving Jewish males and Christian females) and their *doppelgänger*, conversion to Judaism, increasingly exercised the collective mind of the Cape Town Jewish leadership. For these issues were perceived not simply as a matter of individual choice, but as a threat to the community's interests.<sup>7</sup> Attempts in 1923-4 to establish a Conversion Board, comprising representatives from the main Cape Town synagogues, foundered on the rock of ultra-orthodox opposition: the committee of the inceptive Cape Town Hebrew Congregation (Gardens Synagogue) ultimately decided itself to consider conversion applications, on the basis of the strict regulations laid down by the London Beth Din in 1918.<sup>8</sup>

It was popularly supposed that divorce must inevitably follow such "mixed" marriages. But even among Jewish couples, though commentators still idealized the "Jewess ..... as the faithful wife and loving mother":, the divorce rate was rising by the 1920s, once the *shtetl's* social sanctions against it no longer operated.

Yet the woman was still often inhibited by custom. Thus even a secular divorce was insufficient to allow her to remarry by Jewish rites; to do so she needed to obtain a *get* (a dissolution under Jewish law) from her husband, whether he was the erring

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6. M. Gitlin, *The Vision Amazing*, (Menorah Book Club, Johannesburg, 1950) pp.41-2, notes that initially the "English" Jews disliked the "foreignness" of the E. Europeans, while the latter disliked the former's "superciliousness" and "superficial" Judaism; *SAJC*, 6(47) 21.11.1919, "Social and Fashionable".

Compare the U.S.A today where exogeny is seen as a major threat to the survival of American Jewry; *Commentary*, a conservative journal published by the American Jewish Committee returns to this theme periodically.

8. UCT Libs, BC 849, Gardens Synagogue, A., Minutes of Committee Meetings, 1896-1925. In 1896-7 there were four applications for the conversion of Christian women and 9 between 1914 and 1919, 9 conversions were allowed 1907-1925; UCT Libs, BC 809, BOG, A. Minute books, 1923-24, some committee members felt aid should be refused to outmarriage couples, but the rest of the committee was more accommodating.

partner or not.<sup>9</sup> The records of Cape Town's main charitable societies throughout the period under survey, document cases of deserted wives who swelled the numbers of women left destitute by the ill-health, unemployment or the occasional imprisonment of the male breadwinner.<sup>10</sup>

The immediate problem of maintaining their families, faced by such women, did not accord with the traditional image of Jewish womanhood. The advice given early in the century to an abandoned wife by one of the benevolent societies (that she find employment in order to be shot of her conscienceless husband) was uncharacteristically modern. More constantly articulated by communal leaders was the attitude that "the woman's place is in the home and her rightful work is the rearing of her children to be good citizens".

The Rev. A.P. Bender of the Gardens Synagogue mused nostalgically over that lost paragon "the old fashioned type of mother in Israel"; who took her children to *shul*, taught them religious beliefs and Jewish history, who made her home "a true Jewish home, a veritable sanctuary of the most High, a temple of purity and virtue and righteousness and truth and love and peace".

The reality was, as one perceptive respondent in the Kaplan Centre (University of Cape Town) oral records noted, that "in an orthodox kosher house there is a lot of work". Despite the availability of help even in modest homes, the technology associated with the "domestic economy" was primitive and the mother, assisted by the older, unmarried daughters, would supervise the endless household chores, and herself do most of the cooking.

True, the Jewish family is, even in modern times, probably the strongest affiliative bond in Jewish society; the current joke comparing a Rottweiler and a Jewish mother ("the former lets go") has the wry truth characteristic of Jewish humour. But at a time when information on birth control was inadequate and discussions on sex were generally taboo among families aspiring to current middle class standards of "respectability", the idealized perception of motherhood articulated by the Rev. Bender (a bachelor) metamorphosed into exhausted women bearing large families

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9. ZR, 15(162) 30.6.1922; *SAJC*, 7(19), 14.5.1920 "Our Cape Town Letter"; *Ibid*, 7(17), 30.4.1920, "Social and Fashionable".

10. UCT Libs, BC 160. Alexander Papers, List 3, 4(a)(b), CTJPS, Annual Reports and Committee minutes; Jewish Ladies Association, Committee minutes 1896-1904, *passim*; UCT Libs, BOG, A, Minutes, 1921-1923, list at least eight cases of desertion or non-support brought to their notice; see also minutes, 27.6.1923-12.3.1924 *passim*.

throughout their reproductive years.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless in the period under survey before women filled high status jobs which increased their dissatisfaction with housekeeping and its attendant *ennui*, marriage remained an important female objective throughout Jewish society. The Roeland Street Synagogue's marriage register indicates that the great majority of brides had no specific occupation, other than their household activities. This was not a specifically Jewish phenomenon; the 1904 Cape census indicates it was the prevalent trend among white women in general.

