David W Fletcher, Fall 2002

MARION A. KAPLAN'S *THE JEWISH FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN GERMANY*

Kaplan, Marion A. *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany: the Campaigns of the Juedischer Frauenbund, 1904-1938*. Contributions in Women's Studies, Number 8. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979. 230 pages, six illustrations, selected bibliography, and index.

Kaplan served as Executive Secretary of the Council for European Studies at Columbia University and Associate Director of the Leo Baeck Institute, both in New York City. She also contributed to *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (edited by R. Bridenthal, A. Grossmann, and M. Kaplan; New Feminist Library, edited by R. Baxandall, et al.; New York, 1984) and wrote *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (Studies in Jewish History, edited by J. Reinharz; Oxford, 1991).

Outline

1. Introduction. Germans, Jews, and Women; Emancipation: The Goal of Jews and Women; Jewish Feminists in a Man's World; Double Jeopardy: Jewish Women in German Society.

2. Bertha Pappenheim. "Only a Girl": Pappenheim's Early Years and the Story of Anna O; The Author and Activist.

3. Woman's Sphere. The Feminist Aspirations of the Frauenbund; "For Women's Work and the Women's Movement": The Goals of the Frauenbund; The Organization's Structure.

4. Prostitution, Morality Crusades, and Feminism. The White Slave Traffic and Its Opponents; The Frauenbund's Attitudes Toward the Causes and Cures of White Slavery; The National and International Campaigns Against the Traffic in Women; Institutions and Programs to Prevent White Slavery.

5. The Pursuit of Influence and Equality in Germany's Jewish Community. "And He Shall Rule over Thee": The Opposition to Women's Suffrage; The JFB's Campaign for Women's Rights.

6. Housework as Lifework. Marrying for a Living: Choices Available to Middle-Class Women before World War I; Home Economics: The Attempt to Professionalize Homemaking; Housekeeping for Survival: Depression and the Third Reich.

7. Conclusion.

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Synopsis:

The roots of the Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany developed out of issues of Jewish emancipation in response to the constraints on women caused by male supremacy. Jewish women experienced a double jeopardy in German society, since they were discriminated against both as women and as Jews.

Bertha Pappenheim, born in Vienna in 1859 of an educated and mercantile Orthodox Jewish father from Pressburg, Hungary, and an aristocrat mother from Frankfurt, Germany, founded the League of Jewish Women in 1904. She suffered severe psychological problems early in life, and her feminism, both individually and associatively, has been linked by psychoanalysts to her hysteria and nervous disorder. She lacked formal education and training, but through sheer willpower and tenacity she actively fought for improvement of women's status out of a strong sense of social consciousness.

During the latter part of the nineteenth-century, feminist aspirations in Germany gained some respect from male-dominated authorities due to liberal ideology and the growth of the bourgeois women's movement. The development of the kindergarten, likewise fashioned on progressive ideals, also sparked a radical bisexual approach to child development. In contrast to English and American feminists who demanded equality based on the natural rights of suffrage, German feminists emphasized earning equality through a responsible commitment to traditional feminine roles, i.e., motherhood, and its concomitant expansion to nationalistic ideals, i.e., social motherhood. This outlet gave Jewish feminists the perfect opportunity to propagandize women toward a heightened consciousness of a new, liberated self-image.

From this transformed vantage point that functioned contrary to male dominance and self-interest, as well as orthodox legal and religious values, Jewish feminists fought the moral crusade against white slavery and prostitution. Tenets of Judaism, such as the concept of *Geschlechtswesen* (women as simply physical beings) and the passivity or noninvolvement of the female in both the initiation and dissolution of the marriage contract (the male orientation of the *Ketubah* and the *Get*), aggravated the matter for young, susceptible women. Antisemitic critics muddled the true picture and also contributed to the problem. In its counter efforts, the JFB joined with both national and international organizations, and they developed significant institutional structures for the management of their correctional and remedial social work to combat male abuse of young women.

Jewish feminists broke away from the confining roles established by tradition, i.e., wife, mother, and helpmate, and actively lobbied for women's rights nationally and religiously. The issue of political suffrage aligned the JFB with liberal modernizers, and the matter of religious equality distanced the organization from stalwarts (both male and female) of talmudic and rabbinical codes. The JFB made considerable gains toward achieving the franchise, especially during the period of the Weimar Republic, but only to lose ground under the Third Reich. [Interestingly, Kaplan does not integrate the oppressions of the Nazis in her chapter on the JFB's "Pursuit of Influence and Equality"].

In an effort to maintain its "Jewishness" in spite of its feminist ideology, the JFB redefined "housework as lifework" in its goal to professionalize domestic occupations. Nonetheless, duties of

a domestic nature remained opprobrious to most middle-class, progressive Jews, that is, until socioeconomic pressures rendered other careers unattainable and home jobs necessary. Under the Third Reich, many bourgeois Jewish women turned to housekeeping merely to survive.

