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Writing history about the ties that bind: reflections

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The editors invited me to reflect on how I came to write a doctoral thesis in 1985 with a perspective far different from that of mainstream South African Jewish historiography at the time. I now live in the United States and am retired from a career in corporate sustainability. Academic interests have been thoroughly overlaid by nearly four decades of family and executive life. With all the obvious caveats about the limits of memory, here are my reflections.

In 1976 I was a first-year history student at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg. The Soweto Uprising catalysed a new generation of anti-apartheid activity as well as activist academic work using a Marxist class analysis. Charles Van Onselen, echoing Shula Marks at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London and Stanley Trapido at Oxford, was writing vibrant, readable history about the birth of capitalism with the gold rush to Johannesburg, followed by British intervention and victory in the South African War (1899–1902). This work included a strong subtheme of Jews as randlord capitalists as well as a visible and vilified immigrant *lumpenproletariat*.

I graduated in 1979 and applied to Marks's masters programme in Southern African studies. Marks was a world-renowned South African historian; my parents had also been her *madrichim* (youth leaders) at Habonim's summer camp in Hermanus,¹ and she welcomed me warmly. She recommended that I proceed directly to a doctorate and dismissed concerns that I had neither the money nor a proposed topic. She suggested I explore the making of the Jewish community in Johannesburg; at the time the concept of "community" was emerging as a supplement to class analysis for South African history. I accepted the idea, although I had little interest in South African Jews or the Jewish community. My Jewishness is liberal, cultural, secular. I was of course proud of a hazily understood heritage of Jewish anti-apartheid activists in the 1950s and 1960s, but I had

1 The Habonim summer camp in Onrus is the camp of the South African Socialist Zionist Youth movement.

not studied Jewish history. Shula probably did not know this. But she did know that she was directing me towards some of the exciting new trends in historiography. Despite Shula's support, my memory is that this topic did not sit well with my peers in the SOAS/ Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICS) Southern African Studies seminar. Perhaps they saw a focus on what had become a visible Jewish minority in a highly privileged white minority as a distraction, and not relevant to the broader project of rewriting history and righting the wrongs of apartheid. They may have assumed that I was more "Jewish" or more Zionist than I felt.

The History Workshop movement and journal were launched in 1976 in London. I was quickly immersed in a rich, vibrant flow of history writing that was anti-elites and anti-elitism; that drew on new sources like oral history and economic and social history to explore the history of Empire and Victorian England, including imperialism, immigration, class formation, nationalism, and racism. These were the years of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Raphael Samuel and Jerry White's social histories of the working class, including Jewish immigrants in Victorian London, Jonathan Frankel's work on Jewish socialism in the Pale of Settlement, and David Feldman's (then a peer doctoral student at Cambridge) research for his social history of English Jewry. For South African history, Marks, Trapido, van Onselen, Belinda Bozzoli, and their students were reinterpreting the colonial project and the construction of class, nation, race, and community.² These were my starting points

2 In England, there were Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Raphael Samuel, *East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding* (Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981); Jerry White, *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East End Tenement Block, 1887–1914* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862–1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture 1840–1914* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994). On South African history, historians included Charles van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914*, vol. 1: *New Babylon*, vol. 2: *New Ninevah* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982); Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, "Lord Milner and the South African State", *History Workshop Journal* 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1979): 50–81; Marks and Trapido, eds., *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Harlow: Longman, 1987); Belinda Bozzoli, ed., *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987). Subsequent spinoffs in Jewish South African history include the work of Milton Shain in Cape Town and at the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research (Kaplan Centre) at the University of Cape Town; Milton Shain, "Diamonds, Pogroms and Undesirables: Antisemitism in the Cape Colony, 1890–1906", *South African Historical Journal* (Nov. 1980): 13–28.

to examine why Jews migrated to Johannesburg and how they formed a community after they arrived.

The first chapter of the thesis, “From Kovno to Cape Town”, told the origin story. I discovered the institutional records and shipping logs of the Poor Jews Temporary Shelter (PJTS) in London. The shipping logs provided records of almost all the 40,000 Jews that went from Eastern Europe to South Africa in the period 1885–1914. The records revealed a close relationship between the PJTS and the Union Castle Shipping Line and – in a challenge to the standard push-pull history of migration – showed the role played by international shipping companies and English Jewish elites in directing the emigrant flow from the Pale to South Africa, as well as to the U.S. and South America. The shipping logs confirmed for the first time that most Jewish immigrants to Johannesburg came from the Kovno gubernia in the then Russian region of Lithuania, making a very homogenous group. And unlike other European immigrants to South Africa in this period, most travelled in families, providing them with important social resilience and a capacity for upward mobility. The material was new and the arguments were original. As I found the PJTS records and did this research after I had completed the other chapters, this chapter was written last and quickly, when I had run out of time. I nevertheless consider this the most significant contribution of the thesis. Both the material and the analysis contributed to later South African Jewish history and to an emerging awareness of the role of shipping companies in shaping Jewish and other migration patterns.³

