Educating for "Proper" Jewish Womanhood: A Case Study in Domesticity and Vocational Training, 1897-1926*

Nancy B. Sinkoff

As is well known, reform work on behalf of East European Jewish immigrants was a high priority for Americanized German Jews. But while American Jewish historians have brought to light the importance of German Jewish philanthropy, the activities of German Jewish women within those efforts have been largely ignored. The disregard for women's volunteerism is particularly egregious because with the enormous influx of East European Jews into America after 1881, German Jewish women became the immigrants' special guardians and worked tirelessly on their behalf. As women, female German Jews were particularly concerned with the plight of the single young working girl. The "immigrant girl problem," as they called it, encompassed pros-

* The archival material used for this study is held at the 92nd St. YM-YWHA in New York City.
3 The "immigrant girl problem" was common parlance among both Jewish and non-Jewish social workers and settlement-house workers from the late nineteenth century until World War I. Industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and poverty loomed large as forces undermining the "morality" of young girls. See Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy, eds., Young Working Girls (Boston: 1913) and Jewish Charities, (February, 1913) and (June, 1913).

572
Educating for “Proper” Jewish Womanhood

titution, white slavery, delinquency, "immorality," and father desertion and received the greatest amount of their reform energy.

The Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls (CHH), a late nineteenth century boardinghouse and vocational school is illustrative of the reformers’ work. Founded in 1897 by two exemplars of New York’s German Jewish elite, Oscar and Sarah Straus, and the Baroness Clara de Hirsch, the benefactress of the Home, and managed by a thirteen-member board of directors, the Home’s express purpose was “to benefit working girls and other unmarried women who are dependent upon their own exertions for a livelihood...[by] train[ing] them for self-support.” Yet, on closer examination, self-support was not the only priority on the German Jewish female reformers’ agenda. Though the benevolent women who administered the Home were acutely aware of the immigrants’ economic responsibilities for their families and themselves, they had internalized the nineteenth-century ideals of middle-class American womanhood and sought to inculcate those values in

4 On husband desertion in the immigrant community, see Reena Sigman Friedman, " 'Send Me My Husband Who Is in New York City': Husband Desertion in the American Jewish Immigrant Community, 1900-1926," Jewish Social Studies 44, 1 (Winter, 1982), 1-17.

5 Oscar Straus, the son of department store magnate Lazarus Straus (R.H. Macy & Co., Abraham and Straus), championed reform political causes throughout his life and successfully combined concern for East European Jews with general civic activism. Sarah Lavanburg Straus, the daughter of a prominent New York German Jewish family, was involved with the Home for over twenty-seven years: she was president of the board of directors for all but twenty months (June 1898-April 1900) of that period, when her sister-in-law, Mrs. Nathan Straus, replaced her. The relationship between the Strauses and the de Hirsch family began as early as 1887, when Oscar Straus was United States minister to Turkey and the Baron was in Constantinople defending his railroad interests against charges made by the Turkish government. Straus quickly became involved with the Baron’s philanthropic activities, including his plans to resettle East European Jews fleeing Tsarist Russia. In 1891 Straus was named a trustee of the Baron de Hirsch Fund. See Naomi W. Cohen, A Dual Heritage: The Public Career of Oscar S. Straus (Philadelphia: 1969), pp. 11, 21, 55-59, 67 and The American Jewess, (June, 1985), 148. Their professional ties soon blossomed into a friendship. When Baron de Hirsch died in 1896, his wife, a philanthropist in her own right, took over the stewardship of the Fund and decided to found a new charitable endeavor, enlisting the help of the Strauses. See The New York Times, April 2, 1899 and Eugene Benjamin, "The Baron de Hirsch Fund,” Biennial Reports (1906) of the National Conference of Jewish Charities. Also see Cohen, A Dual Heritage, p. 70.

6 Board minutes of the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls, May 12, 1897. The citations for the Home’s materials will also be abbreviated by CHH hereafter.
their East European charges. The tension between self-support and homemaking was inherent in the reformers’ ideology. The women of the Home were motivated not by a single, monolithic concern but by a fusion of middle-class social control, Jewish communal responsibility, and sisterhood, which they shaped into an ideological package defined by gender.7

By the Gilded Age, the German Jewish community had left its peddler roots behind. Though not all German Jews ascended the American ladder of success, a large part of the Northeastern German Jewish community was solidly upper middle class by the turn of the century. The New York German Jewish elite, a homogeneous group of wealthy financiers, bankers, and department store heads bonded to one another through financial, social and marital ties, strove to emulate the culture of their Protestant peers.8 As historian Naomi Cohen notes, wealthy German Jews longed to be accepted by the upper middle class, the “reference group that represented the economic and social attainments to which they could realistically aspire.”9 German Jewish men had built successful investment houses, such as Kuhn, Loeb and Co., J. & W. Seligman and Co., August Belmont and Co., and Lehman Brothers by the end of the nineteenth century, and their financial acumen facilitated their entry into American society. The wives of the German Jewish elite bolstered their husbands’ integration into the American bourgeoisie by creating voluntary organizations appropriate to women of the leisure class.10

German Jewish women were well suited for reform work because of their desire to imitate Protestant benevolent women’s reform activities, their freedom from the necessity of wage earning, and their abundant amounts of leisure time. Servants, slackened religious observance, and labor-saving technological innovations gave elite German Jewish women the time necessary for

7 See Peggy A. Pascoe, “Gender and the Search for Moral Authority: Protestant Women and Rescue Homes in the American West, 1870-1930,” paper delivered at the December 1985 AHA Annual Meeting, New York City, for a similar discussion of gender as a force in the ideology of Western Protestant female reformers.
10 Selma Berrol. “Class or Ethnicity: The Americanized German Jewish Woman and Her Middle Class Sisters in 1895.” Jewish Social Studies, 47 (Winter, 1985), 21-32. This behavior was also typical of bourgeois German and British women. See Marion Kaplan, The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany (Westport, CT: 1979), pp. 169-170.

574
Educating for “Proper” Jewish Womanhood

the personal philanthropy of the late nineteenth century.\(^1\) At the 1893 Jewish Women’s Congress, the first national meeting of reform minded German Jewish women, Carrie Benjamin expressed the belief that because women were “for the most part endowed with...leisure” it behooved them to reach out to the poor.\(^2\) Her sentiments were bolstered by the opinions of Reform rabbis, the spiritual leaders of the German Jewish community in America, who confirmed their female congregants’ feelings of moral superiority and callings of “natural” philanthropy while exhorting them to do charitable work.\(^3\) German Jewish women, like their Protestant peers, felt that charity and education were women’s special responsibilities. Golde Bamber, another reform

---

\(^1\) An 1890 census reported that of 10,000 German-Jewish families living in New York, 40 per cent employed one servant and 10 per cent had at least three servants working in their homes. John Higham, Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America (New York: 1975), p. 145; Cohen, Encounter with Emancipation, p. 30; June Sochen, Consecrate Every Day: The Public Lives of Jewish American Women, 1880-1890 (Albany: 1981), p. 45; Paula E. Hyman, “Culture and Gender: Women in the Immigrant Jewish Community” in The Legacy of Jewish Migration: 1881 and Its Impact, ed. David Berger (New York: 1983), pp. 163-164. From the generic term servants we cannot tell how many were female domestics; nonetheless, the statistic underscores both the affluence of the New York German Jewish community and its dependence upon domestic service.

