






“We Dug More Rocks”

JEWISH WOMEN AND WORK IN THE UPPER MIDWEST

RESearch for the MHS History Center exhibition *UNPACKING ON THE PRAIRIE: JEWISH WOMEN IN THE UPPER MIDWEST* UNEARTHED A TROVE OF COMPELLING FIRST-PERSON ACCOUNTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS FROM A PHASE OF JEWISH SETTLEMENT IN AMERICA THAT HAS BEEN SPARSELY DOCUMENTED. IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE EXHIBITION, MHS PRESS RECENTLY PUBLISHED EXHIBIT CURATOR LINDA MACK SCHLOFF’S 256-PAGE ILLUSTRATED BOOK, *“AND PRAIRIE DOGS WEREN’T KOSHER”: JEWISH WOMEN IN THE UPPER MIDWEST SINCE 1855* (1996). SCHLOFF IS DIRECTOR OF THE JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF THE UPPER MIDWEST.

THE FOLLOWING NARRATIVE AND “VOICES”—EXCERPTS FROM SEVERAL GENERATIONS OF ORAL HISTORIES AND FAMILY STORIES—APPEAR IN CHAPTER 4, WHICH FOCUSES ON WOMEN’S WORK EXPERIENCES. 

Linda M. Schloff

Members of the Feinstein family of Zeeland, North Dakota, about 1890

It was a tremendous transition for mother. She was a very fine seamstress and had worked in Bialystock making shirts for the army. . . . Here she was out in the bleak North Dakota prairie, living in a shack, no running water, no inside bathroom, cold in the winter, hot in the summer, and what they were doing was pulling the stones away so they could plow the land.

Laura Rapaport Borsten's mother's transition from an urban sewing room to the rough Upper Midwestern prairie in the early 1900s is typical of the adjustment many immigrant Jewish women made to the region's labor climate. She, like an estimated 70 percent of young Jewish females registered as artisans in the Pale of Settlement [a section of western Russia stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, to which Jews were restricted], had worked in the needle trades. Once transplanted to the Upper Midwest, though, they typically found themselves in settings, both rural and urban, where these skills were not in great demand. The economy and geography of the

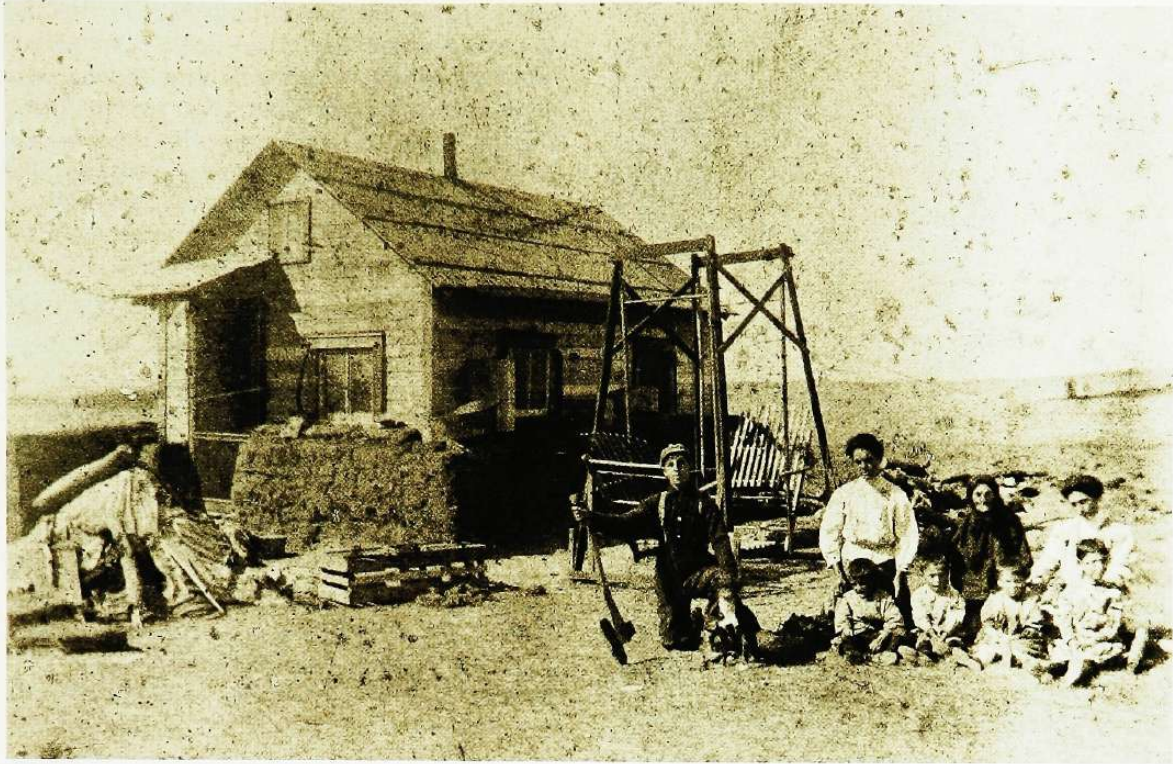
region dictated that Jewish women's work would diversify in ways few immigrants dreaming of America could have imagined.