Jews in prewar Johannesburg constituted a community in that they debated among themselves. But they were also divided by class and circumstance, by language, Zionist vision, type of religious affiliation,

3 The PJTS institutional records were originally discovered by Lloyd Gartner in *The Jewish Immigrant in England, 1870–1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1960). I believe I was the second historian to use them. Gartner referred Aubrey Newman of Leicester University to my thesis. Newman then led hundreds of students in decades of meticulous data entry, broader research, and additional analysis of the PJTS logs and made these available at the Kaplan Centre; see <https://humanities.uct.ac.za/kaplan-centre/research-resources/poor-jews-temporary-shelter-database>; see also Aubrey Newman et al., *Jewish Migration to South Africa: The Records of the Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter, 1885–1914* (Cape Town: Jewish Publications South Africa and Kaplan Centre, University of Cape Town, 2006). See also Nicholas J. Evans, “The Development of Transmigrant Historiography in Britain,” in *Migrant Britain. Histories and Historiographies: Essays in Honor of Colin Holmes*, ed. Jennifer Craig-Norton, Chrishard Hoffmann, and Tony Kushner (London: Routledge, 2018), 224–34.

and political allegiance (Boer or British). I argued that under postwar imperial rule, the Jewish elite crafted a South African Jewish community that was aligned with being white and middle class. Jewish immigration into Johannesburg influenced the emerging definitions of race and nation in early South African state formation, as it did in other New World recipient countries. However, my starting assumptions about class were continually challenged by the data and the unique qualities that ultimately bound this community after the war: its small size, the ethnic homogeneity of the immigrants who quickly dominated Jewish society, and the opportunity to be identified as white as this racial definition was forged. This chapter is reproduced in full in this edition of *JHS*.

The History Workshop also birthed the new field of women's history and concepts of middle-class domestic feminism, philanthropy, motherhood, gender, childhood, and the immigrant family in Victorian England. Anna Davin's landmark "Imperialism and Motherhood" was published in 1978, and women's history flourished. Jewish women's history was a subtheme, most notably in the United States, with historians including Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel.⁴ Making women visible in history was considered part of the broader struggle for women's equality; community support was crucial among feminist historians. At different times, I lived with Shula and her family in Dulwich, and later with Anna Davin in her bohemian terrace house in Elephant and Castle, where most dinnertimes we hosted feminist social historians.

The perspectives and analytic tools of women's history formulated my thinking for the chapters on women and family. I showed how the philanthropic volunteerism of middle-class Jewish women supported the community-building project of the men, while forging their unique brand of domestic feminism, particularly at the South African Jewish Orphanage that was established in 1902. The final chapter on immigrant families showed that poor immigrant parents under economic stress used orphanages as an instrument to keep their families intact. They did not

4 Anna Davin, "Imperialism and Motherhood", *History Workshop* 5 (Spring 1978): 9–66; Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1975); see also Paula Hyman, "The History of European Jewry: Recent Trends in the Literature", *Journal of Modern History* 54, no. 2, *Sex, Science and Society in Modern France* (June 1982): 303–19; Bettina Bradbury, "The Fragmented Family: Life Cycle, Disease and Death Among Nineteenth Century Montreal Families", in *Childhood and Family in Canadian History*, ed. Joy Parr (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), 109–28; Sonya Michel, "Children, Institutions, and Community: The Jewish Orphanage of Rhode Island, 1909–1942", *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 7, no. 3 (Nov. 1977): 385–400.

become dissolute and abandon their children into orphanages, as in the trope of Victorian anxiety.

I did not provide a conclusion. I had come to appreciate the infinite complexity of the individual, and the futility of the historian's quest for truth. I tried to convey this by presenting the simultaneous existence of several truths: separate and almost self-standing chapters for middle-class men, middle-class women, and working families.

I left academic life after graduating. I felt that my research topic was too narrow and parochial to qualify me for an academic job outside South Africa, but I also lacked the self-confidence to ask for professional advice from mentors. Twenty years later, in her 2004 review essay "Apartheid and the Jewish Question", Shula Marks referred to my work on South African Jewry, alongside that of van Onselen, as "pioneering" and "demolishing" the orthodoxies.⁵ She probably told me this in 1985. To my enormous regret, I did not hear it.

5 Shula Marks, book review, "Apartheid and the Jewish Question", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, no. 4, special issue, *Writing in Transition in South Africa: Fiction, History, Biography* (Dec. 2004): 889–900, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4133889>.