By the 1880’s, the mechanization of many household tasks, including bread baking, canning and preserving, and the drop in the prices of ready-to-wear clothing reduced the burden of the homemaker’s chores. Alice Kessler-Harris, Out to Work: A History of Wage Earning Women in the United States (New York: 1982), pp. 110-113. A case can be made, however, that in some homes the increase in household technology could have increased the number of chores. In the affluent German Jewish household of the late nineteenth century the burden of these new chores would be shouldered by domestic help.


\(^3\) Dr. Emil Hirsch, rabbi of Chicago’s Temple Sinai, sermonized: “It is a woman’s part to bring love to fruition. A new field is called for her, a field which opens golden opportunities for planting, and ploughing before women of serious purpose. Social service we have denominated this modern consecration...Our ‘new’ Jewish women indeed have been true to the ideals of their ‘older’ mothers and sisters. Their accession to the ranks of the army battling against filth, sloth, crime, corruption, extortion, and other moral and physical agents of hell augurs well for the triumph of decency, the recognition of justice, the enthroning of righteousness in society and home.” Quoted in Deborah Grand Golomb, “The 1893 Congress of Jewish Women: Evolution or Revolution in American Jewish Women’s History?” in American Jewish History, 70, 1 (September, 1980), 59.
American Jewish History

activist who participated in the 1893 Jewish Women’s Congress, concluded:

All Israel suffers in the degradation of its poor; woman is the Messiah come to deliver them from their second bondage of ignorance and misery. She is the educator, the reformer, and the reward of her labor will be the evolution of a nobler race of worthy citizens and respected members of society.14

Clara de Hirsch was very clear about her philanthropic purpose, stipulating in a 1896 letter to Oscar Straus that the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls should "be a Jewish nonsectarian institution," in which control of the institution should always be Jewish but both board members and girls admitted to the Home could be "of other creeds." She desired that the Home give preference to immigrant girls "as in most instances girls are most in need of a home when they first arrive in the United States."15 Though sensitive to the needs of the homeless working girl, the board of directors deliberately decided to build the permanent home far away from what they perceived was the backward and ignorant immigrant community. Located on 63rd Street between Second and Third Avenues, the Home was a safe distance from the "solid block of Europe" that was the Lower East Side.16

The CHH provided services for three types of girls: trainees, boarders, and day trainees. Trainees were unskilled Jewish immigrant girls over fourteen who had left high school and whose "parents could not afford to support them while learning a trade." Many of these young girls were orphans or from broken homes. Boarders were independent working girls between 16 and 30 who, often parentless and homeless, paid to reside at the

14 Papers of the Jewish Women’s Congress (Philadelphia: 1894), p.162.
15 Baroness Clara de Hirsch, letter to Mr. Oscar Straus, May 1896, transcribed in the board minutes of the CHH, May 12, 1897. Her ecumenism was a common feature in the ideology of German-Jewish middle-class reformers. At the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, New York rabbis and ministers collaborated in the writing and compiling of an interfaith prayer book, A Book of Common Worship. Isaac Mayer Wise, the architect of Reform Judaism in America, later described the religious exchange at the Fair as "the most triumphant moment" of his life. Cohen, Encounter with Emancipation, p. 262.
16 The American Jewess (September, 1898), 41. The Home officially opened in 1897, operating for two years from a rented building located at 208 Second Avenue in the heart of the Lower East Side. The temporary home, accommodating only thirteen individuals at a time, sheltered 87 women, ranging in age from their mid-teens to mid-forties, between November 1897 and April 1899. The clients included Jews and non-Jews. See the individual register of the CHH, 1897-1898.
Educating for "Proper" Jewish Womanhood

Home.\textsuperscript{17} Day trainees were unskilled immigrant girls still living with their families. Girls were referred to the CHH through a number of different sources. The German Jewish reform network, including the National Conference of Jewish Charities (NCJC), the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, the Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society, and the Educational Alliance, sent girls to the Home. German Jewish female reformers working in the temple sisterhoods and with the National Council of Jewish Women also cooperated with the CHH. And municipal social service organizations in New York City, including the settlement houses, the Charity Organization Society, The New York City Department of Charities, and the Board of Education, knew of the CHH's work and sent eligible girls to the Home.\textsuperscript{18} In 1912 and 1913, at the height of the Homes training program, over 140 girls lived at the CHH, more than 70 of whom were trainees.\textsuperscript{19}

The board of directors, comprised of prominent New York German Jews, supervised the total operation of the Home, including its finances, physical plant, trade and education programs, employment services, and administration.\textsuperscript{20} But most of the leisured women of the CHH tended to rubber-stamp decisions already made by the professional staff living and working at the Home. In fact, the most important person involved with the CHH

\textsuperscript{17} Boarders paid $3.00 a week for room and board at least until 1910, when fees were raised slightly. Working girls whose wages exceeded a fixed amount — $300 a year in 1901, $350 a year in 1905 — were discouraged from living at the Home to insure that poorer girls would have a secure and comfortable lodging to return to after work.

\textsuperscript{18} Board minutes of the CHH, April 24, 1898, November and December 1911, April 1922: 1905 annual report of the CHH. During slack periods, the Home advertised in the Yiddish and American press. Sommerfeld's report April 1920.

\textsuperscript{19} The directresses kept records of the number of girls living and receiving training at the Home. Unfortunately, the monthly statistics do not account for girls who had left the Home or the training programs nor for those girls who may have been enrolled in two classes, so many of the numbers may be inaccurate. I calculated the average yearly number of trainees from the Home's records. See the Appendix.

\textsuperscript{20} The thirteen original directors were: Mr. Oscar and Mrs. Sarah Straus, Mrs. Frieda Warburg, Mrs. Florentine Sutro, Mrs. Rose Abraham, Mrs. Tellie Cohen, Mrs. Sarah Goldman, Mrs. Liselle Stern, Mrs. Irene Kohns, Mrs. Jenine Ickleheimer, Mrs. Gabrielle Greeley Glendenin, Mrs. Emma Wasserman, and Mr. Edmund E. Wise. The directresses always addressed one another by their married names. Board minutes of the CHH, May 12, 1897. Note that the only male members of the Board were Oscar Straus and Edmund E. Wise, the treasurer.
American Jewish History

was the Resident Directress. Living on the premises, she was responsible for overseeing meal preparation, housekeeping, training, curfew, discipline, and recreational planning, among many other tasks.\textsuperscript{21} From 1899 until 1926 the Resident Directress was Rose Sommerfeld, a German Jew from Baltimore. She is especially important in the history of the Home because her tenure overlapped the Home’s vocational training program. As Resident Directress, she was required to attend all the board meetings and to keep a monthly report on the workings of the Home. Fortunately, her records from 1915 through her retirement in 1926 have survived, allowing us a personal glimpse into the Home.