For the single or married woman who refused charity when her family was on the verge of penury, finding paid employment was imperative. While most of the immigrants engaged in "legitimate" occupations, at the turn of the century prostitution and brothel keeping, even running the occasional gambling house, were, judging from court records, conceivable options. A substantial number of Jewish prostitutes operated in Cape Town: the fact that these women needed a Yiddish-speaking interpreter when brought to trial, indicates that they were recent emigrants from the Old Country, where possibly they had already plied their trade.

Prostitution was patently a last resort. Contrary to the trend in the poor white population, so too, for a Jewish girl, was domestic service, which in a Christian family could be particularly problematic for an orthodox woman.

Working class women employed outside the home in the immigrant community's earliest years as a mainly urban underclass can therefore be subsumed under three main groups: self employed; wage-earners in commerce; and operatives in the premature industries which were developing in Cape Town at the time of the Anglo-Boer War. Self employment was an aspiration for all Jewish immigrants, resulting from economic proscriptions in the Russian Pale of Settlement. Women ran, or helped their husbands, in neighbourhood enterprises such as primitive dairies, secondhand clothing shops or simple drapery and grocery stores. Self employed too were those who rented rooms or ran orthodox boarding houses. This was grinding hard work, but had the advantage of not requiring a capital outlay as existing household facilities and resources could be utilized. Self employed dressmakers working at home had similar advantages.

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11. ZR, 4(44), 14.6.1912, "I.H.H"; ZR, 5(56),15.7.1913, Bender; 12(139),30.7.1920; 7(26), 2.7.1920, editorial; 14(159), 31.3.1922, 19.6.1925 "Aunt Rachel's column: SAJC, 2(5), 6.2.1903, "Our Ladies Letter"; 19(21) 23.5.1930; UCT Libs, BC 949, Kaplan Centre interviews, *passim*, several of the (elderly) respondents refer to the domestic chores and particularly the mother's disinclination to leave the (kosher) cooking to a maid. See also comments on sexuality and birth control. DC's mother had eight children between 1888 and 1908; a family which applied for help when the mother died in about 1911, comprised eight children ranging from 14 years to one month.

The range for women in commerce was limited. Many were untrained shop assistants, employed in family concerns, or by fellow Jews at low wages (in the 1920s varying from 30/- to £3.10 per month), which was considerably less than a similarly employed London woman. Those who had received some kind of training, began in the century's early years to find better paid employment as shorthand-typists or bookkeepers (at £6 per month in the later period, 1913-1926).

Rent and food statistics indicate the buying power of such wages. In 1910 an average three to six roomed-house in Cape Town could be rented monthly for £3.10, rising to £6.19 in 1931. Bread would cost 2/8d for an average loaf in 1905 and 3/4d in 1930, eggs were 1/11d a dozen in 1905 but after a high inflationary period in 1920 came down in price as did most other foodstuffs.

A small number of Jewish female operatives were employed in the tailoring and cigarette-making trades where conditions were wretched and wages low. A Cape Select Committee appointed to investigate factory conditions and wages, reported in 1906, at a time of post-war depression, that in tailoring concerns there was "undoubtedly a considerable amount of sweating". Leah Solomons "a first class buttonholer" earned 30/- weekly for an official 10-hour day which in practice was often prolonged for a further five hours; Dora Rosenthal, a piece-worker who earned 4/6d, also for a 10-hour day, survived thanks to the piece work she did at home. Two of the cigarette factories were Jewish-owned; their exploitation of all workers thus intruded upon ethnic and religious commonalty. The woman's role in the incipient trade union movement in which Jewish males played an important part, remains unclear; but it would seem that, as in post World War I England, many unions opposed the entry of women.<sup>12</sup>

Yet shared social and religious bonds remained the bedrock of Jewish society. Except among Jewish socialists, class differences did not imply class conflict, as the records of institutions such as the Gardens Synagogue, and charitable societies run

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12. UCT Libs, BC 849, Gardens Synagogue, A, speaks of the "growing evil of immorality among Jewish girls"; BC 798, Roeland St Synagogue, B, Marriage Register; BC 809, BOG, *passim*; BC 160, List 3,4(a) CTJPS, 1903-4, *passim*; BC 949 Kaplan Centre interviews, *passim*; C1-06, Cape of Good Hope, *Report of the Select Committee on conducting of factories and fair wage clause*, pp.v ff, 35a ff; E.J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700*. (Dublin, 1977), p.173; G. Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism. The South African Experience, 1910-1967*, (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1980), pp.24, 173-196; R. Hallett, "Policemen, pimps and prostitutes", in C. Saunders, (ed.), *Studies in the History of Cape Town, Vol. 1* (Department of History, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1979) pp. 7-16; Union of South Africa, *Union Statistics for Fifty Years Jubilee Issue, 1910-1960* (Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1960); B. Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, (Labour Research Department, London, 1921). The author is indebted to Ray Alexander for information on Jewish women in labour movements prior to the 1930's.

by the *balebatim* (communal leadership) indicate. Possibly this was a function of the proximity of many of these leaders, to their own humble origins. For, as noted before, this was an immigrant community characterized by social mobility.

