

BOOK REVIEW

Rachel Manekin, *The Rebellion of the Daughters: Jewish Women Runaways in Habsburg Galicia* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 304 pages.

Reviewed by
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In the period preceding World War I, a number of young Jewish women in Habsburg Galicia left their traditional Jewish homes for life in the Catholic Church. While the number of such converts is statistically small—there are records of 324 Jewish women who entered the Felician Sisters' Convent in Krakow—close to 75% of them were under the age of 24. Although the Jewish community tended to portray this phenomenon as kidnapping, and some families involved government authorities in their attempts to recover their daughters, the situation was far more complex.

In exploring this phenomenon, historian Rachel Manekin has performed a brilliant work of detection, revealing to her readers the inner lives of these young women. Delving into Polish police records, trial transcripts, and other first-hand materials such as letters in which the writer describes what is happening to her and how she feels about it, Manekin introduces us to a world of intrigue, family dynamics, relations between Jews and their surroundings, associations with the Catholic Church, as well as precursors to feminist thinking, shining a new light on history that has implications for the Jewish world in all times and places. Her painstaking exploration of sources in several languages allows her to reconstruct life stories and revive people whose travails grab hold of us and motivate us to question our previously held assumptions. Manekin's learned analysis opens new avenues of research that should inform social, religious, political, and legal historiography in the future.

The crux of this narrative lies in the unique legal situation of Galician Jewry in the Habsburg Empire. Jews enjoyed a larger measure of equality and freedom there than in other areas of Eastern Europe. Franz Josef I's May Laws of 1868, and their further clarifications in 1869, made school attendance compulsory while limiting the influence of the Catholic Church on education. Additionally, they enabled children to convert to Christianity once they reached the age of fourteen, even while still in the custody of their parents. Orthodox (mostly Hasidic) girls who sought to avoid unwanted marriages and to forge a pathway to secular, enlightened society, found an "opening" in these laws. For them, the Church was a haven from a lifestyle they resisted. What some post-World War I Jewish

writers called the “lost generation” of Galician Jewish women included these “runaways” examined by Manekin, as well as prostitutes and victims of sex-trafficking, who deserve a well-researched book of their own.¹

Manekin sets the scene with a clear exposition of the historical and legal framework, the educational opportunities for both girls and boys, the woman-centered thinking (I hesitate to use the term “feminism” in the period from 1873–1914, although Manekin does not), and the views of the community leadership. She follows this background with biographies of three young women, each of whom broke with her family for a different reason and in a different manner. She includes in this riveting book an excursus on resonant representations of similar life stories in Hebrew and Yiddish literature, theater, and film. That chapter transports the book into a different genre, and easily stands on its own as a fascinating excavation of Jewish culture. Manekin concludes with a dense chapter on Sarah Schenirer and the Bais Yaakov movement, and in so doing situates the “rebellion” of the book title as an educational crisis as much as anything else. In the context of her research, Manekin sees Bais Yaakov as one way of coping with the general problem she analyzes: that of “cognitive dissonance... as a result of Polish acculturation and lack of formal Jewish education” (9) that affected Orthodox Jewish women in Galicia more than in other places.

The reader may ask why young Jewish women were attracted to Catholicism—or if, in fact, that was the case at all? The trouble began with the separate and wholly unequal education traditionally provided to boys and girls. Jews came to a tacit understanding with the Galician authorities that they would send their sons to *heder* instead of to government schools, and the authorities would turn a blind eye—while their daughters would attend Galician public or private schools. These schools provided a general education but still were heavily Catholic in orientation. While Jewish boys lived an intensely Jewish life in the *heder*, the synagogue, and the community, Galician families provided almost no supplementary Jewish education for their daughters, who learned only the most rudimentary Jewish practice from their Jewishly unsophisticated mothers.

¹ Although, see Edward J. Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight Against White Slavery 1870-1939* (Clarendon Press, 1982), a first attempt at providing such a study, almost four decades ago, which seems to have had little impact in generating ongoing study of the topic. Bristow’s book provides little from the perspective of the women and girls who were trafficked (presumably the types of archival and ego-documents Manekin had at her disposal were not available to Bristow in the early 1980s).