Rose Sommerfeld epitomized the female settlement house worker, both Jewish and non-Jewish, of the late nineteenth century. Middle-class, unmarried, and motivated by both scientific optimism and religious conviction, she felt a personal calling to her work.\textsuperscript{22} Before accepting the position of Resident Directress, she pursued Jewish communal activities in Baltimore, including involvement with the National Council of Jewish Women, the Frank Free School, founded in 1887 for the ‘‘religious and moral’’ instruction of Russian-Jewish children, and the Daughters of Israel Working Girls Home, which provided room, board, English instruction, and some limited vocational training to orphaned Jewish girls.\textsuperscript{23} Board minutes, monthly reports, and articles in a variety of Jewish and Progressive periodicals attest to Sommerfeld’s unusual zeal for both the Jewish working girl and the Home. Her commitment to her work often took her beyond her official duties. She personally intervened in the lives of the girls living at the Home — once preventing the deportation of an immigrant — and supported the other staff members in their

\textsuperscript{21} Board minutes throughout the period examined revealed tensions between the lay and professional women associated with the Home. A sore point was board members’ lackadaisical involvement with the girls living at the CHH. As Sommerfeld wrote in 1916: ‘‘On Saturday afternoon Mrs. Liebmann entertained fourteen girls by taking them to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and taking them afterwards to her own home. The girls had a most enjoyable time. This is the kind of work that I would like the Directors to do, for it would enable them to become acquainted with the girls and would give the girls diversion and pleasure.’’ Sommerfeld’s report, December 1916.


\textsuperscript{23} See *Deeds to Live By*, Baltimore Section, National Council of Jewish Women (Baltimore: 1968), p. 13: Sommerfeld’s report for the Frank Free School of Baltimore, undated, in the collection of the Jewish Historical Society of Maryland; and *The American Jewess* (December, 1895), 183.
Educating for “Proper” Jewish Womanhood

requests for salary increases and longer vacations. Her frequent suggestions to the board, which ranged from the mundane (requesting new linens) to the professional (encouraging board members to use their political and social connections to aid a public school in purchasing an empty lot next to the Home which could be used by the girls) were rarely ignored. Sarah Straus met Rose Sommerfeld either on her tour of working girls homes in the Northeast in 1896 or through the networks of the tightly knit middle-class German Jewish community.

Like their peers in the contemporaneous settlement house movement, the women of the CHH recognized the environtal roots of poverty and the liabilities of being unskilled. They keenly felt the need to train Jewish immigrant girls for entry into the marketplace. The Home’s 1905 report expressed this important facet of German Jewish female reformers’ work:

The object of the training department is to fit young girls in as short a time as practicable for trade work, as a means of livelihood. There is a growing demand for skilled workers, and we have ascertained by experience that girls who leave our school, having completed the entire course, have no difficulty whatever in obtaining good positions at living wages. Another advantage to be derived from such a training, is the variety of trades the girl has at her command, thereby enabling her to work at another trade when the season is dull at the particular one she has chosen.

In order to achieve its goal of making the trainees self-supporting, the Home ran on a tightly organized schedule, with carefully plotted slots during the day for outdoor exercise and English classes (a prerequisite for all German Jewish reform programs for East European Jewish immigrants). At the turn of the century, trainees at the CHH rose at 6:00 a.m., breakfasted at 7:00, did household chores from 7:30 to 10:00 a.m., prepared for their training classes from 10:00 to 10:30, and attended class from 10:00 to 12:00. Lunch was 12:00-12:30, household duties 12:30-1:30, and classes 1:30-3:30 and 3:30-6:30. Exercise and English classes took up one hour each in the afternoon. Dinner was

---

24 See Sommerfeld’s report of February 1924 for her efforts to prevent Pearl Spiegel’s deportation. See her reports of September 1919 and April 1923 regarding salary increases for the staff.
25 Board minutes of the CHH, December 1913, April 1914, May 1914, November 1915.
26 See Sarah Straus, 1901 president’s report of the CHH, for her inspection of working girls’ homes.
27 1905 annual report of the CHH, p. 7. See also Jewish Charities (December, 1911). 13 on the importance of self-support.
served at 6:30, and evenings were occupied with carefully organized leisure activities.28

The needle trades provided the natural employment for both male and female East European Jewish immigrants at the end of the nineteenth century. By 1911, Jewish women made up 60 percent of the work force in the ladies garment industry.29 Not surprisingly, sewing skills comprised a large part of the Home’s industrial curriculum. The 10 to 13-month handsewing class taught practical skills, such as making uniforms, aprons, household linens, and curtains, along with the 24 required basic stitches. After handsewing, the girls graduated to machinesewing. Completion of the machine-sewing course was a prerequisite for advancing to millinery and dressmaking, and the girls were expected to work by eye, without bastings or guides.30 The 6 to 12-month dressmaking course was run as a professional business. Overseen by a “competent dressmaker,” the girls created dresses “in the latest style” for paying customers.31 The experience of working on all parts of the gowns enabled the girls to enter well-paid professional dressmaking houses upon completion of the course.

Despite German Jewish female reformer’s commitment to training East European Jewish working girls for self-support, issues of domesticity, marriage and motherhood — of women’s “proper” place in a fast-changing industrial nation — were central to their agenda. As an Anglo-Jewish paper noted, the immigrant girls at the Home were not only required to attend trade training classes but had “to assist in the household, [as they were] being trained for their future homes, whether they return to relatives or friends, or in coming years are mistresses of their own homes.”32

The content of the late nineteenth-century female reformer’s domestic agenda echoed the antebellum period’s prescriptions for female behavior, commonly known as the “cult of true womanhood.”33 Piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness were

28 Sommerfeld’s report, 1901.
29 Kessler-Harris, p. 138.
30 1905 annual report of the CHH, pp. 10-11.
32 Hebrew Standard, April 3, 1907, special issue devoted to the Jewish woman.
Educating for "Proper" Jewish Womanhood

the central tenets of a "true" woman's "proper" sphere, popularized in gift books and women's magazines and given sacred legitimacy by preachers and religious tracts. Inextricably linked to the debate over women's "proper" place was the fear that if women left the confines of the home — the natural place — they would lose their deftness at domestic arts, skills necessary to the stability of the middle-class home. Failure to master the arts of domesticity could be diastrous for marriages. Female seminaries, which cropped up before the Civil War, were the objects of pointed debates about whether a "finished" education would negatively influence domesticity. 34

Efforts to educate young girls systematically in the domestic arts increased in the Gilded Age as industrialization drew more and more women into the wage-earning work force, a trend which threatened the home-based sphere of "true" womanhood. 35 The wave of support for vocational preparation which underscored women's traditional role came from a variety of sources, including elite Progressive reformers, innovative educators like John Dewey, child development theorists, and Progressive social workers and settlement-house workers. 36 The burgeoning home economics movement, whose founders Ellen Richards and Helen Campbell believed that most women were no longer prepared for the rigors of housewifery, lent further support to the professionalization of domestic education. Members of the National Household Economics Association (NHEA) conferred with members of the General Federation of Women's Clubs to bring home economics instruction to the public. By 1910, the U.S. Commission on Education reported that 250 women's clubs supported the idea of mandatory home economics in the public schools. By 1917, the Federal government had included home economics in the vocational training program budget of the Smith-Hughes Act. 37

Progressive Jewish social workers and reformers joined in the clamor to educate women in the arts of housekeeping, cooking, and motherhood. Rosa Sonneschein, editor of The American Jewess, spoke for the women of the CHH:

