

# THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN: PRIVATE LIVES, PUBLIC PEOPLE

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*L'auteure examine quelques activités du National Council of Jewish Women (Conseil national des femmes juives), un organisme en grande partie de classe moyenne, dont la première section canadienne fut établie à Toronto en 1897. Bien que la culture de ce groupe de femmes ethniques les définissait comme des êtres 'privés' (épouses et mères), elles ont pu dépasser la sphère domestique pour devenir participantes de l'arène publique du pouvoir et de l'impuissance.*

Women learn to define their identities in a variety of formal and informal educational settings. The covert and explicit messages they receive may often be in tension with each other, producing ambiguous and conflicting definitions of self which sometimes seek resolution in action. Within this framework, this article examines some activities of the National Council of Jewish Women, a largely middle-class organization the first Canadian section of which was founded in Toronto in 1897 and which now comprises ten sections and a national office. Throughout the twentieth century its members learned from their families, the schools they attended, and the organization they joined. What did this group of ethnic women learn about their private selves, their public roles, and their political possibilities within these settings? Their culture defined them, and they defined themselves, as private people – as wives and mothers. They nonetheless transcended domesticity to become participants in public concerns of power and powerlessness.

The issues in this essay arise from the rich and fascinating body of literature on the private world of women and concomitant analyses of the public world of men. The differences between these realms, the literature suggests, derive from gender, psychology, and culture. An assumption of dimorphism has informed analysis of male and female activities,

rendering the former public, active, and more valued, the latter domestic, sometimes passively receptive, and less valued. If our culture and our scholarship create and reinforce each other, historians of women must carefully examine the dualistic approach that has emphasized the mind/body, the civilized/natural, the rational/affective dichotomies as well as the male/female, all of which limit our understanding and our acceptance of a continuum of human possibilities. Illuminating though a description of polarities may be, it is not an adequate means of analyzing women's activities in organizations. These encompass both the private and the public realms, with women living and acting in both spheres.

Scholars in a variety of disciplines are questioning the public/private dichotomy. Michelle Rosaldo, an anthropologist, writes that we must understand "how 'male' and 'female' work as cultural and social facts, whose significance for individuals cannot be analyzed apart from their significance in public life."<sup>1</sup> Naomi Black, a political scientist, writes that her colleagues have analyzed the League of Women Voters as politically immature because of its nonpartisanship, with the women involved in it "uninterested and incompetent, associated with deviant practices and marginal issues and attitudes."<sup>2</sup> She adds:

*... analysts have emphasized the need to obtain for women the resources and experiences that would enable them to approximate men's levels and types of political involvement. Ideally, women would then become indistinguishable from all other (male) citizens. This would occur when women had matured politically . . .<sup>3</sup>*

Finally, Phyllis Rose, a literary critic, writes about marriage as a political construct:

*On the basis of family life, we form our expectations about power and powerlessness, about authority and obedience in other spheres . . . I believe marriage to be the primary political experience in which most*

*of us engage as adults, and so I am interested in the management of power between men and women in that micro-cosmic relationship.<sup>4</sup>*

Each of these scholars is suggesting that the kinds of issues we have relegated to one realm or the other, the public or the private, in fact belong to both. Gender, political activism, and marriage are all political matters of power, are all private matters of identity formation.

An organization like the National Council of Jewish Women must be understood at once as a political institution with public concerns and as a vehicle for expressing a domestic identity, a private self, or a female self. Council members themselves might dispute this, arguing that as wives and mothers they were not concerned with politics but with community; as Jewish women they were merely acting in consonance with their Jewish tradition, creating and re-creating the warmth of the hearth. However, although they believed that the work of the emotions and of intimate relations was not public, they did not realize that in their interest in ethnic and community matters – mere "women's concerns" – they acknowledged precisely the heart of political issues of power and powerlessness as they worked for and with domestic servants, the old, the sick, immigrants, and children. An inner tension thus pervaded the work they did. While their educational settings taught them that whatever they did would, by definition, be domestic, their organizational work took them more and more out of the house into the political and the public realm. In fact, those very institutions that taught them presented conflicting visions about what should be the right education for girls. Girls were pulled in different directions, growing up with a welter of mixed messages and learning a number of responses to the settings in which they functioned as adults.