Education was its driving force. Historically the love of learning had been one of the earliest expressions of a Jewish identity. In the Talmudic period male children had been more highly esteemed than females and consequently their education had received greater attention. This attitude persisted (as far as traditional learning was concerned) well into the 19th century when the *Haskalah* impinged on Eastern Europe.

Bender's introduction in 1896 of *batmitzvah* (confirmation) classes to raise the status of women in the religious community did not receive widespread acceptance. Thus when the *Bnoth Zion*, the newly-established (1901) women's Zionist organisation in Cape Town, began teaching children, including girls, Hebrew through the modern *Ivrith b'Ivrith* method, it was adopting an important new approach both to the language and the intellectual potential of women.

In the *Bnoth Zion* classes girls far outnumbered boys. A different picture emerges however in the 1920s at the traditional-style *Talmud Torahs* established in the larger Peninsula communities. These afternoon schools taught Jewish history, religion and ritual, and traditional Hebrew. Girls were admitted; but because this was not a parental obligation, male numbers were far in excess.<sup>13</sup>

Secular education was subject to a different imperative. The 1905 *Cape School Board Act* enforced compulsory primary education for all white schoolgoing children living within the specified radius of a school, thus obliging the parents to educate all children uniformly. In doing so the distinctive "achievement drive" of the Jewish immigrant cohort was reinforced. The women in particular were keen that their children (including the daughters) should learn English. Musical skill was a typical European bourgeois accomplishment which Jewish girls across the board acquired, often expertly, as the results of public examination show.<sup>14</sup>

Higher education which could enable a girl to overcome the constraints of her social role (both colonial and customary) required a great measure of parental co-

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13. UCT Libs, BC 852, *Bnoth Zion*, A2, Committee meetings, Feb. 1927-Oct. 1929; BC 759, Woodstock and Salt River Congregation, C, Minutes of *Talmud Torah* committee, 1923-1934; BC 949, Kaplan Centre interviews, *passim*, those of the female respondents who learnt Hebrew did so privately; M.E. Katz, *Jewish Education at the Cape 1841 to the Present day*, (M.Ed. University of Cape Town, 1973), p.75 ff; I. Abrahams, *The Birth of a Community* (Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, 1955) p 94; *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 6; ZR 4(45), 15.7.1912; 5(55), 15.6.1913; *SAJC*, 19(47), 28.11.1930.
  14. UCT Libs, BC 949, Kaplan Centre Interviews, *passim*; *SAJC*, 1(1), 7.2.1902; 1(47), 2.10.1902, "Our Ladies letter"; 6(49), 6.12.1919; 6(51), 19.12.1919; 7(23), 11.6.1920, "Our Cape Town letter"; *SAJC*, 19.9.1924.



operation. The tendency to favour males persisted, conceivably as a residue of the old aspiration to produce learned men. A more persuasive explanation lies however, in the continuing prevalence of the belief that “over-educating” girls made them “unfit for their natural duties”; and that as marriage was a girl’s proper destiny, scarce resources should rather be used to equip the future breadwinner with the necessary skills.

Social pressures inevitably impinged on personal inclinations. South Africa’s secondary industrialization during World War I created new employment opportunities in commerce for trained personnel including women. Consequently parents were prepared increasingly to invest in a girl’s acquisition of commercial skills. The 1921 census shows that clerks and typists predominated among all working women; similarly by 1923 the “business girl” was a normative figure among young Jewish females.

Of the professions, nursing and teaching were favoured by the colonial middle class as “respectable” occupations, an attitude increasingly shared by Jewish parents. Nursing utilized the “natural” feminine virtue of empathy. Teaching, involving as it did, working with children, was in a sense an extension of a woman’s maternal instincts; and for orthodox parents it had the additional advantage of ruling out Sabbath work.

Though other professional openings lagged somewhat, by the 1920s a growing number of women were attending classes at the South African College, and subsequently at its successor, the University of Cape Town. In 1921, of 900 students, 209 were Jewish, of whom 40 were women; that means one out of every five Jewish students was female, compared to one out of three in the total student body. As the percentage of Jewish male students far exceeded the percentage of Jews in the population as a whole, it is clear that Jewish parents, for whatever reason, still fell behind other parents on the question of tertiary education for their daughters.<sup>15</sup>

Most Jewish women graduates held Arts degrees of no particular excellence. A few individuals proved to be high achievers however, in their professions, notably law. The Cape lawyers produced two “firsts”: the first female applicant for admission as an advocate once *The Womens Legal Practitioners Act* was passed in 1923; and the

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15. UCT Libs, BC 160, Alexander Papers, List 3.4(b), CTJPS. 30.11.1902; BC 949, Kaplan Centre interviews, in the 1920s, “E.S” trained in various hospitals, including the Robben Island Insane Asylum; “D.J.W” was a primary teacher, and several of the respondents became music teachers, shorthand-typists, secretaries and bookkeepers. A number of girls in “G.A.’s” matriculation class became university-trained teachers in the early 1920s; *SAJC*, 1(8), 23.5.1902; 2(13), 3.4.1903; 7(1), 2.1.1920, “Our Cape Town Letter”; 7(41), 22.10.1920; 9(52), 29.12.1927; *Ivri Onouchi, Journal of the Jewish Guild*, (Johannesburg) 1(7), 1.8.1923.

first woman attorney. Bertha Solomon's father, a leading Cape Zionist, encouraged her educational ambitions; she too was admitted as an advocate, (in the Transvaal) and subsequently became a member of parliament. Throughout the Union, several Jewish women trained as doctors; an unusual career choice was that of the woman who specialized in agricultural chemistry.