34 Welter, pp. 236-239.
American Jewish History

Another much needed reform in education is a more womanly training of our girls...Compelled to become a breadwinner...[woman] has successfully entered industrial and intellectual fields, but her foremost mission will forever be the propagation of the race. Therefore education ought to prepare her to be the best qualified guardian of her offspring.38

The home, she concluded, should remain women’s proper domain. Training for “proper” womanly behavior coincided with industrial training at the CHH. At times, the “domestic” agenda at the Home was clearly articulated; often, however, it was an implicit and unstated, although central, component of the Home’s training program. The German Jewish women reformers of the CHH most clearly expressed their concerns with shaping the gender specific behavior of their charges with the Home’s first trade training program, the course in domestic service, which consisted of cooking, laundry, and serving. Each girl engaged in domestic training was required to complete all three aspects of the year-long course, given under the tutelage of a “capable, highly recommended graduate of Pratt’s Institute and the Teacher’s College,” institutions with programs in domestic science. The training consisted of “general, advance, fancy and invalid cooking; all kinds of laundry work, from the use of soaps, starch and washing fluids, to the laundry of the finest laces and embroideries; a complete course in waiting, household science, marketing [for groceries] and hygiene and emergencies.”39 Three months of the year-long course was spent working for a family.40

A complex interplay of self-interest, social control, and sisterhood explains German Jewish female reformers’ eagerness to steer East European Jewish girls into domestic service.41 Affluent reformers expected servants to run their households. Faced with a severe shortage of domestics, a shortage that surfaced as early as 1830, German-Jewish women became interested in training

39 Mrs. Ollesheimer (Director of Training), 1900 CHH report. pp. 16-17.
40 1901 annual report of the CHH.
41 A parallel nexus of forces existed in the ideology of Jewish female reformers in Germany. The Jüdischer Frauenbund (League of Jewish Women), an early twentieth-century German Jewish women’s organization headed by Bertha Pappenheim, also established home economics schools for East European Jewish girls. See Kaplan, pp. 171-177.
Educating for "Proper" Jewish Womanhood

their East European sisters as domestics as a remedy for their household management problems.\(^{42}\) The reformers were unabashed about their self-interest. At the 1893 Jewish Women's Congress in Chicago, Julia Richman concluded her discussion of directing immigrants toward "worthy" employment with the following suggestion:

If we could establish...a training school for servants, from which we could supply competent cooks, laundresses, nursemaids, waitresses, etc., tell me, you housekeepers who hear me, would there be any lack of dollars flowing from your pockets into ours?\(^{43}\)

*The American Jewess* concurred, concluding that it would "be philanthropy enough to alleviate the burdens of the rich by improving domestic service alone, quite apart from considerations of benefit to the pupil."\(^{44}\)

Another component of the reformers' dogged commitment to domestic training for immigrant girls was the possibility of inculcating middle-class values of "proper" womanhood in the immigrant girl who worked as a domestic in a German Jewish household. Middle-class German Jewish women felt that the tenement environment of the East European Jewish homes limited "the opportunities for the gaining of domestic virtues," making it even more important "to spread before her [the immigrant girl] the practical examples of home life."\(^{45}\) Domestic service training would, it was hoped, not only provide immigrant girls with a self-supporting vocation but "improve" their moral and social values.\(^{46}\) Numerous examples of successful social uplift through domestic service graced the pages of the Jewish press in this period.\(^{47}\) At the CHH, special attention was given in the domestic

---

\(^{42}\) Between 1870 and 1920, the number of people employed as servants, waiters and housekeepers decreased more than 49 percent despite a population growth from 40 million to 160 million. From 1900 to 1920, the number of individuals employed as servants decreased 46.7 percent. See Margaret Gibbons Wilson, *The American Woman in Transition: The Urban Influence, 1870-1920* (Westport, CT: 1979), p. 77.


\(^{44}\) *The American Jewess* (September, 1898), p. 42.


\(^{46}\) Julia Richman concluded in her talk that through domestic service training "the girls are gradually acquiring habits of greater refinement and culture. Table manners and personal habits will improve, and with their improvement a long stride will have been taken away from the old landmarks of ignorance and vulgarity." Richman, p. 105.

\(^{47}\) A 1910 article in *Jewish Charities* boasted of the case of a young Jewish girl who, placed in a "respectable and sensible Jewish family" as a nursemaid,
American Jewish History

science classes to table setting, the correct service of meals, the proper care of glassware, silver and china, and the caution needed for the care of delicate lace to insure that immigrant girls placed in upper-middle-class homes would perform as expected.

Domestic service training was also a subtle method of controlling the sexuality of East European girls. German Jewish female reformers, like their non-Jewish counterparts, feared the unsupervised mixed-sex environment of the sweatshop and garment factory and considered domestic service the proper work environment for girls under their care. They tried to discourage young girls from going into factory work, believing it immoral and physically deleterious.48

But social control is not the only explanation for reformers' commitment to domestic service. Jewish prostitution, an international problem since the mid-nineteenth century, plagued the Lower East Side and continued to rise with immigration. Young Jewish girls traveling alone were particularly vulnerable to the traps — betrothal promises, the purchase of steamer tickets for the trip across the ocean, fake employment opportunities, seemingly innocent friendships with a landsman (an individual from one’s home town) — laid by devious procurers.49 Moved by the vulnerability of the unskilled Jewish immigrant girl, reformers hoped that by directing young girls into domestic service they would deprive exploitative white slavers of a ready crop of innocent victims. German Jewish women played a central role in the international Jewish fight against white slavery and prostitution throughout this period.50 Moreover, their fears of sexual exploitation in the shop were not unjustified.51

---

50 Bristow, and Kaplan, pp. 106-107, 118-125.
51 As one anonymous Jewish working girl explained in a letter to Abraham Cahan, the editor of the Jewish Daily Forverts: “In this shop there is a foreman who is an exploiter… In spite of the fact that he has a wife and several children, he allows himself to ‘have fun’ with some of the working girls. It
Educating for "Proper" Jewish Womanhood

Despite the concerted effort to create a practical and professional course in domestic training at the Home, only seven of 41 inmates, as they were called, chose to pursue the domestic service training in 1900. Domestic service training as a separate department of the CHH’s vocational education program was discontinued in 1902, when it could boast a mere 37 graduates out of approximately 168 trainees. The directresses attributed the course’s lack of success to the rigors of the training, which they believed overwhelmed many of the trainees, girls “too young and frail to do the work.” But they were compelled to admit that many trainees were unwilling to spend six to twelve months training for a position for which they could be hired straight off the boat.52

The failure of the domestic service program was but one of many indications of class tensions at the Home. As Alice Kessler-Harris has shown in her study, Out to Work, Jewish immigrant girls chose manufacturing over all other trades, preferring the independence and higher remuneration of the shop to the strict control and poor wages associated with domestic work.53 In one year, two-thirds of 300 Jewish girls placed as domestics by employment agencies left their jobs to pursue other work. In 1900, Russian women comprised only 14.3 percent of servants and waitresses of foreign parentage, of whom 34.8 percent were Austrian, 30.8 percent Irish, and 29.9 percent German. Since the census did not separate immigrants by religion but by place of birth, “Russians” generally signifies Jews, who comprised the majority of immigrants from Russia in this period. And Russians made up only one percent of the laundresses.54 East European Jewish girls desired trade training but not always the training that their German Jewish benefactresses desired for them.

