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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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Foreword

You may not be able to judge a book by its cover, but you probably won't go wrong judging an anthology by its editors. The three editors of this particular collection — professor of historical geography, Ruth Kark; professor of history, Margalit Shilo; and professor of folklore, Galit Hasan-Rokem — are stars of the Israeli academic scene. Their subject matter is pre-State Israel, i.e. the Jewish community that lived in what was to become Israel in 1948. Within that community, about which so much has been written, there is one group that has garnered less attention than it deserves. That group is women. The relative lack of attention paid to the study of pre-State Jewish women stems from the same problems that are true around the world. There is no special archive to collect papers on this group; there are no special chairs at universities; and there is very little research support in Israel devoted to this topic. Thus, the work is difficult to undertake and funding is hard to come by.

The Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, founded (under a different name) in 1997, was created to address these specific problems. The following year we partnered with the Lafer Center for Women and Gender Studies at Hebrew University (and the Tauber Institute at Brandeis University) to hold a conference on a topic never previously discussed in a large public forum — the contribution of Jewish women to the creation of the State of Israel. Held at the Hebrew University, the conference was organized under the title “We Were Here, Too!” and received a lot of media attention. The papers in this collection stem from that early conference. The next year we held a complementary conference at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, focusing on the American counterparts of these Jewish women in pre-State Israel. This second conference resulted in the volume, *American Jewish Women and the Zionist Enterprise*, edited by Mark A. Raider and myself, and published in this series.

Since then, many other conferences have been held, and many new research projects initiated. And yet, the contributors in the current volume were the earliest ones, and their research was truly groundbreaking.

To make this extremely broad topic manageable, the editors chose three foci: life history, politics, and culture. They also chose only Israeli academics, both women and men, all of whom are very well known in their fields. The book begins with historiographic reflection, i.e., how should historians and other researchers deal with the study of women. Two initial contributions, by sociologist Deborah Bernstein and historian Yossi Ben-Artzi, start this discussion. To counterbalance the previous nearly exclusive focus paid to Ashkenazi Jews, several of the next contributions (by Henriette Dahan-Kalev, Michal Ben Ya'akov, and Esther Meir-Glitzenstein) deal with Mizrahi women, North African women, and Iraqi women. Joseph Glass, an expert on immigration to Palestine from the United States and Canada, offers a chapter on this topic in the interwar years. Penina Morag-Talmon discusses women immigrants not in terms of individual adjustment and choices, but as parts of social networks.

Another group of chapters deals with ideas rather than behaviors. Einat Ramon, for example, brings the ideology of key Zionist theoretician A. D. Gordon to bear on the feminist concerns of women in the Second Aliyah. The image of pre-State Israel is still very much rooted in the unusual communities of kibbutz and moshav, rather than the city. And in this book, as well, we find an emphasis on the kibbutz. The contribution by Henry Near takes up once again the question of why women did not find in the kibbutz the utopian society of which they had dreamed.

The story of Jewish women's political activity in pre-State Israel is not so much one of elected office but rather of creating new organizations. To achieve this objective required considerable political skill. The examples in this volume are Margalit Shilo's study of girls' schools in Jerusalem; a study by Shifra Shvarts and Zipora Shehory-Rubin of the unique institution called *Tipat Halav* (maternal and infant welfare centers); Nira Bartal's study of the nursing school in Jerusalem; and Bat-Sheva Margalit-Stern's examination of the women's workers movement.

Cultural products of Jewish women in pre-State Israel are discussed in a book section entitled "Creativity in Word and Music." There we can find chapters on poetry, fiction, and music. The book concludes with a discussion of memory, with contributions by Billie Melman and Judith Baumel-Schwartz. Studies of memorialization and the creation of legends form an appropriate bookend to contrast with the opening section on historiography.

Collective memory is the process and product of a society's defining of its past; historiography is the analogous phenomenon on the part of professional historians.

As anyone who has done work in the field of women's studies knows, conducting research and publishing one's findings are only the beginning. The next step is equally significant, and that is to incorporate this work into the general record. If the work is not integrated into the studies conducted by people working in fields other than women's studies, then it will remain marginal. Nor is the point to have research on women sit side-by-side with that of research on men. Rather, our goal should be to take work such as appears in this volume and integrate it into a larger whole. Then we can ask more sweeping theoretical questions that will help us uncover the meaning of gender in society.

As director of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, I am pleased that we are able to contribute to progress on all the steps along the way to this greater goal. We offer research grants to scholars around the world who do work in the field of Jewish women's studies; we sponsor conferences; we invite scholars-in-residence to spend time at our headquarters at Brandeis University; we publish *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* (in partnership with the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem and Indiana University Press); and we publish the HBI Series on Jewish Women, of which this excellent volume is the latest publication. It is our sincerest hope that all of these efforts will contribute to a change in historiography and memory. And that as the field of Israel Studies develops on campuses in the United States and elsewhere, books such as this one that deals with half the population will become central to the curriculum.

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