Possibly the best known of the Jewish female achievers were Sarah Gertrude Millin the author, and Irma Stern, first expressionist artist to exhibit in Cape Town. But it is open to question as to whether their experiences as Jewish females were the substance of their creativity, or whether the given of a shared Jewish descent materially affected the career choices of the Jewish female lawyers, doctors or graduates in the humanities.<sup>16</sup> Nor, absent sufficient biographical information, is it possible to establish the extent to which the pervasive anti-semitism of the period shaped their *Weltanschauung*.

The effects of incremental gender equality are easier to gauge. Traditional Jewish attitudes regarding the intellectual inferiority of women and their duties to home and family, were - like similar attitudes in white, middle class society as a whole - steadily being eroded early in the 20th century. This was partly a function of the incipient industrialization noted before, which took women out of the home; equally it was a consequence of increasing standardization in the secular education and upbringing of the sexes.

The daughters of immigrants assimilated the speech and behavioural patterns of their English-speaking reference group, including their leisure activities. Young women cycled and hiked with their, frequently unenthusiastic, male peers. Cycling, together with smoking in public, being the quintessential metaphors for women's burgeoning liberation in the late 19th, early 20th centuries!<sup>17</sup> Those with intellectual aspirations participated on an equal footing with males in literary societies.<sup>18</sup>

Prior to the 1960s when inequality began to be confronted at many levels, the institutionalized programmes of proto-feminists concentrated on political and legal disadvantages. Though marriage gave a woman social status, under South Africa's Roman-Dutch law (both public and private) her legal standing was substantively

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6. *South African Jewish Yearbook* (1929), hereafter *Yearbook SAJC*, 2.2.1923; 9(6), 10.2.1922; 9(49), 8.12.1922; *ZR*, 13.2.1925, 15.11.1929; B. Solomon, *Time Remembered*, (Timmins, Cape Town, 1968); F. Jaff, *Women South Africa Remembers*, (Timmins, Cape Town, 1975); Elaine Katz, "Bertha Solomon. A Feminist for her time", *Jewish Affairs*, 48(2), Winter, 1993).
  17. *SAJC*, 2(7), 20.2.1903; 7(33), 20.8.1920, "Social and Fashionable", "and this without any shame or bashfulness. Of course we saw many who looked like the daughters of Jewish parents".
  18. UCT Libs, BC 931, Cape Town Jewish Literary and Dramatic Society, 1916-1928; *SAJC*, 10.6.1921.

reduced to that of a minor. Control of children was vested in the father; so too was control of property held in community unless voided by an antenuptial contract. Thus the paternalistic tendency of the law, which persisted until 1953, reinforced a similar bias in Jewish tradition.<sup>19</sup>

Until 1930 women were disfranchised, and consequently unable to affect issues pertaining even to their own interests. Already prior to the unification of South Africa however, the Women's Enfranchisement League had been established at the Cape, with the aim of promoting an

intelligent interest in the question of political enfranchisement of women in the Cape Colony and to advocate the granting of the vote to them on the same terms as men.<sup>20</sup>

The extent to which the generality of Jewish women participated in the suffrage movement (which became a national one in 1911) is difficult to establish.<sup>21</sup> After World War I at the Cape there was a handful of Jewish activists; while several high profile individuals became involved in the national struggle. But in 1930 only one Jewish woman, the septuagenarian Sophie Levisseur was a member of the 14-woman leadership cadre drawn from the dominant white, English-speaking middle class.

One of the most dedicated campaigners in Cape Town was Ruth Alexander, wife of a well-known communal leader. Initially influenced by the conservative Judaism of her father, the noted Hebrew scholar Solomon Schechter, in the 1920s she stood aside from her earlier fervent commitment to purely Jewish (including Zionist) concerns, developing radical feminist views akin to those of her friend the writer Olive Schreiner, which unlike the current orthodoxy included the espousal of a non-racial women's franchise.<sup>22</sup>

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19. SAJC, 9(19), 12.5.1922; 7(49), 17.12.1940; ZR, 14(159), 31.3.1922; *Yearbook*, Irene Geffen a Jewish lawyer published *The laws of South Africa affecting women and children* in 1928; Katz, "Bertha Solomon", a doughty fighter for reform of the marital right. *The Matrimonial Affairs Act* of 1953 corrected the imbalance.
  20. South African Library, MSC 26, O. Schreiner Papers, Box 2.1. The League's main arguments subsumed opposition to taxation without representation and the protection afforded by participation in the political process.
  21. UCT Libs, BC 949, Kaplan Centre interviews, "H.I." stated her mother was one of the very few Jewish suffragettes; SAJC, 1.4.1921, claimed however many Jewish women were "working arduously"; *The South African Women's Who's Who 1938*, (Johannesburg, Biographies Ltd, 1938); C. Walker, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in South Africa*. (UCT Centre for African Studies Communications No. 2, 1979).
  22. See for example the ZR, 5(51), 23.1.1913, for which Ruth Alexander ran the children's column; SAJC, 1.4.1921, "Social and Fashionable"; 9(18), 5.5.1922; 9(39), 29.9.1922; 19(21), 23.5.1930; E. Alexander, *Morris Alexander. A biography*, (Juta, Cape Town, 1953), pp. 54 - 57, 140 and Chapter 27.