The women of the CHH were equally concerned with the

was my bad luck to be one of the girls that he tried to make advances to. And woe to any girl who doesn’t willingly accept them.” Isaac Metzker, ed., A Bintel Brief (New York: 1971) p. 72.
52 1905 annual report of the CHH.

585
American Jewish History
domestic education — the manners, housekeeping abilities, and sexuality — of the boarders who did not receive formal vocational training. They strove to influence the boarders by creating a home environment under safe female protection that minimized "the artificiality of institution life." Comparing the CHH with the working girls homes administered by the Young Women's Christian Association (YMCA), Rose Sommerfeld remarked:

While many of the homes are doing good work, they are so hedged in by rules and regulations that the great majority of those for whom they are primarily needed, fight shy of them....It is true every hotel has its rules and so must working girls' homes, but these must be reduced to a minimum, and not interfere with the personal liberty of the girl.

The Home encouraged domesticity by sponsoring evening cooking and sewing classes for the boarders and requiring them to keep their rooms neat. Though regulations were kept to a minimum, the Home had two cardinal rules for the boarders which could not be broken under normal circumstances: punctuality at breakfast and returning by the 10:30 p.m. weekday and 12:00 p.m. Saturday night curfews.

The curfew at the CHH reveals the directresses' preoccupation with moral uplift, or educating young girls in the sexual mores suitable to middle-class American Jewish women. This concern was often discussed in moral terms assumed to be scientifically objective but which reflected the German Jews' goal of reforming the East European Jews themselves, as well as ameliorating their problems. The word "moral" was also a vessel for other Pro-

55 1901 annual report of the CHH, p. 31.
56 Sommerfeld, Biennial Reports (1906) of the National Conference of Jewish Charities, p. 111.
57 1905 annual report of the CHH. In 1901 the curfews were half an hour earlier. 1901 annual report of the CHH.
58 In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term "moral" replaced "purity", one of the central antebellum tags for a true woman, - meaning chastity prior to marriage and restraint in married life - as proper womanhood's prescriptive norm. Social work literature of the period continually reflected on the moral character of young working girls, bemoaning its seeming deterioration and urging concerned reformers to create schools and other environments to uplift morally the fallen or near-fallen. Sex was rarely, if ever, directly mentioned. In Young Working Girls, social workers Woods and Kennedy refer to "moral resistance," a "moral lapse," "moral tone," and the worst sin, "immorality" (pp. 84, 100). Occasionally, a bold social worker might admit that "the girls, as well as the boys, should be taught that self-restraint and personal purity are the highest foundations of character." Bertha Lubitz, Jewish Charities (May 1904), 220.
Educating for "Proper" Jewish Womanhood

gressive values, such as diligence, thrift, sobriety, and altruism, but female reformers’ primary concern was sexuality.59

The women of the CHH relied on two methods, direct intervention and passive persuasion, to shape the "proper" parameters of their charges’ sexuality. They tried to ensure that every boarder had her own room as an alternative to the "immodest" overcrowding of the immigrant home. Supervised privacy, the reformers believed, encouraged morality.60 Boarders were screened for respectability, and all girls living at the Home were carefully scrutinized by Rose Sommerfeld and other workers for any signs of unusual behavior. If possible, recalcitrant behavior was remedied. In May 1918, Sommerfeld informed the board of directors that Lillian P— who had "had no trade and drifted around from one job to the other," and might have fallen into "the hands of white slavers" prior to her coming to the CHH, had finally been persuaded to embark on a career in millinery after learning that her mother had died. Sommerfeld wrote, "we took advantage of the opportunity to show her that as she was in mourning, she would not be able to go to dance halls, skating rinks, etc., and persuaded her to become a trainee in the Millinery class, which she did." After two weeks in the class, Lillian's attitude showed marked improvement — "so far she seems very obedient" — and Sommerfeld was confident that her turnaround would be permanent.61

Female reformers at the CHH also sought to control the sexuality of their charges by more subtle means. The Home introduced sex hygiene lectures as part of its extracurricular training as early as December 1915, hired teachers and service help who "not only have the best qualifications in their special branches, but such as will exert the highest moral influence, through their presence," and boasted of its unique open enviroment and myriad leisure activities, channeling the recreational activities of their charges into safe avenues of middle-class leisure. 62 Progressive


60 See Jane Addams' Foreword to Young Working Girls, Woods and Kennedy, eds., and pp. 41-42.

61 Sommerfeld’s report, May 1918.

62 The Bureau of Social Hygiene was formed in 1912; because Sommerfeld’s monthly reports are not extant before 1915, we can only suppose that CHH girls attended sex hygiene classes earlier in the decade. Rose Sommerfeld’s reports, December 1915, February 1916, March 1916, June-August 1922, and
American Jewish History

reformers considered constructive, supervised recreation an important antidote to working-class morality. Complaints about the lack of suitable amusements for the young working girl — with the most vocal criticisms directed at the dance hall — abounded in the literature of the period.63 ‘‘The young girl’s search for recreation is fraught with moral danger at many points’’ concluded the authors of Young Working Girls, a sentiment frequently echoed in the reports of the CHH.64 Rose Sommerfeld revealed the purpose of the Home’s organized social life in her 1906 report: ‘‘The social life is a most important feature….It is our aim to make the home attractive….so that they will have less desire to seek pleasure elsewhere in places and ways which may lead to infinite harm.’’65

Leisure activities at the CHH included the Girl Scouts and the Cla-de-Hi Girls, which met weekly, offering members cooking classes, English and German lessons, ‘‘amusements and entertainments,’’ and a self-government club, which held a mock court every Friday evening. Chaperoned outings to museums, concerts and the theater were regular events. Other activities included evening lectures on a variety of topics (a 1917 talk was titled ‘‘Southern Folk Lore and Creole Stories’’): physical culture classes (compulsory for trainees, optional for boarders), including gymnastics, brisk walking when the weather permitted, and calisthenics; and in-house productions, including skits, plays, and

May 1924: Bessie Spanner’s report, April 1926. See also member’s minutes of the CHH, 1900, p. 14.