Under the Nazis, the JFB continued to function, but more in line with the preservation of its Jewishness rather than the promotion of its feminism, since the pressure was too great to do otherwise. In 1938, the Nazis dissolved the Juedischer Frauenbund under its master plan of *Gleichschaltung* ("assimilation").

Analysis:

Marion A. Kaplan's book, *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany: The Campaigns of the Juedischer Frauenbund, 1904-1938*, intends to illuminate a largely unexplored lacunae in German women's history–the work of the League of Jewish Women–and thereby supplement the history of both German Jewry and the women's emancipation movement. In addition to what she calls the two frameworks of German-Jewish history–an "outer framework" whereby Jews and Germans of successive generations interacted economically, politically, and socially, and an "internal framework" whereby the Jewish *Gemeinde* defined itself according to and in contradistinction with its larger German milieu–the Frauenbund (JFB) represented a "hidden" community who "had a story of their own, determined by their own unique roles, aspirations, and achievements as well as by their relationship to the Jewish *Gemeinde*, the budding women's movement, and the German nation" (4). Appropriately, Kaplan's book develops several themes that highlight the role of the JFB in the advancement of the feminist cause in the first half of the twentieth century. She takes a look at: first, the effect of modernization on changes in women's traditional roles and status; second, the dialectic of how Jewish women shaped their own situation, yet how they were shaped by uncontrollable circumstances; third, the cultural myths

regarding women's "nature"; fourth, the JFB's acquiescence to orthodox values of duty, self-abnegation, and social work as it related to the definition of "feminism"; and fifth, the relative significance of gender, as opposed to class, ethnic heritage, nationality, and religion, toward establishing bonds of unity as well as provoking rationalizations for division among women [6-7].

Kaplan understands her study to be focused on the middle-class women's movement, which primarily eschewed the more radical socialists (see her discussion of the split within the Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine or Federation of German Women's Associations, 64-67) and the predominately communist proletariat. Kaplan therefore establishes well the parameters of her study, although the assessment that her work "can illuminate the sex-specific conditions which oppressed middle-class women regardless of religious affiliation" (7) seems an over generalization and concessive to her desire to explicate "The Jewish Feminine Movement." With good reason, Kaplan locates the roots of Jewish women's "double jeopardy" to the challenges sparked by the clash of female-oriented, emancipation ideology with patriarchal and Victorian proclivities in Jewish communities (i.e., the problem of "Jewish feminists in a man's world" or antifeminism) and the vital struggle for identity and survival in a repressive, racist culture (i.e., the problem of "Jewish women in German society" or antisemitism) [8-23]. But her discussion remains oriented decidedly toward the Jewish bourgeoisie, so much so that her portrayal of all classes with the designation "Jews" appears somewhat contrived and misleading. No doubt, if Germany's Jewish women suffered "double jeopardy," then Eastern Europe's Jewish women

endured perils of "triple" or even "quadruple" proportions (see 85). Kaplan acknowledges this limitation as she conducts her study of JFB, which is both German and middle-class (see especially chapter 3, "Woman's Sphere").

In some respects, portions of Kaplan's study, even though pertinent to her sub-themes, remain tangential to the evolution and work of JFB (for example, the psychoanalysis of JFB's founder–Bertha Pappenheim, nineteenth-century predecessors of JFB, and early efforts against "white slavery" by European Jews, 31-34, 59-69, 108-113; compare her treatment of German opposition to women's suffrage and the limited choices available to bourgeois women in Germany prior to the Great War, 147-149, 169-173). But Kaplan uses these glimpses of data from pre-JFB days to validate a "context of oppression" against which the dynamic efforts of JFB as a consequential counter-agency and a definer of feminism in Jewish-German society can be evaluated. Eclectically, she assembles her information from biographies, interviews, journal articles, newspapers, periodicals, organizations reports and yearbooks, personal memoirs, and secondary studies. Predictably, the JFB guarded the Jewish notion of the exaltation of motherhood which obligated women to long-standing Victorian ideas of "women as guardians of social and cultural values, 'the mothers of civilization'" (72). But Jewish feminists (like their German counterparts) extended the realm of domesticity to incorporate "social motherhood" to their advantage in the advocacy of career interests, educational pursuits, and, more importantly, the liberally-defined umbrella of efforts undertaken by the JFB to enhance social welfare. Nevertheless, in spite of inherent contradictions between the tenets of feminism and the dogmas

of Judaism (see 81-82), Kaplan shows how the JFB's twin antidote to German society–rejection of assimilation and fear of antisemitism–provided members of the Frauenbund with "a congenial atmosphere for Jewish women . . . [and] a feeling of ethnic community . . . [in which they could] work together on behalf of their own people" (85).