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Jewish “city girls” from Krakow met others like themselves inside the schools. However, provincial girls from the surrounding villages “lacked a critical mass of Jewish women [peers] that could reinforce their social identity as Jews” (105). The crisis came when these acculturated, Polonized young women were required to marry yeshiva boys who had essentially grown up in a completely different world. For those who felt the need to escape, the possibility of taking refuge in a convent, whether their real intention was to convert or not, provided a legally protected alternative that their parents were hard-pressed to contest. Ironically, it was in the convent that some of the village girls had their first experience with a “cohort of other young Jewish women” (113) like themselves.

Each of Manekin’s case studies exemplifies a different archetype of what motivated girls to find a way to break with their families. In addition, each furnishes a different version of the legal battle that ensued, although all represent the somewhat desperate attempt of both sides to harness the government’s legal system and the secular press to their cause.

The most famous case is that of Michalina Araten, daughter of a wealthy Gerer Hasid in Krakow, who ran away to the convent to avoid an arranged marriage—and apparently out of a sincere attraction to Catholicism. Her father’s search for her involved forged documents, questioning her sanity, police investigations, and appeals to government ministries that were willing to help. The nuns’ ability to smuggle her from one convent to another in their extensive network must have instilled fear in the hearts of any Jewish parent who heard about it. (Using documentary analysis, Manekin “cracks the case” of Michalina’s age, essential in determining the validity of her ability to undertake conversion without her father’s permission.)

The affair was extensively covered by the Jewish and general press, which drew attention to Church-State relations as well as to antisemitism. Events like this are reflected in a book by German-Jewish author Jakob Wasserman and in S.Y. Agnon’s poignant novella, “Tehilla”; Manekin deftly analyzes these representations. However, even more interesting to the contemporary reader, and deserving of some sleuthing of its own, is the fact that, following the death of her second husband, Michalina visited her siblings’ children in Israel and made *Aliya* under the Law of Return in 1962. She died in 1969, and is buried in a Jewish cemetery in Haifa.

Debora Lewkowicz, who grew up as one of very few Jews in a small village outside of Krakow, lived “on the boundary between the Polish Catholic and Jewish worlds” (119). Not surprisingly perhaps, she fell in love with a young Polish neighbor. Her parents’ hasty attempt to arrange her marriage to a Jew led her to the Felician Sisters’ Convent in Krakow.

Her parents accused the young paramour and his friend of abduction, requiring Debora to testify in court. Letters from Debora unearthed by Manekin, written both to her family and to the convent, attest to Debora's life-long ambivalence about her conversion and an ultimate attempt to make peace with her family and return to Judaism. Literary representation of Debora and her hapless betrothed make their appearance in Agnon's *The Bridal Canopy*, as well as in contemporaneous plays by Jewish and non-Jewish authors. (The representation of this theme in Jewish literature is best known from the writings of Sholem Aleichem, but we note that his stories are set in the Russian Pale of Jewish Settlement; Manekin maintains a focus on Galicia.)

Anna Kluger, a descendant of the Sanz Hasidic dynasty, had a passion for learning and a deep desire to study at university, against her parents' wishes. This despite the fact that, by 1900, some Orthodox families were allowing their daughters to pursue some type of higher education. Anna and her sister sued their parents in order to emancipate themselves from legal custody and allow them to live outside their childhood home, as well as to compel their parents to pay for tuition and living assistance. Anna testified to her coerced, but unconsummated, marriage in order to accuse her parents of abuse. Anna's story found its way into a novel by Aniela Kallas, a Jewish writer from the early twentieth century, which aroused controversy due to her attempt to explain the plight of the daughters in terms of then-current theories of parent-child relationships.

Manekin's chapter on the founding of the Bais Yaakov movement together with Naomi Seidman's recent *Sarah Schenirer and the Bais Yaakov Movement: A Revolution in the Name of Tradition* (Littman Library, 2019) combine to introduce a much-needed critical history of Bais Yaakov.² When read together, we learn of Bais Yaakov's multiple iterations in different countries and at different times, and the major impact this educational network has had and continues to exert on the communities it serves. For Manekin, the Bais Yaakov schools, youth movement, and teacher-training programs arose as a post-World War I resolution to the problem of the "runaway daughters," although Schenirer and the movement's publicists never mention this phenomenon in their writings. Schenirer, who had been briefly exposed to the Hirschian school model that had been largely accepted by German Neo-Orthodoxy, envisioned an entry point for girls into the spiritual life of the religious community, and a path to deeper Jewish learning, which would serve as a bulwark against cultural assimilation. Her intention was to avoid alienating the

² Reviewed in these pages by Jackie Rosensweig, *TRADITION* 52:1 (2020), 152–157.

