KALE MEYDELACH OR *SHULAMITH* GIRLS: CULTURAL CHANGE AND CONTINUITY AMONG JEWISH PARENTS AND DAUGHTERS – A CASE STUDY OF TORONTO'S HARBORD COLLEGIATE INSTITUTE IN THE 1920s*

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Les étudiant(e)s de religion juive, enfants de parents venus au Canada des pays de l'Europe de l'est à la fin du siècle dernier et au début du 20e siecle, formaient plus de la moitié du corps étudiant au collège Harbord à Toronto, au cours des années 1920. Cet article démontre comment l'histoire de l'éducation peut toucher plus que les questions traditionnelles de l'assiduité et de l'ascension sociale: il démontre des perceptions qui peuvent se trouver dans l'histoire ethnique, lorsqu'on souligne l'aspect du sexe. En se servant des dossiers du collège et des souvenirs d'ancien(ne)s élèves, Lynne Marks examine la continuité culturelle et d'adaptation chez les parents immigrants juifs et leurs filles.

For young Jewish women attending high school in Toronto in the 1920s Harbord Collegiate was the place to be. Former students who transferred from Jarvis or Parkdale later recalled how much happier they had been at Harbord. As Toronto's Jewish community moved west of University Avenue in the 1920s, Harbord became "the Jewish high school," with Jewish students making up over half of Harbord's student body.[1] These Jewish students were the children of Eastern European immigrants who came to Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[2]

Why were Canadian-born Jewish students so much happier attending school with other Jews? Did this simply reflect the attitudes of their immigrant parents and the anti-Semitism of Canadian society or was it something more complex? An exploration of patterns of interaction between Jewish and non-Jewish young women provides some answers. An equally intriguing set of questions relates to the very presence of Jewish young women at high school. For European Jews, education – while valued – had been largely a male perogative. Had Old World attitudes towards education and proper gender roles been replaced by Canadian values among immigrant parents?

A close look at Harbord Collegiate in the 1920s shows how the history of schooling can address more than traditional questions of school attendance and upward mobility. It also demonstrates the insights to be gained within ethnic history by focusing on gender. Using Harbord's records and the recollections of former students this paper explores patterns of cultural continuity and adaptation among Jewish immigrant parents and their daughters.[3] Clearly, many immigrant parents modified traditional perceptions of proper female roles by allowing their daughters to attend an academic high school such as Harbord. Although modified, traditional attitudes were not transformed. Males remained privileged in terms of access to education.

The self-perception of the first Canadian-born generation is critically important; I study it here through an examination of student interaction and extra-curricular activities among Harbord students. One finds that these young women defined for themselves a new sense of Jewishness which allowed them to adapt to Canadian society, while continuing to identify themselves as Jews. An exploration of Jewish reactions to the subtle and not so subtle efforts at assimilation which occurred at Harbord helps to identify the limits of Canadianization for both parents and daughters.

Before looking at female Jewish students at Harbord Collegiate it is essential to understand what the lives of these young women would have been like had their parents remained in Europe. Among Eastern European Jews, men and women were expected to fulfill different roles. Women's primary role was in the home, while the ideal sphere for men was the *shul*, or synagogue, where they prayed and studied Talmud. The value placed on male scholarship made it acceptable and often imperative that wives earn money to support scholarly husbands. This emphasis on religious male scholarship resulted in very different patterns of education for male and female children. Boys entered all-male religious schools at four or five, and attended them until at least age thirteen. The longer they could study, the more status they and their families acquired. In sharp contrast to this pattern, girls usually attended more informal female schools for a few years, where they learned to read Yiddish and perhaps a bit of Hebrew. They spent most of their girlhood at home, helping their mothers and learning domestic skills, until they became *kale meydelach*, girls of marriageable age. In the *shtetls*, the Jewish towns of Eastern Europe, it was assumed that "for girls study is marginal to their primary activities, while for the boys it is the major occupation and goal."[4]

For Canadian-born Jews who attended Canadian public schools, the Jewish education which had been dominant in Eastern Europe was relegated to after-school hours. However, in other respects this education remained unchanged. Most young women received a few years of Yiddish or Hebrew lessons, but their education continued to be much less extensive than that provided for their brothers. For example, Mrs. Goodman mentioned that she went to a Hebrew evening school for a few years, but that her brothers studied for much longer. She commented that "on Friday night my father would question my brothers on what they learned in Hebrew school and they would review the *sedra* (reading from the Pentateuch) of the week . . . I would sit in and listen, because I was interested."[5]