Kaplan lauds three major struggles of the JFB which shaped its unique cast of Jewish feminism: first, the fight against prostitution and forced slavery of young women via a broad coalition with other reform organizations and the society's own activist programs; second, its active voice for political and religious equality; and third, its efforts to professionalize the status of Jewish women in the conventional domestic occupation of housekeeping. On the down side, the JFB's home economics retooling efforts met with less than desirable results. Kaplan notes:

> It ran counter to the historical development of Jewish employment and to the basic tendencies of advanced, capitalist economies in which commerce and industry, rather than agriculture, crafts, or domestic service, offered opportunities for profitable employment. And, although the major reason for the JFB's failure to convince Jewish women to switch fields was due to socioeconomic patterns beyond its control, the ambivalent feelings of Jewish feminists toward domestic service and their objective position as employers of domestics did not enhance the JFB's credibility among those it sought to persuade. Originally, home economics training, while intended to prepare all women for later life, was considered vocational training for the poor. Middle-class women could use their home economics preparation as a prerequisite for, or complement to, what the JFB itself referred to as "higher" professions. Only slowly and hesitatingly, under the duress of the 1920s and 1930s, did the Frauenbund begin to suggest domestic service as a career for middle-class women. Even then it hedged, hoping aloud that most would advance to related fields once the crises had abated.
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> The JFB took no note of the contradictions in its home economics campaigns. Even as the upgrading of housekeeping to a profession was intended to improve women's status and offer greater job satisfaction, it was also, at least implicity, an acknowledgment of the lack of choices available to them (180-181).

Contrarily, Kaplan is quick to show how bourgeois attitudes, albeit a hindrance to feminist acceptance of domestic professionalization, enhanced women's limited achievement of elected positions at local and federal levels (even in the Reichstag, 161-162) and leadership participation in the liturgy of the synagogues (i.e., public preaching and teaching, 163-164). Without doubt, though, the greatest success of the JFB lay in its institutional accomplishments, namely, the protection and socialization of "endangered girls" in clubs, dormitories, schools, and particularly, at the Isenburg home (125-137). Economic aid, such as the early marriage treasury, and counseling services, like the railroad station posts, provided helpful and practical means to the JFB whereby it could achieve its "propaganda" goals–"to arouse a feminist consciousness and a feeling of female solidarity among Jewish women" (75). Toward these ends, Kaplan remarks that the JFB's educational program, especially its lectures and summer classes, represented "its most effective contribution to the cause of feminism" (80).

But such demonstrations of activism by Jewish feminists could not overcome the most potent expression of JFB's "double jeopardy"–the menace of Nazi antisemitism. Though Nazi hostility to Jewish women represents a subsidiary matter in Kaplan's work, its portrayal shows both the resilience and weakness of Jewish women, especially when confronted by a foe that wielded society's traditional instruments of power (i.e., the economy, the government, and the military). In this respect, from a broad perspective the JFB functioned in German society as a real, but ineffective structure of power. Kaplan explains how the Nazis initially showed tolerance toward the JFB and allowed it to operate in spite of its feminist agenda and its

international alignments (i.e., a lack of serious concern about the activities of women, especially Jewish women, see 89), but harassed and spied on its members, censored its publications, and falsified legal charges against its leaders. Of course, the JFB's social work became a source of distorted antisemitic harangues by the Nazis, most noticeably, concerning the implication of Jews in white slavery and female prostitution (114). Already disadvantaged economically under the fledgling Weimar government by laws against the *Doppelverdiener*, professional Jewish women suffered inordinately from the discriminatory "April Laws" (1933). In response, the JFB naively overlooked the dangers and clung to the belief "that Jews had a place in Germany and that a synthesis of *Deutschtum* and *Judentum* was possible" (22). Even as late as 1935, Pappenheim herself failed to encourage mass emigration, as she and many others maintained that the Jews still had a home in Germany (51). Such skeptics had to be shocked to accept the reality of the Nazis' monstrous antisemitic intentions, if not by the Nuremberg Laws of September 1935, then definitely by the advent of "Crystal Night" in November 1938. But by then it was too late, for "after Crystal Night, the Juedischer Frauenbund was ordered dissolved, [and] its treasury and institutions were absorbed by the Reichsvertretung" (204-205). A short time later, in 1942, many JFB leaders succumbed to Hitler's "final solution," as they were forced to Nazi concentration camps.

In its last year, its "struggle for survival," the JFB continued its work toward the goal of Jewish identity and its practical expressions in community and religious life. Kaplan observes that "during the Hitler years, the feminism of the JFB became less pronounced, because it

concentrated on social work and because of the misogynist nature of the Third Reich" (199). But the Juedischer Frauenbund did not abandon completely its vision for women's equality, especially within the Jewish community, although "the needs of German Jews took precedence over purely feminist goals" (ibid.). In this respect, the JFB concluded the last of its thirty-four years in the same spirit that marked its inception shortly after the turn of the century. Kaplan's *Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany* portrays this congenial picture of both struggle and achievements of middle-class German Jewish women in a remarkable and laudatory way. Her work, while missing the interactive voice of less well-to-do German Jews, i.e., from the proletariat, nevertheless narrates a meaningful voice for German feminism.