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community's male leadership and to buttress traditional family values. Her students who later wrote about their experiences describe an emphasis on emotional attachment rather than intellectual achievement and a continuing opposition to higher education.

Manekin emphasizes the role of "place" in her historical analysis. The foundations of the Bais Yaakov movement specifically in Krakow provide her with a way to deal with the problematics of the alienated daughters who aggregated in a Krakow convent seeking refuge from a lifestyle they did not want but could not change. The legal situation in Krakow and its surrounding villages, the central presence of the Felician Sisters' convent, and the heterogeneity of the Jewish community there, enabled rebellious daughters—those attracted to Christianity as faith, those escaping unwanted marriages, and those who aspired to higher learning—to escape the tradition or to mine its depths with a new vision. The Bais Yaakov Seminary in Krakow was to be a bastion against future "lost daughters." Where else but in Krakow could this "closing of the circle" take place?

The politicization of education in one historical time and place, described explicitly and implicitly in Manekin's revelatory book, involves varying interpretations of Talmudic statements, assorted reasons for rabbinic action or inaction, a gendered perspective on Jewish life and society, and diverse entry points into the surrounding culture for boys and for girls. Such politicization and its concomitant factors continue to thrive in the Jewish world of today. Even the highly-questionable attitude of the Galician Orthodox press, which espoused the idea that rather than introducing innovations into the already very limited religious education of Jewish girls, it would be better to limit their secular education, lives on in certain circles.

In an age of spiraling costs, modern religious Jews in the Diaspora look for ways to take advantage of state education assistance and state standards (especially in Europe) while not sacrificing the homogeneous society of a Jewish day school. Church-State separation and its corresponding laws and procedures, which were once abundantly clear and defended by American Orthodox Jews, may need to be reconsidered in order to enable them to maintain the viability of their schools. While many secular universities have become more and more hospitable to religious Jewish students, debate around an array of issues, including matters framed as "human rights," have become increasingly "intersectional" and shrill, often scaring parents who fear exposing their children to anti-Zionism and antisemitism.

Although Manekin remains critical of the contemporary Israeli version of Bais Yaakov in which she was raised, she sees Sarah Schenirer as

an entrepreneur with an innovative approach to strengthening girls' religious identity and weakening the attraction of secular education. Agudat Yisrael developed Schenirer's tactics "into a formal and well-developed education system that turned the passion for intellectual creativity and freedom into a passion for religion and commitment to Orthodox ideology and practice" (181). Could the recent flourishing of women's *midrashot*, some of which now even incorporate the once forbidden curriculum for rabbinic ordination, be analyzed according to this paradigm?

While Robert Liberles, Paula Hyman, and others began to develop the field of Jewish social history with its emphasis on "regular people" rather than "great men" some 50 years ago, Manekin adds the dimension of the dogged search for material (perhaps now easier due to online resources) in local legal archives and in ego-documents—texts in which the "I" is both the writer-describer and the described subject. That she does this with such skill in order to unlock unknown or misunderstood episodes in our history is, of course, significant. However, Manekin's more impressive achievement is her presentation of a comprehensive synthesis of the data and the finely wrought biographies of the three young women through which she tells her story.

I have already cited my own interest in the later life of Michalina Araten. Manekin notes that Anna Kluger's life and achievements after receiving her Ph.D. deserve further treatment. Another suggestion for study that intrigued me as I read this book was the bias of Western European Jewry towards Galician and other *Ostjuden*. Although this bias has been explored by modern Jewish historians, there is a parallel today in Israel's Ashkenazi-Mizrahi conversation, which is only beginning to be examined through literary as well as historical sources. Manekin's notes suggest whole books yet to be written (see especially at 209, 210, and 221). At one point she even announces a new field: "the history of emotions" (7), which would blend history, literature, and psychology and provide academic background for the now-fashionable movement towards SEL (social and emotional learning) in schools. How exciting it would be if Rachel Manekin herself were to take up this challenge. Aside from its significant contribution and merits as historical scholarship, *Rebellion of the Daughters* is an important book for educators and all those tasked with communal decision-making as it relates to Jewish schooling.

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