Jewish parents were less likely to discriminate against daughters with regard to public school education. However, an

examination of Jewish attendance at Harbord suggests some continuity with Old World patterns of male privilege. Among Jewish students entering Harbord in 1923, 71% were male and only 29% were female. In comparison, slightly over half of the non-Jewish students were female. Two years later the pattern among entering students was similar, although among Jewish students the gender differential, at 59% male to 41% female, was not quite as extreme:

TABLE 1.

Percentage of Students Entering First Form at Harbord Collegiate: by Sex, Father's Socio-Economic Rank, and Religion, 1923 and 1925

	Jewish				Non-Jewish			
Socio-Economic Rank*	Male %	Female %	Total %	N	Male %	Female %	Total %	N
1923								
1	48	52	100	21	70	30	100	24
2	71	29	100	42	41	59	100	64
3	73	27	100	55	50	50	100	36
4	90	10	100	20	50	50	100	20
Other	66	34	100	3	0	100	100	4
Total	71	29	100	141	48	52	100	147
1925								
1	44	56	100	41	40	60	100	30
2	57	43	100	35	51	49	100	43
3	66	34	100	82	57	43	100	42
4	75	25	100	12	57	43	100	21
Other	40	60	100	5	33	66	100	3
Total	59	41	100	175	51	49	100	139

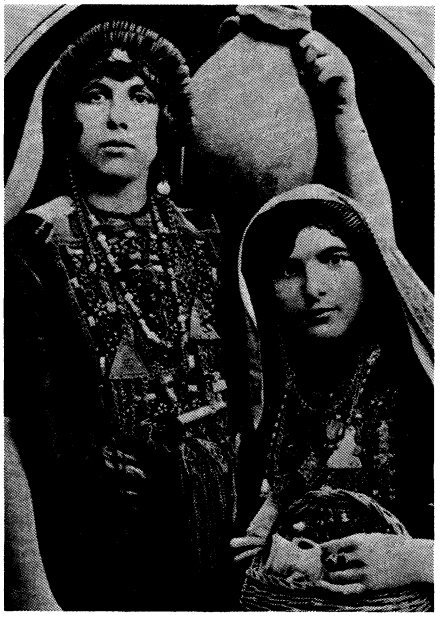
*1 = professional/managerial
2 = small business/clerical
3 = skilled workers
4 = semi-skilled and unskilled workers

Source: Toronto Board of Education Archives, Harbord Collegiate Records, Student Cards and Class Lists, 1923-1926.

While the minority position of Jewish female students at Harbord clearly reflects continuity with European patterns among immigrant parents, the presence of these young women also reveals certain changes in immigrant attitudes. How far had attitudes shifted? Did Jewish parents send daughters to high school with the same dreams of professional careers that they had for their sons?

It seems that, for Toronto Jewish women, vocational ambitions were to be limited. After leaving school women worked until marriage, which remained their ultimate destiny. Clerical work, which was clean and respectable but inherently temporary and dead end, was the common experience of all women interviewed for this study. Moreover, they suggested that it was the experience of almost all female Jewish students at Harbord. The 1931 census reinforces their claim. In this year almost half of Canadian-born Jewish women in the labour force did clerical work – two and a half times the proportion of all Canadian-born women in the clerical field. Conversely, the proportion of all Canadian-born Jewish women working as teachers, the most "professional" occupation attainable by most Canadian women, was only a quarter that of all Canadian-born women. A reluctance to hire Jewish teachers in the public school system no doubt played a role here, but traditional expectations of women's proper role may also have narrowed Jewish women's occupational options even more than was the case for most Canadian women of the 1920s.[6]

Since female students were destined for clerical work, why did parents send daughters to an academic high school such as Harbord? Miriam Cohen has argued that by the 1930s New York Italian young women stayed in school for longer periods because parents came to see the economic value of schooling in providing the necessary training for clerical jobs.[7] However, for young Jewish women in Toronto the Central High School of



Two Jewish girls in Palestine
Credit: YIVO Archives

Commerce, situated only a few blocks from Harbord, most readily provided such training. Harbord did not teach clerical skills. In fact, after leaving Harbord most female students took a short course at Central Commerce or a private business school to equip them for a clerical job. What then can explain parental decisions to send daughters to Harbord?