When the *Women's Enfranchisement Act* was passed in 1930, the (male) editor of the *South African Jewish Chronicle* predicted that the vote would give women "a new sense of dignity, importance and equality". Because political empowerment was regarded in the 1930s as an end, rather than a beginning, he mistakenly believed it would "inevitably obliterate" their "inferiority complex"; and consequently would heighten their awareness of world problems, including the need to participate in the establishment of a Jewish national home.

We will return presently to the Zionist ideal. In his sweeping reference to "world problems" the *Chronicle* editor was making a revolutionary suggestion; that the generality of Jewish women emerge from their familiar Jewish social ambience to enter a less comfortable, non-sectarian arena and make a contribution to the common weal. In practice the "deep-rooted feeling of inferiority" persisted among such women, producing an unwillingness to participate in, or hazard opinions on matters outside their previous experience.<sup>23</sup> Even acculturated Jewish women still felt "out of place" in organizations dominated by their Christian rôle models, such as the Cape Hospital Board Ladies Committee. While the Jewish Board of Guardians sent female representatives to the National Council of Women (NCW), an affiliate of the International Council of Women, established in America to improve the status of women, the country's other leading women's organizations had few - if any - Jewish participants by 1938. It was only when a sense of unified purpose was aroused during World War II that Jewish women became substantively involved in general communal work.

Few Jewish entries in the 1938 *Woman's Who's Who* professed an interest in politics; and Bertha Solomon was the only Jewish woman to hold office in local and national political institutions.<sup>24</sup>

Thus both prior to, and after enfranchisement, leisured women continued to concentrate on the kind of Jewish communal work still regarded (particularly among Jewish males) as a socially acceptable alternative to the airhead activities women supposedly preferred.<sup>25</sup> Their rôle in synagogue affairs remained the traditional subsidiary one. At the Gardens Synagogue in 1896, though a Miss Lorie had done "noble work" training the choir, further female participation was "strongly opposed ... in order not to establish a precedent". In 1902 women members were deputed to provide embroidered cloths for the new synagogue's *bimah* (reading desk) just as females had done sixty years before when the congregation was established. Twenty

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23. *SAJC*, 2(41), 23.10.1903; 19(21), 23.5.1930.

24. UCT Libs, BC 809, BOG, A, 8.8.1923; however *Who's Who 1938* indicates that a few Jewish professional women participated in the NCW at a lower level.

25. See *SAJC*, 4.5.1923, "Instead of devoting so much time to paltry amusements .... (they should work) on behalf of a deserving institution".

years later, the participation of women in the Adelaide (Australia) synagogue choir at the 1921 *Kol Nidrei* and *Yom Kippur* services was queried in South Africa on the grounds of admissibility in Jewish law.<sup>26</sup>

By comparison, in the Gardens Synagogue, the pre-occupation with fundraising and the accompanying exclusion of women from policy making decisions or membership of the committee persisted during the 1920s. This could not have been an uncongenial situation; for when in 1932 the committee endorsed gender equality no females took advantage of the offer.<sup>27</sup>

This disinclination to occupy more influential positions was replicated in certain other male-dominated Jewish organizations. By 1930 no woman had served on the Cape Board of Deputies (the intermediary between the community and outside institutions including the government); or on the committee of the *Dorshei Zion*, the first Zionist society in South Africa; or played any but a minor rôle in the all-male mutual aid societies.<sup>28</sup>

In 1921 as she became increasingly radicalized, Ruth Alexander deprecated voluntary charity as a palliative, demeaning to all involved.<sup>29</sup> This was not a popular viewpoint, given the contemporary emphasis in Anglo-Saxon society (of which the Cape was a segment) on charitable work as a virtue, and therefore an extrinsic endorsement of women's right tentatively to move out of her "separate sphere". For Jewish women specifically this philosophy accorded well too, with the biblically enjoined obligation to give *tzedakah* (material charity), and by extension, to help the less fortunate through voluntary communal service.

To their customary fundraising therefore, middle class women added activities perceived (no less by themselves) as consistent with the natural female aptitude for domestic management and care of the young.<sup>30</sup> The Ladies Association Hospital Kosher Kitchen, Astra Jewish Young Women's Residence and the Cape Town Jewish Girl's Association are typical examples. So too was the Cape Town Jewish Orphanage, where, because young children were involved, women played a

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26. UCT Libs, BC 849, A, Minutes of Gardens Synagogue Committee, 1.3.1896; *SAJC*, 23.12.1921, "Our Australian Letter".