The Canadian schools in the twentieth century were highly centralized and



Credit: Ontario Archives (Toronto)

bureaucratized. Their purpose, especially in relation to immigrant women, was to create a docile, obedient population, well trained to work. Free and nonsectarian schools were supervised by a centralized administration, hoping to inculcate values of obedience, conformity, and regularity, the skills that would be demanded of paid workers.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, however, girls were also taught the refined tastes appropriate to ladies. Educators, as they had done in the nineteenth century, exhorted young women to uplift mankind with their superior sensibilities.<sup>6</sup> That message, combined with the hope of inculcating habits of obedience and efficiency in girls and women, came together in the home economics or domestic science movement.

Its advocates introduced the home economics curriculum early in the century as an addition to what they thought of as the "male" curriculum, seeing it as a means of fitting women for their "God-given place in life" as custodians of hearth and home.<sup>7</sup> The domestic science curriculum was also a response to urban-industrial change and its unfortunate threats to the home. Households had to become more efficient; immigrant girls in particular had to learn the "value of pure air" and understand how to combat the dangers of flies on open milk cans or of typhoid in open wells. Middle-class reformers argued that factory girls were too disadvantaged at home, while at work

they were over-exposed to the seamy side of life. The unprotected home could no longer serve as a fortress against social decay. The new curriculum would "help alleviate the social problems of slum housing by instilling into girls the desire and the 'executive ability' to turn 'hovels into homes'."<sup>8</sup> Clearly, here were messages in tension with each other; if immigrant women were transformed into Anglo-Saxon ladies, they would not want to work in factories much longer. Teaching both obedience and mastery, school systems offered conflicting goals.

Elsewhere, however, girls were learning that they and their mothers did not inhabit hovels voluntarily; these were facts of architecture and geography and poverty. Jewish mothers taught their girls that their living circumstances were not a result of inadequate education and slovenliness but of insufficient money. The home as a female workplace was where women shared insights with their fellow workers. Those insights too were mixed. Jewish women had developed strong personalities and business skills, working out for pay or with their husbands, making do within the economic constraints of their domestic economies. They taught their daughters to be strong, even willful – traits which, by Canadian standards, were considered aggressive and downright unfeminine. Jewish women did not readily fit the ideal of "the lady;" many of them were dubious of,

or did not even know about, the ways of the lady and perpetuated a tradition of strength and decisive action.

Many of their daughters embraced at least part of the code of genteel womanhood in order to become Canadianized. They learned in their schools, from their teachers, sometimes from the mothers of their classmates, how to become North American women. In some respects, Jewish teachings also enabled these young women to fit into the majority culture. To the extent that Jewish women were defined as mothers, daughters, and wives, and defined themselves that way, they and the culture around them agreed that women were primarily participants in the family, indeed auxiliaries to men. That part of their cultural baggage allowed them accommodation in Canadian society.

Receiving the conflicting messages of school and home, Jewish women sought reconciliation in their institutional affiliations. Early in the twentieth century they joined organizations like the National Council for Jewish Women to meet with women like themselves, women who were married and had children. Once there, they created and worked with study groups and began to see the need to effect change. The generations taught each other as older and younger women met together, discussing and then responding to urban problems. As they did so, they educated themselves to leave the private realm at least at times. Private and public selves began to blend in each member.

They learned to write constitutions, arrange meetings, manage funds. Fund raising was an especially important function, for in that activity women often broke through the barrier between private and public worlds, intersecting with the realm of men to raise money. Furthermore, Council provided Jewish women a chance to gain leadership skills, enabling them to move with greater self-assurance toward community activities. They reconciled the conflict between the private and public realms – the need to be a lady but to be efficient, the need to remain a good wife while being clever and strong – in their organizational work. Private selves and public activism became increasingly difficult to separate. In the kind of work they did, Jewish women like many others worked to alter the political and social system.