Parents seem to have transferred the traditional Jewish respect for scholarship to the new secular Canadian education. This education was clearly not exclusively masculine. Immigrant parents could see that Canadian young women attended Harbord as readily as young men. Also, the secular education offered at this school had never been denied Jewish girls, as had the all-male religious learning of the *shtetl*. As a result, the attendance of daughters could be justified and even encouraged.

According to Mrs. Singer, "it was considered by the community to be really fine if parents could send their daughters to an academic high school."[8] High school educated daughters gave both parents and the daughter at least some of the status which in Eastern Europe was reserved for male scholars. Interviewees made it clear that a commercial high school education was considered second best. Immigrant parents who were unfamiliar with the school system sometimes sent elder daughters to Central Commerce, but when they realized that this school did not provide an academic education, they sent younger daughters to Harbord. All interviewees said that their parents were strongly committed to their attending Harbord and expected that they do well at school. As Mrs. Levy commented, "in my home you simply couldn't bring home bad reports."[9]

Interviewees did not suggest, however, that parents viewed attendance at Harbord as leading to a career. For most Canadian women the major vocational justification for attending an academic high school was a teaching career, which few Jewish women enjoyed. Rather, immigrant parents sent their daughters to Harbord because such academic education was valued in itself. Attendance at Harbord could actually limit employment opportunitites. Mrs. Kuperman lamented the fact that her parents had insisted that she and her sister attend an academic high school, since this meant that they lacked the skills needed to get a well-paying clerical job.[10]

Although female education was accepted and even valued within the Jewish community, it remained less important than male education. It is clear that, when family resources were limited, sons came first. In both 1923 and 1925 Jewish students at Harbord with professional or managerial parents were marginally more likely to be female than to be male, while among students with parents in clerical, small business or blue collar occupations, the proportion of young women was much lower than that of young men (see Table 1). Among non-Jewish students, gender ratios in school attendance do not appear to be correlated to father's occupation.

Among Jewish families the economic strain of university attendance was rarely justified for a daughter. Mrs. Goodman, the only interviewee to attend university, stated that if one of her brothers had wished to attend she would not have been able to do so.

Mrs. Kay's brothers attended university, but she did not. Mrs. Kuperman commented matter-of-factly that "if there were boys in the family, naturally the boys went."[11] In some cases daughters appear to have internalized traditional beliefs in their subordinate role. Mrs. Levy's parents wanted her to attend university, but she refused to go. She would not accept her parents' financial sacrifice and recognized her younger brother's desire to attend university.[12]

It is not suprising that male needs were placed first, given the near monopoly men had over education in traditional Jewish culture. Also, in Canada high school and university were valued for the economic rewards they offered to young men. Traditional Jewish attitudes may have shifted to accept the education of daughters, but vocational goals for women remained limited. Women were not expected to have real careers: as their ultimate destiny was marriage and motherhood, their education could more readily be sacrificed. It remains clear, however, that some value was placed on female education, at least at the high school level, since attendance was usually encouraged if family resources allowed.

Faced with the opportunities offered by Harbord Collegiate, Jewish parents modified but did not transform traditional values. What about their daughters, who were actually attending Harbord? By examining the interaction of Jewish and non-Jewish young women and the extra-curricular activities of female Jewish students, one sees how the first Canadian-born generation created their own sense of themselves and of their place in Canadian society. As one former student commented with regard to extra-curricular activities, "you had to make your own way, parents did not know about these things . . . "[13]

A preference for Harbord among young Jewish women reflected the fact that most socializing took place within one's own ethnic group. All former students interviewed for this study recalled that all or most of their friends were Jewish. They may have been friendly with non-Jewish female students in class, but even while walking to school or eating lunch they associated primarily with Jewish young women. This sense of division may explain the very limited involvement of female Jewish students in organized extra-curricular activities at Harbord. Among young women involved in extra-curricular activities, non-Jewish women out-numbered Jewish women by more than two to one.[14] Few interviewees attended Harbord dances and those who did associated primarily with Jewish students at these affairs.