27. UCT Libs, BC 759, Woodstock and Salt River Congregation, A, Minutes 1934-1948; *SAJC*, 1(6), 18.4.1902; 1(12), 18.7.1902; 19(39), 26.9.1930; 19(42), 17.10.1930; 19(47), 28.11.1930; J. Simon, "Where are our modern prophetesses." (Green and Sea Point Hebrew Congregation, Rosh Hashanah Bulletin, 1992).

28. *SAJC* 25.5.1923; *ZR*, 15.9.1930.

29. *SAJC*, 30.12.1921, debate at Women's Enfranchisement League Debating Society.

30. See *ZR*, 1930, *passim*; *Jewish Yearbook*, 1933, *Jewish Yearbook 1938* (*Jewish Chronicle*, London, 1933, 1938).

significant rôle on its executive.<sup>31</sup>

The Orphanage was a window on the real world of poverty and distress among fellow Jews, as was the Board of Guardians, successor organization to two parochial charitable organizations, the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society (CTJPS) and the Gardens Synagogue Ladies Association, which combined in 1921. From its inception in 1895 the Ladies Association had been mainly concerned with relieving hardship among women and children, often in collaboration with the CTJPS.<sup>32</sup> Like their Christian counterparts, the members of the Ladies Association personally visited needy families. As these “Lady Investigators” belonged primarily to the “old elite”, while the recipients of their charity were generally newly arrived immigrants, the historian is tempted to look for evidence of condescension, even class prejudice on the part of the former. Their records in fact, show a similar response to those of the Ladies Benevolent Society, a contemporary Christian organization. These middle class women, no matter how squalid the conditions to which they were exposed, showed a far from “demeaning” tough-mindedness, tempered by courtesy and consideration. In the Jewish case, the names of recipients, though known to officeholders, were omitted from the minutes; so too were value judgements. The present author has found only a couple; a house described as “filthy”, a reference to a “good for nothing” husband.

In sum the Ladies Association was not simply an “Angel in the House” appendage of a male society, but a partner whose efficiency and independence were recognized. Its executive insisted and the CTJPS accepted, that if they raised money they must be consulted on, and even trusted with its disbursement. Their participation in policy making was entrenched during the South African War (1899-1902) when they were involved in discussions on equal terms with the male *balebatim* over the refugee crisis in Cape Town, which placed a heavy financial burden on Jewish charities.<sup>33</sup> Yet while women continued to play an important and coequal rôle with men in the subsequent Board of Guardians, the executive remained primarily male.<sup>34</sup>

A large proportion of donors to this organization were women, confirming a high level of female commitment to the *tzedakah* injunction. Maintaining the example set in the early years of its precursors, all committee members did hands-on

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31. See UCT Libs, BC 938, Jewish Girls' Association, D, Minutes, 1918-1922, *passim*, for the type of instruction and entertainment offered to girls; S.A. Library, MSC 32, Eric Rosenthal Collection, “The Cape Jewish Orphanage”; ZR 2.5.1930; SAJC, 18.6.1923, in this year there were 13 women and 16 men on the Orphanage committee.
  32. UCT Libs, BC 160, Alexander Papers, List 3,4(b), CTJPS, committee minutes; UCT Libs, BC 849, Gardens Synagogue 6, 1896-1899, *passim*; SAJC, Vol.1(1), 7.2.1902.
  33. UCT Libs, BC 160, Alexander Papers, List 3,4(b), CTJPS, A.G.M., 9.8.1897, 2.12.1900. A large number of refugees from the Transvaal were Jewish.
  34. SAJC, 2.3.1923; 11(1), 4.1.1924.

investigative work, during which they could disburse small sums of money on the Board's behalf. Finding jobs for unemployed men constituted an important aspect of the male members' duties; the "lady visitors" concentrated on problems such as unwanted pregnancies, and illness, homelessness and neglect of the aged where these last affected women. As with the Ladies Association their reports to the committee, if not particularly compassionate, are never patronizing or censorious.<sup>35</sup>

Given the origins and procedures of the Board of Guardians' work, there was no problem in accepting gender equality as an integral aspect of its activities. The Zionist movement also mobilized women but according to a different ethos.

The Women's movement, the *Bnoth Zion* was founded in Cape Town in 1901 primarily through the efforts of a man, M. Zuckerman, less sceptical than his fellow committee members in the *Dorshei Zion* regarding the potential achievements of a women's society.<sup>36</sup> Some 160 joined the new association whose leadership was a further example of the interface between the Anglo-Germans and the better off early Eastern European arrivals.