64 Woods and Kennedy, p. 6.

65 Sommerfeld’s 1906 report, p. 111.

588
Educating for “Proper” Jewish Womanhood

recitals to raise money for summer holidays, a library, and the ever-popular but dangerous social dancing.66

Sunday evening was dance night at the CHH, providing an alternative to the public dance halls. As Rose Sommerfeld wrote in 1912,

Sunday evening is the general reception evening, and the girls are always encouraged to invite their men friends. For this evening a pianist has been engaged to play dance music for the girls and their friends, and consequently the ‘dance hall’ with its attendant evil has no attraction for them.67

Recognizing the emotional needs of their charges and eager to marry them off, the reformers of the CHH had little problem with coeducational dancing properly supervised. Nonetheless, there were always “moral risks” in mixed gatherings, and the Home was not always successful in maintaining middle-class decorum at the Sunday evenings. Anna Davis, Rose Sommerfeld’s temporary replacement in 1924, complained that “we need a class in social dancing. We cannot censor conduct on Sunday nights unless we are able to set our own standards in our own classes. Perhaps some member of the board could arrange this for us.”68

Supervision of their charges’ leisure activity extended into the summer months, when trainees’ classes were suspended and the warm weather and longer days beckoned them outside and beyond the walls of the Home. Viola Eckstein, Rose Sommerfeld’s assistant, commented: “The girls like to be on the streets and it is hard to attract them elsewhere. The neighboring picture shows and the ice-cream parlors offer more enticing diversion than the roof of the Home or the library upstairs.”69 Summer group activities included boat trips up the Hudson River to Bear Mountain, picnics in Central Park, concerts, day trips to Coney Island and Van Cortland Park, sailing to Staten Island, and building campfires in a nearby playground.70 These activities were always chaperoned. Strenuous efforts were made to help the girls spend a

66 Sarah Straus, Jewish Charity (May, 1904), 191: Sommerfeld’s reports, May 1910, March 1916, January 1916, November 1919, November 1920, January 1921, March 1922, and April 1924: Bessie Spanner’s report, November 1925; 1901 President’s report; board minutes of the CHH, November 1902, February 1904, April 1906, February 1907, and October 1911, p. 253; Sommerfeld, The American Citizen (November, 1912), 253.
67 Sommerfeld, The American Citizen (November, 1912), 252.
68 Anna Davis’s report, December 1924.
69 Viola Eckstein’s report, June 1910.
70 Sommerfeld’s reports, June-September 1917, June-September 1919, Summer 1920: board minutes of the CHH, October 1911.
American Jewish History

week or two away from the sweltering city, preferably at one of the various camps sponsored by German Jewish reformers or at the Home’s own Welcome House Vacation Home in Long Branch, New Jersey.71

Other attributes of “proper” womanhood, such as thrift, diligence, and charity, were important priorities influencing life at the CHH. Established in 1899, the Penny Provident Fund at the Home was required of every boarder. In 1912, each boarder was expected to put away at least fifty cents a week; her year’s savings would be 26 to 52 dollars, enough for a vacation away from the city or for other approved leisure activities. Rose Sommerfeld believed that the Fund was “one of the most valuable things we have done...[as it] provides the girls with a snug little fund for emergencies and necessary pleasures, and inculcates in them habits of thrift and a feeling of independence.”72 Trainees imbibed discrete budgeting lessons in their classes. Commenting on the millinery class, Sarah Straus noted that it both introduced the girls to a trade and taught them “economy and thriftiness.” The girls, she swelled, made their own winter hats and turned seemingly useless scraps of velvet and silk into valuable practice pieces.73

For German Jewish women the sphere of charity was the American Jewess’ “real realm, her scepter and her crown,” and the women of the CHH expected the girls to turn their thriftiness into charitable works.74 The Home’s 1905 annual report noted that “the girls are encouraged to think of others less fortunate than themselves. By entertainments and a weekly collection among themselves they support one of their number who is in a sanatorium for consumptives.” It also cited the example of several of the boarders who, “imbued with the spirit of the Home,”

71 German Jewish efforts “to assist worthy Jewish working girls of small means to spend their summer vacation in the country, in the process aiding their ‘physical development’ “ began as early as 1893 with the incorporation of the Jewish Working Girls Vacation Society (JWGVS), which maintained a “large and commodious” home in Bellport, Long Island. Annual Reports of the Jewish Working Girls Vacation Society, 1894-1899, pp. 7, 29.
72 Sommerfeld, The American Citizen (November, 1912), 253. Pennies collected to aid the girls in case of any emergency, such as being suddenly out of work or disabled, were deposited in the Home’s Emergency Fund, created in 1919. Both boarders and former CHH girls contributed to the Fund, which amounted to $2264.14 in 1923. Sommerfeld’s reports, May 1919, October 1919, January 1922 and May-September 1923.
73 President’s report, January 1899.
74 Rosa Sonneschein, quoted in Glanz, The German Jewish Woman, p. 135.
Educating for "Proper" Jewish Womanhood

had volunteered to teach classes at a local settlement house.\textsuperscript{75} During World War I the girls sewed shirts, utility bags, pillows, arm slings, bandages, and slippers for wounded American soldiers; cooked custards, rice puddings and jellies to raise money for relief organizations; and collected clothing among themselves for war refugees. The American Jewish Relief Committee, the Committee for the Adoption of a War Orphan, the Allied War Drive, and the sick poor of New York City benefitted from the CHH girls' charity.\textsuperscript{76} Piety, too, was important in the definition of proper womanhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, despite the increasing secularization of American and Jewish life. German Jewish reformers felt at once beholden to impart religion to the East European Jewish immigrants under their care and determined to wean their charges away from the traditionalism of their parents. Surprisingly, the ideology of the CHH reflected a degree of compassion that defies the stereotype of German Jewish insensitivity to East European religious customs. Though the laws of kashrut were some of the most difficult traditional observances for German Jews to understand, the CHH's kitchen always prepared food according to kosher guidelines. "Every form of cooking is taught, but the food eaten in the home is prepared according to the stipulations of the Jewish law, so that none of the scholars need disregard the customs of her race and religion" commented The American Jewess in 1898.\textsuperscript{77} The women of the CHH recognized the importance of respecting the immigrants' dietary needs fourteen years before two of the New York City's largest Jewish social service institutions, the Hebrew Orphan Asylum and the Educational Alliance, shocked the Jewish com-


\textsuperscript{76} Sommerfeld's reports, December 1915, November 1916, October 1918, and February 1921.

\textsuperscript{77} The American Jewess (September, 1898), 42. The CHH may not have been the first German Jewish institution to observe kashrut. Sommerfeld told the (NCJC) in 1906 that the Daughters of Israel Home for Jewish Working Girls in Baltimore, which opened in 1896, was the first of its kind to recognize the need for kosher eating facilities. However, Barbara Kirschenthal-Gimblett has recently explored the Jewish cookbook of the nineteenth century and suggests that the kashrut of certain German Jewish charity cookbooks would not meet the standards of the East European Jewish kitchen. Without detailed recipes it is difficult to know how kosher the kitchen of the CHH really was. Barbara Kirschenthal-Gimblett, "The Kosher Gourmet in the Nineteenth-Century Kitchen: Three Jewish Cookbooks in Historical Perspective," The Journal of Gastronomy, 2, 4 (Winter, 1986/1987), 51-89.
American Jewish History

munity by “passing….from a non-kosher to a kosher dietary” in 1911.78

Jewish values were imparted at the Home through holiday observance. Passover, Chanukah, and Purim were all celebrated at the CHH, often with invitations extended to the board of directors, other homes for Jewish working girls, such as the nearby Friendly Home run by the NCJW, and to the girls’ friends and family. The Home marked Sabbath evenings by a mixture of Reform Judaism, domesticity, and Progressive uplift. The girls listened to a reading of the Union Prayer Book’s evening service and to a special talk every Friday evening after dinner. In 1899 topics for the Friday night evening talks included “a lesson in how to handle dishes while at table [sic],” “ethics of brown soap and water,” “our government, the President and Vice President of the United States,” and “changing of bed linen for an ill person, with actual person therein.”79