The Vancouver section, established in 1924, provides one example of the work of Council women which expressed both their domestic and public personae. Members intended originally to assist immigrants, care for Jews in need, institute Jewish schools, and provide Council members "a place where topics of interest in the Jewish world may be discussed."<sup>9</sup> Two years later they determined to establish a Neighborhood House in the east end of the city which children might come to regard "as a second home and be helped in Canadian ways." The Neighborhood House provided space for night classes in English, a Girl Guide group, a library, and sewing classes; in 1927 a baby clinic was also opened there. In 1932 the Vancouver section established a girls' summer camp on land donated by one of the members to give campers the opportunity to "live together, bring out the qualities of sportsmanship and provide outdoor summer recreation."

As economic disaster threatened Canadians during the 1930s, Vancouver Council women sought creatively to provide relief for members. A noodle factory was set up in the basement of the Jewish Community Center where twenty Jewish women worked for twenty-five cents an hour: "the work is divided so that they all share alike." Members were urged to buy one packet of noodles a week. International events also prompted a variety of activities; the Vancouver section hosted the Interstate Conference of Jewish Women in 1931 at which delegates approved a motion limiting armaments.

After Canada entered the war, Council women from all the sections built "library huts" in military camps across Canada which were equipped with books and also served as meeting places and recreational centres. After the Holocaust, Council established hostels in Europe where displaced Jewish girls received food and shelter, vocational training, and "the understanding care of trained social workers." The Vancouver section continued until 1950 to collect books for distribution to European libraries. During that decade Vancouver women joined with the provincial government in sponsoring a free measles immunization program.

Council's unofficial motto was, "See a job, pass it on." As members, Jewish women were learning how to create change. They defined a problem, one often close to their own experience, then

acted to correct it. They became skilled in acting "out there" in the public realm, though few of them acknowledged in interviews that they were in fact doing political work. To the contrary: most of them denied it, saying, "Oh, no! Politics is for men. It's not people-oriented enough."<sup>10</sup> They proclaimed themselves wives and mothers first, performing an affective function, responding to the social needs they perceived. Perhaps they were sensible in speaking as private women, while behaving as public women. To the extent that they shared such a self-image with the culture around them they could be heard, their activities acknowledged as appropriate and laudable, their enterprises supported by donations and government funds.

Concerned with communities and individuals, with issues of power and powerlessness, with injustices and inequalities, Council women maintained community by creating survival strategies not only for Jews but also for other Canadians; they minimized their inner conflicts between private and public selves by allowing expression to both those personae. In their activities related to "women's issues" they learned to overcome their powerlessness. They plunged themselves into the heart of the public realm. Private women were also public activists.

<sup>9</sup>Michelle Rosaldo, "Moral/Analytic Dilemmas Posed by the Intersection of Feminism and Social Science," in Norma Haan et. al., eds., *Social Science as Moral Inquiry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 91.

<sup>10</sup>Naomi Black, "The Politics of the League of Women Voters," *International Social Science Quarterly*, 35, No. 4, (1983), 586.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Phyllis Rose, *Parallel Lives* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), p. 7.

<sup>13</sup>T. R. Morrison, "Their Proper Sphere: Feminism, the Family, and Child-Centered Social Reform in Ontario, 1875-1900," *Ontario History*, 68 (March 1976), 45-64.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, Alison Prentice and Susan Houston, eds., *Family, School, and Society in Nineteenth Century Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 249.

<sup>15</sup>Robert Stamp, "Teaching Girls their 'God Given Place in Life'," *Atlantis*, 2, No. 2 (Spring 1977), 18-34.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>17</sup>National Council of Jewish Women, Vancouver Section, "Faith and Humanity: 50th Anniversary Edition," 1974, n.p. The following quotations are also all to be found in the same unpaginated booklet. Council publications and correspondence are housed in the archives of the national offices in Toronto and in the Archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal.

<sup>18</sup>I am in the process of interviewing section and national Council leaders, and several of them said the same thing.

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