As noted previously, the *Bnoth Zion*, unlike other Jewish organizations in which women were involved, pioneered a modernist approach to the intellectual potential of females, going beyond the redemptionist aim which was the foundation of Zionism. Though this philosophy accorded with the Zionist movement's commitment to equal rights for the sexes, in practice the dominant male societies (including the national umbrella organization, the South African Zionist Federation) preferred women to concentrate on "women's work"; organizing fundraising and social functions, and arranging "edifying" lectures.<sup>37</sup>

Participation in policy or decision making was not part of that work; and the women Zionists generally acquiesced in the supportive rôle ascribed to them. It was only in 1928 for example, that a woman became an executive member of the Federation by virtue of her personal ability.

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35. UCT Libs, BC 809, BOG, A, Minute books, 9.3.1921-23.7.1925; BC 809, Cash Book, April 1921-Dec. 1925, July 1929-August 1932; *History of the Cape Jewish Board of Guardians, Issued to commemorate the centenary, 1859-1959*, (Cape Board of Guardians, Cape Town, 1963).

36. M. Gitlin, *The Vision Amazing*, pp. 47, 112-13, 258 ff; G. Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*; pp. 25, 40; *Yearbook*, p.73 ff; B. Widan, "Women's Role" in D. Sherman (ed), *Forty Years in Retrospect*, (WP Zionist Council, 1984).

37. For example, ZR, 22.11.1929, the *Bnoth*, debated the relative merits of Zionism's cultural and financial aspects. But the lectures often have a specific feminine slant e.g. SAJC 11.11.1921, Morris Alexander lectured on "The treatment of children according to Jewish law and custom"; ZR 5(49), 15.11.1912, report of the Executive Council of the S.A. Zionist Federation. Women were expected to help "inculcate in our young the ideals of Zionism and the tenets of Judaism".

While the "At Homes", "Members Teas", raffles, fêtes and "socials" were not intellectually taxing, they did hone the organizational skills of the leadership. A greater assertiveness in the relationship of the *Bnoth* with both Federation and *Dorshei Zion* from 1929-1931 can largely be attributed however, to the participation of individual women of above average intellectuality like Fedora Clouts, a university graduate from an "establishment" family of Eastern European origin. She recalled in 1983,

We had to struggle all the time. We weren't prepared to accept all this dictation.

Thus the intellectualism, firmness of purpose and administrative ability which women like Clouts brought to their office not only ensured the expansion of the society's work and improved efficiency in its management. In addition the *Dorshei Zion* and to a lesser extent the Federation were induced to retreat from their former perception of the *Bnoth* solely as an obedient cashier; and to agree henceforth to prior consultations on matters of "general Zionist interest". This new-found resolution notwithstanding, equality remained subject to the constraints of the time; (the society's minutes, even in those liberated years, show that office holders were still cited by their husbands' initials).<sup>38</sup>

The *Bnoth Zion* membership numbered some 300 in 1932 when a second women's communal organization, the Union of Jewish Women was founded. While it concentrated on the concerns of South African society as a whole, like the *Bnoth* it too drew upon a limited group of middle class women of increasing leisure. Many of the leading female Zionists perceived the Union as a competitor for scarce resources and therefore potentially damaging to Zionism; whereas its founders maintained that an organization such as theirs, which strengthened the relationship between the Jewish and broader communities must also benefit the Zionist ideal. It took many years to reconcile these two viewpoints; meanwhile the women's movements, far from closing ranks to protect their burgeoning independence, replicated the dissension in the public activities of Jewish males.

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38. UCT Libs, BC 949, Kaplan Centre interviews, Fedora Clouts. Brought in as chairlady from outside the organization, she was also one of the few Jewish women interested in national politics, and education in general; UCT Libs, BC 852, *Bnoth Zion* Association, A2, minutes of Committee Meetings 1927-1933, see for example, 13.3.1930, "Our society are [sic] being asked to participate in arrangements ... when everything has already been fully discussed and practically decided upon"; 17.7.1930, "we hear from [the Zionist Federation] only when financial help is required"; 26.8.1930, the *Dorshei Zion* "saw our point of view and apologized most humbly"; 11.9.1930, 12.3.1931, 30.6.1931, 13.10.1931, 22.10.1931, 12.11.1931, 28.12.1931; *SAJC*, 2.10.1931, Clouts maintained that "if there could not be a proper central body in Cape Town on which were to sit men and women to direct the movement in the city then it were better that they worked separately until they [ie. the women] obtained the recognition they deserved".



The migration to the Cape of Jews from the Russian Empire (and later from its succession states) effected the transfer to a modern, secular, industrializing society of customs and values developed initially under conditions of socio-economic stagnation and political oppression. The present article has attempted to establish whether this process produced new behavioural patterns, specifically among the female cohort. Did, for instance, a perception of a shared identity exist or perhaps newly emerge - among Jewish women in the *Gründerzeit*? And if so, did this include a conscious awareness of their prescriptive rôle in the community, and a consequent common intention of inducing change?

Gender equality was built into *Halachic* Law; but in formal religious observances, women played an inessential part. They shared, however, with the majority of Jewish immigrants of all classes, a "culture of discipline" which they had internalized as orthodox Jews living under restricted conditions within the Pale of Settlement. The values they brought to their new home had been fostered by a combination of traditional social customs and religious beliefs; values such as communal responsibility, industriousness, thrift and the primacy of family affinities.