Religious education, however, played a minor role in the life of the Home, and what little existed took place at uptown Reform synagogues close to the Home physically and ideologically. CHH girls attended High Holiday services at Temples Rodopf Shalom and Beth El, usually at the expense of the synagogues, whose directors donated tickets to the CHH. On Saturday mornings the Home encouraged Bible study, a reflection of the influence of Reform Judaism. Sommerfeld occasionally refers to trainees’ synagogue attendance in her reports.80 Sommerfeld’s successor, Bessie Spanner, perhaps more religiously energetic than Sommerfeld or more conscious of assimilation pressures, introduced confirmation classes for CHH girls in 1924. CHH girls attended the classes at Temple Emanu-El, and in May 1926, when seventeen girls celebrated the Reform rite of passage, the board of directors sent flowers and a Bible to each confirmant.81 The Home’s commitment to imparting religious values consistent with the ideology of Reform Judaism, however, included celebration of Christmas and teaching dressmaking on the Sabbath.82

78 Jewish Charities (September, 1911). 1.
79 1905 annual report of the CHH, p. 13; Sommerfeld’s report, November 1917: Anna Davis’s report, November 1924; President’s 1899 report; board minutes of the CHH, June 1922.
80 Reform Jews, in general, rejected the authority of Talmudic law and stressed instead the ethical and historical teachings of the Five Books of Moses. For Reform Jews, the Bible represented “pure” Judaism unencumbered by rabbinic legislation.
81 Bessie Spanner’s report, March 1926; Sommerfeld’s report, May 1926.
82 The issue of whether or not to teach dressmaking on Saturday was of little
Educating for "Proper" Jewish Womanhood

What explains the reformer's emphasis, both explicit and implicit, on the domestic education of their charges? Despite their commitment to self-support, the reformers held a deeply ingrained belief that work was temporary for women, a way station between school and marriage. The reformers of the CHH hoped that marriage would be a side effect of domestic science training. As Sommerfeld commented at the 1906 meeting of the NCJC:

I will say that being a great advocate of matrimony, we try to make all the matches we possibly can at the Clara de Hirsch Home, because we really believe salvation for the working girl lies in the fact of being married and having a home of her own. We do train them so that when they do get married, they will be the right sort of home keepers.

Sommerfeld's words came as a response to the charges of two conference discussants, Mr. A. R. Levy and Judge Julian Mack, that girls untrained and unprepared in the domestic arts made

concern to the Home until Jacob Schiff, the eminent banker and philanthropist who was also an observant Jew, expressed his dismay at the practice in a letter to Mrs. Ira Leo Bamberger, Secretary of the CHH: "I cannot but feel that the course which has been pursued [teaching dressmaking on the Sabbath], must necessarily have a demoralizing effect upon the young girls under the protection of the Clara de Hirsch Home, whose respect for their religion thus becomes systematically undermined." Though not an active member of the board, Schiff was probably a contributor to the CHH. After receiving Schiff's letter, the board apologized to him, promising to remedy the situation "as soon as our contract with the head of the Department expires." But the dressmaking teacher's contract was renewed and the board voted only to discontinue Saturday dressmaking classes in December 1908. Board minutes of the CHH, February 4, 1902; Jacob Schiff, letter to Mrs. Ira Leo Bamberger, October 5, 1903.


84 Sommerfeld, Biennial Reports (1906) of the National Conference of Jewish Charities, p. 120. Moreover, Sommerfeld was always quick to mention the engagements and marriages of any CHH girl in her monthly reports to the board of directors. Many weddings took place at the Home. Small affairs were consecrated in the privacy of Sommerfeld's room while large parties, such as one in 1920 with "two hundred invited guests" and refreshments of "herring, all kinds of sandwiches, fruit, beer, ginger ale, wine, etc." were celebrated in the dining room. Sommerfeld was relieved to note "that the training received in home-making has not been in vain, as all the girls have made excellent housewives." Sommerfeld, The American Citizen (November, 1912), 253; See also Sommerfeld's reports, January 1917, December 1920, January 1923, and board minutes of the CHH, November 11, 1910 and November 1911.

593
American Jewish History

poor wives, destroying many marriages. The antebellum lament that a common cause of failed marriage was a woman’s inefficiency in housekeeping or incompetency at keeping a budget rose again in the Guided Age and Progressive Era. Mr. Levy remarked that “while we have men who are able to work and make ten and twelve dollars a week, we have no women that can arrange their homes comfortably with that little amount of money, and therein lies the difficulty in the Jewish girl question.” Judge Mack concluded that

too much emphasis cannot be laid upon education in domestic science — in the preparation for marriage — for surely one of the great causes of the divorce evil and of disruptions in the family that tend to bring the children into the Juvenile Court, is the total lack of preparation [for marriage] on the part of those who belong to the class of the working girl.

Despite the changes in gender roles wrought by industrialization, reformers still expected wage-earning girls to become wives unpaid for their domestic labor and thought it best to educate girls for domesticity as well as for industrial work. Of course, by domesticity they meant middle-class domesticity: implicit in Judge Mack’s remarks was contempt for the womanhood of the working-class home.

In fact, middle-class expectations informed every aspect of the Home’s work, from the tablecloths in the dining room to the recreational trips to the Metropolitan Museum, and Rose Sommerfeld took special pride in the girls she and the directresses successfully shaped. Any symbol of a change in class status, such as a car, a chauffeur, or a prosperous look, always found its way into her reports. The underlying hope of the reformers was that through the acquisition of skills — both industrial and domestic — the girls could begin their ascent from the working class. Class mobility, however, resulted more frequently from the Home’s efforts to cultivate “proper” Jewish women than from its vocational training program.

85 Mr. A.R. Levy, Biennial Reports (1906) of the National Conference of Jewish Charities, p. 115.
86 Judge Mack, Biennial Reports (1906) of the National Conference of Jewish Charities, p. 119.
87 As Jane Addams wrote, “the average working-class home in the city is so physically inadequate that it automatically produces ill health, nervous tension, and a desire to escape, all of which are predisposing causes of moral laxness.” Foreword, Young Working Girls, Woods and Kennedy, eds.
88 Sommerfeld, Biennial Reports (1906) of the National Conference of Jewish Charities, pp. 109-110.
Educating for "Proper" Jewish Womanhood

Two cases deserve mention because they show that on the scale of the Home's ideological priorities class mobility was higher than Judaism. In March 1920, Sommerfeld reported the marriage of Helen Friedman "at the Cathedral on Easter Sunday" to the Board. Sommerfeld did not discuss Helen's intermarriage but elaborated on the wedding's sumptuousness, which included "a wonderful wedding dinner at the Hotel Astor" and "a four months' European wedding trip" for the newlyweds.89 Another case Sommerfeld commented on in her report involved a boarder from an Orthodox Jewish home eloping with a non-Jew. Upon hearing of the clandestine marriage, behavior highly inappropriate for a CHH girl, Sommerfeld contacted both the girl's parents and new husband: "I interviewed the husband on Sunday night and realized the girl had gotten the best of it as he is apparently a much better type man than she is a girl." After consoling the girl's parents, Sommerfeld and a social worker from Brooklyn concluded that there was no reason to annul the marriage.90 Intermarriage posed no threat to the ideology of the CHH when it meant upward mobility for a CHH girl.