This sense of division can be explained in various ways. Certainly anti-Semitism played an important role. Interviewees suggested that, in the early 1920s, the division between Jewish and non-Jewish students was based largely on such sentiment. Mrs. Palmer, who entered Harbord in 1922, stated that when some non-Jewish girls with whom she had been friendly learned she was Jewish, their friendship cooled considerably. Students entering later in the decade argued that anti-Semitism was less of a problem. They suggest that they remained separate from non-Jewish students partly because their parents preferred this, but also because they too felt more comfortable among Jews.[15] Reasons for Jewish reluctance to become involved in general extra-curricular activities become clearer once these activities are examined. The Girls' club, the main club for female students at Harbord, was affiliated with the YWCA; its meetings ended with vesper services and the club undertook to provide Christmas dinners for poor families. It is not surprising that only one Jewish student can be found on the large executive of this club. Jewish students, particularly those from observant homes, could not have been comfortable in such an atmosphere.

Although their Jewishness meant that Jewish female students remained distinct at Harbord, it did not mean that they retained their parents' lifestyle. They had housework to do, but they did not spend all of their non-school time as apprentice housewives, or working to help support the family, as their mothers had. Since they did not wish to be involved in the Christian extra-curricular activities at Harbord, they created their own unofficial Jewish Girls club. This club had a Hebrew name, the *Shulamith* Girls, and was largely composed of Harbord students, with a few Jewish students from other schools.[16]

The existence of this group suggests a sense of difference among young Jewish women. However, the activities of the club and other activities of Harbord students reflected Canadian patterns and interests, although with Jewish overtones, more than they did the Jewish traditions of Eastern Europe. The *Shulamith* Girls were involved in activities similar to those of the official Harbord Girls Club, which in turn reflected activities common to most Canadian women's clubs of the period. At the Jewish club there was some attempt to keep minutes; there were bridge games, teas, and outings. Fundraising events were also organized, the only difference from the Girls' Club being the object of the charity: the *Shulamith* Girls raised money for a Jewish orphanage.[17] They held parties, inviting male Jewish students from Harbord. Some of the women interviewed were also involved in other Jewish groups which seem to have been modelled on Christian organizations. These groups included an all-Jewish Girl Guides, the National Council of Jewish Juniors and a social service group affiliated to Mount Sinai Hospital.[18] All of these organizations had a Jewish membership and were concerned with Jewish issues. However, they were very different from immigrant organizations such as the *landsmanshaften*, mutual benefit societies which were organized by European place of origin, and held firmly to European traditions. These organizations and most Jewish groups in Europe were exclusively male. The very existence of female organizations reflected an adaptation to Canadian society.[19]

The experience of young Jewish women at Harbord demonstrates patterns of both acculturation and continuity among the first Canadian-born generation. Young women adopted Canadian ways, while retaining a strong sense of themselves as Jews. This ethnic identification led Jewish students to prefer each other's company and to join groups with some Jewish content. As Deborah Dash Moore states in the American context: "Through the process of becoming . . . American, second generation Jews redefined the meaning of Jewishness . . . they established the limits of their assimilation into American society."[20]

The extent to which the Jewish female students of Harbord Collegiate identified with a new sense of "ethnic Jewishness," incorporating both Jewish and Canadian elements, is illustrated in a story told by Mrs. Lerner. In the 1920s a young Jewish woman recently arrived from Germany entered Harbord. Having a pronounced accent, she was perceived by the other female Jewish students as being foreign, with the result that she was largely ignored and not included in their activities.[21] Obviously the Jewish-Canadian synthesis which bound the *Shulamith* Girls together was very different from the European Jewishness of their parents and of this young woman.