Employment opportunities for these women contrasted sharply not only with the ones they had known in Europe but also with those prevailing in large American cities such as New York and Chicago, where the burgeoning ready-made clothing industry employed vast numbers of Jewish immigrants. But in the cities of the Upper Midwest, that industry was small and centered in shops that typically employed fewer than a half-dozen people each.

The economic well-being of the Upper Midwest was founded on agriculture, mining, grain milling, and forestry. Few Jews ever worked in the latter three areas. However, they experimented with farming, and they filled a traditional niche by providing commercial services to miners, millers, lumberjacks, and farmers. Farming, for a brief period, provided Jewish immigrants with what was long considered the quintessential American work experience—that of the independent yeoman farmer. With greater or lesser enthusiasm, Jewish women learned to be farm wives. And, as spouses of Main Street merchants all over the Upper Midwest, they balanced their Old World role as

Sadie Schwartz sits at the sewing machine in her husband's tailor shop, St. Paul, 1917





Hannah Marcus (center), her daughters Rachel Marcus Shapiro and Eda Marcus Schlessinger, and their children in Bowman County, North Dakota, 1910. Hannah and Rachel filed their own homestead claims, while Eda homesteaded with her husband.

contributors to the family economy with the New World middle-class expectation that wives should be removed from the hurly-burly of the business world.

Daughters of Jewish immigrants commonly pursued white-collar jobs as bookkeepers and clerks, positions in which regional particularities did not figure. Those who could afford additional schooling characteristically chose teaching. Unlike East Coast Jewish women, who typically taught in large urban areas, many Upper Midwestern women who entered this field performed stints in small-town or rural settings.

Voices

OLD COUNTRY/NEW COUNTRY

Ethel Krochock Bernstein's grandmother Shana Gitt was a spinner, herbalist, and midwife. Beginning in 1890 the family migrated in stages from Kresilev, a Ukrainian town near Kiev, to Grand Forks. Though she never learned her new country's language, her skills translated all the same.

My grandmother . . . delivered me. She tied my umbilical cord, and when the doctor arrived

and saw what she had done, he said, "very good grandma." When medicine was needed for various ailments my grandmother was taken to the drug store, and, incidentally she couldn't speak or understand English, was taken to a back room of the drug store where many herbs . . . were in jars on shelves. . . . [W]hen she looked them over she pointed to this one and that one, and took the herbs home and either ground or cooked them and made the medicine needed, and they always did the work expected of them.

FARMING ON THE PLAINS

Ethel Schlasinger Overby's parents, having fled Odessa, began farming in North Dakota in 1906. Her mother, Sarah, was unprepared for life on the land.

Sarah had seen farming close at hand as a child in Zebricov [near Odessa], but life on the prairie was much more strenuous than she had imagined. . . . She raised chickens and cared for a garden, cooked and sewed, and worked at heavy labor—well-digging, raking hay in the blazing sun until she almost fainted, following Noah across the prairie as he dug up rocks, then loading them onto the stone boat that the horses would haul to a ravine. . . . When Noah



Ann Goldstein and her children Al and Esther next to the family general store in Solen, North Dakota, late 1930s

Rachael Freedland being nuzzled by a calf on the family farm near Osseo, Minnesota, about 1915



went to work on a road-building crew in the summer, she and her cousin Becky . . . took her cookstove, a cow, dishes and pots, and set up a kitchen in an empty house near the road job. There they fed a hungry crew of 15 men, baking fresh bread every day. When the road job was completed, each of the cooks had earned \$30.



Celia Kamins was born in New York City around the turn of the century. After the early death of her father, her mother remarried and moved to a North Dakota farm. Celia and her sister, Pearl, joined their mother and stepfather in about 1912.