Despite the steadfast efforts on the part of the CHH's staff and board of directors to socialize trainees and boarders in the "proper" ways of Jewish womanhood, there were conflicts at the Home that could not be hidden. These conflicts were rooted in the contradictory definitions of work and sexuality implicit in all middle-class reform efforts.91 The tension between working-class needs for quick economic solvency and middle-class values of delaying work for better education was a constant pressure in the vocational training efforts of the CHH. In May 1916 Sommerfeld commented that "we lost a great many girls during the past month. Parents and relatives, knowing the demand for workers, have insisted in several cases upon taking the girls home and putting them to work, even tho [sic] they have not finished their training."92 Some boarders also resented the obligatory savings

89 Sommerfeld's report. March 1920.
90 Sommerfeld's report. May 1924.
92 Sommerfeld's report. May 1916. "There is a restlessness in the atmosphere and the trainees feel they want to get out to work and earn money. It is difficult to make them understand how much more important it is to learn a trade,
program. In *Arrogant Beggar*, Anzia Yezierska’s autobiographical novel based on her stay at the CHH from 1900-1901, the protagonist, Adele Linder, bitterly depicts the directresses as more concerned with the adage “a penny saved is a penny earned” than with the individual needs of the girls. Compounding this class-based tension was German Jewish reformers’ insensitivity to the fact that despite the low “moral” level of the shop, factory work was more lucrative than domestic service.

Problems also arose over differing definitions of sexuality appropriate for model Jewish women. Within Rose Sommerfeld’s sanguine reports were many examples of trainees and boarders who did not follow the Home’s rules, such as ignoring the curfew or making improper liaisons with boys in the neighborhood. In August 1918 two boarders seeking freedom from the CHH’S rules left the Home on the pretext of going on a short vacation. Sommerfeld inquired after the girls upon her return to the Home in September from her holiday and “found [that] no one knew definitely where these girls were and upon investigation we found that they had never done what they said they were going to do, but were running wild and living in a furnished room in the Bronx.” Workers from the Home finally located the girls after nearly a week searching and managed to convince them to return to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, which had referred them to the CHH. Sommerfeld’s comments “From what can be learned they did not go over the borderline, but came very close to it” illustrate well the Home’s concern with delineating the boundaries of female working-class sexuality.

which will be of ultimate benefit (sic) to her [sic] than to do unskilled work even at the high wages that are being paid today.” Sommerfeld’s report, May 1919, and March 1921. Similar expectations were apparent in Jewish trade schools for boys. Reformers at the Baron de Hirsch Trade School for Boys constantly bemoaned the inadequacy of only five and a half months of training. 

*Jewish Charities* (December 1909), 13.

94 Always on the lookout for the girls who might “go wrong,” Sommerfeld responded immediately to any suspicious behavior. When Hannah J—, a trainee, did not return to the Home one Saturday afternoon and Sommerfeld discovered that she had lied about attending a girl’s party and had met a soldier instead, Sommerfeld contacted J’s sister and then reported her absence to the Bureau of Missing Persons. Sommerfeld even contacted the soldier’s brigadier general. When Hannah was found she was reprimanded and then placed as a domestic in the home of a family known to the board of directors, a fitting punishment for a “wayward” girl. Sommerfeld’s reports, April 1919 and May 1919.
95 Sommerfeld’s report, June-September 1918.
96 The following year Sommerfeld reported that a number of boarders voluntarily
Educating for "Proper" Jewish Womanhood

These conflicts notwithstanding, it is important to remember that for many of the girls the Home was their only source of security and stability; it was the family they did not have. In their most compassionate moments the German Jewish reformers felt like mothers, aunts, and older sisters to the girls who, due to dislocation suffered by East European Jewish families during immigration and adjustment to America, found themselves in the new country with few, if any, female mentors. The lessons in needlework, table setting, piety, and charitable works combined with control of sexual behavior made the Home an institutional expression of the kin-based female apprenticeship networks that characterized the nineteenth century. The Home was a "fictional female family." The reformers’ efforts to create a real home environment did not go unnoticed. Reunions were always well-attended, several former trainees and boarders volunteered as caseworkers for the Home after they had married or gone to work, and on at least one occasion a former girl repaid a debt to the Home many years later. To a degree, the comforting femaleness of the Home mediated the constricting forces of social control and softened the harshness of institutional life.

* * *

In the twenty-nine years of trade training at the CHH, its directresses, and especially Rose Sommerfeld, imparted a complex set

left the home "to live at the Y.W.H.A. as they did not care to be in at 12 o'clock." Sommerfeld's reports, June-September 1919 and May 1920. See also Sommerfeld's reports, May 1914, May 1917, June-September 1917 and October 1921. This evidence is very compelling; nonetheless, it is still too early to assert that East European Jewish women as a group had sexual mores completely different from their German Jewish benefactresses.

97 The term "fictional female family" for the settlement house is from Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, who draws a convincing portrait of the female community created by late nineteenth-century single female settlement residents. Ellen DeBois, Mari Jo Buhle, Temma Kaplan, Gerda Lerner, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium," Feminist Studies, 6 (Spring, 1980), 62-63. For more information about the bonds between bourgeois female reformers and the female kin networks of the antebellum period, see, respectively, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870-1936" in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct (New York: 1985), pp. 245-249, and "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 1 (1975), 1-29. While Smith-Rosenberg is primarily concerned with single bourgeois reformers, I have extended her idea of a "fictional female family" to include the working-class girls supervised by middle-class female reformers.

98 Sommerfeld's reports, December 1916, May 1917, May-September 1923: board minutes of the CHH, May 1917.
of values to the girls who passed through its doors. The atmosphere was at once both compassionate and patronizing, gracious and oppressive. Social control motivated much of the Home’s programming, but so too did feelings of Jewish responsibility and sisterhood, especially in light of the threat of white slavery and the disruption of Jewish family life at the turn of the century.

The women of the CHH can best be understood as tenacious defenders of the woman’s nineteenth century “sphere” who, faced with the new century’s economic demands, were bent on imparting the gender-specific role expectations of that sphere to their young charges. Because Gilded Age expectations of middle-class female behavior echoed the prescriptions of the ante-bellum period, reformers at the CHH created a trade training program which resonated with the concerns of the cult of true womanhood recast to meet the demands of the twentieth century. As affluent German Jews who sought social integration into the society of their Protestant peers, the women of the CHH were especially eager to impart the values appropriate to “proper” middle-class American womanhood to their East European sisters.

The directresses prided themselves on their successful vocational training program for East European Jewish working girls, yet their overarching concern with gender expectations reveals that the “vocation” in the vocational training at the CHH had a twofold meaning: teaching the necessary industrial skills for successful entry into the marketplace and cultivating the proper attributes of female behavior for the fulfillment of woman’s traditional middle-class role.

99 The totals are those reported in board minutes and do not equal the numbers in the individual trades because many girls were enrolled simultaneously in various classes.

100 Numbers not available.

598
## Educating for "Proper" Jewish Womanhood

### Appendix

Average Number of Trainees at the Clara Hirsch Home for Working Girls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Hand-sewing</th>
<th>Machine sewing</th>
<th>Dress-making</th>
<th>Millinery</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>