Although this new sense of ethnic Jewishness was forged by the Canadian-born, it required some acceptance by immigrant parents. As long as daughters "stayed with their own," most activities were acceptable to Socialist and Orthodox parents alike.[22] Little objection was made to club membership or attendance at movies or parties, even though such activities differed from those of young Jewish women in Eastern Europe. This reflects a further weakening of traditional gender expectations among immigrant parents. Certain women interviewed suggested that this willingness to allow daughters to accept new ways was linked to parental eagerness that they, and more particularly their children, become more Canadianized, and thus better able to succeed in Canadian society.[23]

To what extent were Jewish parents willing to accept the Canadianization of their children? Immigrant parents sent their children to Canadian schools which saw the Anglicization of the immigrant as one of their primary roles. Both parents and children seem to have accepted the process of Canadianization offered by the schools – but only as long as it did not threaten their Jewishness. Jewish students willingly accepted the guidance of Harbord's Anglo-Saxon teachers. Interviewees spoke of teachers with respect and admiration and clearly viewed them as role models. However, overt attacks on the students' Jewish identity were not passively accepted. A speech given by the principal, attacking Jewish students who did not wish to write an examination on a Jewish holiday, drew parental protest. More than half a century has not entirely dispelled the bitter resentment at the principal's tendency to change the names of Jewish students, and at his comment to those who protested that "I can't help it if your parents are too ignorant to know what to name their children."[24]

Parents and children welcomed much of what Harbord offered, both its academic opportunities and its lessons in Canadian culture. Parents saw such lessons as helping their children to advance and to integrate into the new society. However, Canadianization had its limits

Shabat *Credit: JEB*

for both generations, limits which were far narrower than those of Canadians who saw the schools as a means of solving the "immigrant problem" through assimilation. Toronto's Jews were not easily molded into ideal British Canadian citizens: Jewish parents and their daughters were active agents. Parents modified but did not transform traditional gender roles in response to Canadian society and the educational opportunities it offered. Daughters took up new activities and redefined their Jewishness to incorporate much of Canadian culture. Despite substantial adaptation, it is clear that neither generation was prepared to compromise with Canadian culture when it threatened their self-defined sense of Jewishness.

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[1]By 1914 66% of Toronto Jews lived between Spadina and Bathurst, and they continued to move west in the 1920s. See Stephen Speisman, *The Jews of Toronto* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979).

[2]In the 1920s many of these immigrants had attained a modest prosperity, which allowed them to forego their children's earnings and send them to high school. However, in this period not all Jews could afford a high school education for their children. This paper therefore does not represent the experience of all Canadian-born Jewish adolescents of the 1920s.

[3]Nine former Jewish female students of Harbord were interviewed for this study. Their names have been fictionalized to retain their privacy.

[4]Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is With People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken Books, 1952), p. 125.

[5]Interview with Mrs. Goodman, July 25, 1983.

[6]Canada, *Census of Canada*, 1931, volume 7, Tables 46 and 49. For a discussion of the options open to Canadian working women in the 1920s, see Veronica Strong-Boag, "The Girl of the New Day, Canadian Working Women in the 1920s," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1979.

[7]Mirian Cohen, "Italian-American Women in New York City, 1900-1950: Work and School," in Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Class, Sex and the Woman Worker* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977).

[8]Interview with Mrs. Singer, July 25, 1983.

[9]Interview with Mrs. Levy, August 9, 1983.

[10]Interview with Mrs. Kuperman, August 10, 1983.

[11]Mrs. Goodman, Mrs. Kuperman and interview with Mrs. Kay, July 19, 1983.

[12]Mrs. Levy.

[13]Mrs. Singer.

[14]Information compiled from Harbord yearbooks and student cards.

[15]Mrs. Levy, Mrs. Kay and interview with Mrs. Palmer, August 8, 1983.

[16] Mrs. Kuperman and Mrs. Levy. *Shulamith* is a Hebrew woman's name. It has no particular significance in this context that I have been able to discover.

[17]Mrs. Kuperman and Mrs. Palmer.

[18]Mrs. Landau, Mrs. Goodman, Mrs. Singer and Mrs. Tobias.

[19]See Paula J. Draper and Janice B. Karlinsky, "Abraham's Daughters: Women, Charity and Power in the Canadian Jewish Community," in Jean Burnet, ed., *Looking into my Sister's Eyes: An Exploration in Women's History* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Toronto, 1986) for a discussion of Jewish women's organizational involvement.

[20]Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 4.

[21]Mrs. Lerner.

[22]Orthodox young women were not permitted to be involved in such activities on the Sabbath. Mrs. Goodman.

[23]Mrs. Kuperman and Mrs. Kay.

[24]Mrs. Kuperman.

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