At the Cape the social mobility of their children (a function of the emphasis placed on education), the scrupulous fulfilment of the obligations to give *tzedakah*, allied to an aversion themselves to accepting charity, are all testimony to the persistence of this culture. This is confirmed by an examination of attitudes expressed in the records of institutions run by women.

These organizations fostered a common South African Jewish identity among the Anglo-Germans and the Eastern Europeans as the latter moved out of the urban underclass. Thus a picture of the acculturated Cape Town Jewish woman of the early 20th Century begins to emerge primarily from communal records, supplemented by the writings of female journalists targeting women readers in the Jewish newspapers.

As secular education became the norm for Jewish children, inevitably there was a growing correspondence between the behaviour and attitudes of these women and their English speaking reference group. The "Our Ladies Letter" and "Social and Fashionable" columns in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* during most of the period under survey, indicate that middle class Jewish women were, like their peers in the general population, afforded a similar range of topics - moral, political, cultural and social - purportedly of interest to the average female. Yet domestic matters, particularly simple cooking and advice on fashion, predominated, suggesting a sizeable market for the "nursery and kitchen" agenda.

There is no definite evidence to suggest that on principle Jewish males regarded women as intellectually inferior. On the contrary, the Zionists, for example, emphasized gender equality in all aspects of *the* movement. Yet because the generality of women - lacking marketable skills - were still confined to the home,

(which was perceived moreover as a protective environment), in practice traditional paternalism characterized the dealings of Jewish males with women's organizations

Consequently a residue of a collective inferiority complex remained even among acculturated Jewish women towards their male counterparts and by extension towards the wider community (including women involved in similar, but unsectarian communal work). The latter tendency was reinforced by contemporary Jewish society's introspective nature, compounded by the anti-semitism and snobbery which were then still crass and pervasive among English-speaking South Africans, and which discouraged all but the most assimilated Jewish women.

In Jewish society the mother was still an idealized figure, an attitude entirely consistent with paternalism. As long as she engaged in good works, woman's emergence from her traditional territory - the home - was not perceived by males as harmful to family life. Rather she was encouraged to engage in such charitable work not least because this accorded with the traditional obligation for all Jews. From the mid-1920s however, economic developments acting in tandem with an undifferentiated educational system, motivated women to acquire professional and business qualifications. For financial or customary reasons however (and possibly a combination of both) Jewish families still trailed the general population in providing their daughters with a tertiary education. Nevertheless, increasingly, individual Jewish females were gaining confidence in their social skills, including the ability to conduct communal organisations as efficiently as men. In sum, while religious observances remained orthodox at his period, traditional social behaviour was selectively modified when expedient.

History is not a deductive science; its epistemology is based *au fond* on conclusions derived from evidence. If institutional records provide some traces of women in the public sphere, what is missing is the unique and the personal; contemporary diaries and letters, even subsequently published biographical material. The Kaplan Centre interviews fill this lacuna to a very limited extents, being testimony recollected in the tranquillity of old age and therefore lacking a compensatory passion. Consequently the innermost feelings of the early 20th century middle class women come as through a glass darkly. Of a time when privacy was prized and respected, we do not for example know anything about the sexuality of such women.

Even less, because they lacked the leisure or the secular education to be active in communal organizations, can we follow in the daily footsteps, let alone hear the voices or speculate on the emotions of underclass women; first wave immigrants who came at the century's inception.

In short, except in the records of the sodalities, we cannot establish the extent to which, in the community's formative years at the Cape, individual women accepted (or conversely rebelled against) their traditionally ascribed social inferiority. How then can the historian compensate for this omission? Possibly by comparing (with

due regard for cultural differences) the everyday experiences of their counterparts almost one hundred years later; black, urbanizing females, who are also in a sense, immigrants trying to conserve “decent” values in the changed circumstances of an alien society.<sup>39</sup>

*Abstract*

**The social role of Jewish women in the Grunderzeit of the Cape  
Jewish community 1896-1930.**

Using mainly contemporary primary sources, the article examines the effect produced by the transfer to a modern, industrializing society of the traditional, prescriptive role of Jewish women, developed initially under the vastly different conditions obtaining in the Russian Empire and its succession states.

Put another way, the article seeks to establish the extent to which not only the behavior and aspirations, but also the educational and employment opportunities changed as a result of large-scale emigration to a British colony in the late 19th, early 20th century.

It would appear that on the whole, while the subordinate role of women in Jewish religious observances remained intact, the surrounding secular society did selectively begin to moderate traditional social mores.

Two factors played an important function in this latter development. The enforcement, by local educational authorities, of compulsory primary education for all white children ensured that Jewish girls as well as boys would be assimilated into a mainly English-speaking reference group. Secondly, the new arrivals fused with secularized, modernized Anglo-German component of Jewish society, whose members had preceded the Lithuanian immigrants by a few decades.

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39. See *The Argus*, 8.9.1995, “Sociomonitor” research on the urban black population of Cape Town.