We dug more rocks on 320 acres than I think they dug in the whole Negev in Israel. We would work all day digging rocks, loading them on stone boats. Somehow or other we assumed that that was the way things had to be. We would quit at four . . . go in and clean up and get ready to milk the cows . . . and my stepbrother and I would milk twenty cows. We separated all that milk with a hand separator. We would carry the cream down in a dugout to keep it from souring. And when it would sit we would skim the cream off the top; use the sour milk for cheese, the cream for butter, and then in the evening when the sun was almost down, but it was still light enough to see, we would pick weeds in the garden and pump water [for] the garden. . . . I was almost a dropout in school because there were only certain days that I could go to school. I couldn't go on Monday because I had to help my mother wash clothes. I couldn't go on Tuesday because we had to iron and bake. I would go Wednesday and Thursday, but Friday I had to stay out because we had to clean house and bake for the weekend.

DAIRY FARMING

Two recollections, by Ralph Stacker and Rose Gillman, about St. Paul's West Side, probably dating from the 1920s, attest to the fact that cow-keeping was not restricted to rural areas.

RS: [The husband] wouldn't work . . . so his wife had to support the family. So she bought a cow and she milked the cow, made cottage cheese, made sour cream, delivered it herself They had a little bit of a shack near the river, and on a winter night . . . they would bring that big—the cow would freeze—they brought the cow in the kitchen. And she supported the family.

RG: [She] had a house full of children and she kept cows . . . and she milked the cows and

bottled the milk herself, and went around on a little wagon and delivered it herself. She was always in a hurry, she had so many things to do. And when she went to the butcher's, no matter how many there were standing and waiting in line, he would say, "Lady, you will have to give up your turn for this woman. She is very busy and she doesn't have time to waste." And he would give her a little package of meat and she would run.

SALES WORK AND HELPING OUT

Bessie Halpern was fourteen when her family arrived in Minneapolis in 1900. She worked at two department stores, one on a prime downtown shopping street. . . . After marrying Max Schwartz in 1908, Bessie found a different sort of environment in the Belfield, North Dakota, store her husband bought. Belfield was a busy, mixed-nationality market town of five hundred, located on the Northern Pacific line.

During these days, many foreign people traded with us; Ukrainians, Bohemians, Russians, Germans, and Scandinavians. . . . We listened to all the folks' tales of their family problems, and sickness [and] became friends with our customers. In the back of the store, we allotted a space for the farm trade to make and serve themselves with their own lunches; it was a

help for them with all their babies. [I] played the sales lady in the store. . . . I was dressed up. I was busy but it was a sort of recreation too, until it was time to make the supper.

ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVITY

Fannie Overman and her family arrived in Superior, Wisconsin, from Russia in about 1904, when she was two. Fannie completed a commercial course and worked as a stenographer in Duluth before marrying Abe Goldfine in 1922. As her son Manley related, she was her husband's full partner in a series of rurally based family enterprises.

My dad would buy cattle in the country that he would ship to the South Saint Paul stock yards and then call my mother and say, "cover the checks." She would have to go to the bank . . . or exchange checks with friends and relatives which was quite normal in those days. Since the day they were married, she was completely in charge of all financial arrangements.

After she was married . . . she bought a mailing list of all the farmers in Northern Minnesota. She wrote . . . telling them the Goldfine's Stable had excellent cows and horses for sale. . . .

Fannie weighed 99 pounds . . . and looked very young. Farmers would come to the door

Mochel and David Schloff serving Indian customers in their Hazen, North Dakota, general store, about 1925





Fannie Goldfine, a Duluth businesswoman, at the groundbreaking for her discount store, 1961

... and say, "Is your father home?" ... The farmers would come usually around lunch, so she would make them lunch and then would type up the ... sales contract.

Between 1932 and 1936 they opened their first feed, seed, and farm supply store. ... She continued to do all the financing, check writing, paying of bills, etc. ...

[S]he went to Minneapolis in 1934 for the opening of the bids for the furnishing of horses to the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camps. This was the type of activity she got very much involved in because it took expertise in bookkeeping, financial, and office skills. During the war they couldn't get farm machinery [to sell] so Fannie put in a little furniture department in the machinery warehouse. In 1941-1945 that aspect of business grew. ...

In 1960-1962 we decided to build a new discount store. ... [When secondary financing] backed out, Fannie, based on her character and creditability ... was able to arrange ... financ-



Belle Zimmerman with her grade school class in a small Wisconsin town, about 1909



ing . . . [with] in 48 hours. . . . The store was built and in 1962. . . . Fannie stood at the door for 30 days greeting every customer who came in.

WHITE-COLLAR WORK

During the 1930s some business schools refused to train Jewish girls, as the nineteen-year-old Fannie Schwartz of Minneapolis found out.

I wanted to attend a specific business machine school. . . . In those days if a girl finished comptometer school she earned \$35 a week, big money. I was received by this lovely looking Nordic, I'm being polite, and she had my name on there, asked me to sit down, and started asking questions about experience and grades in school and what I hoped to do. Then she said, "I have just one last question to ask you. Are you Jewish?" And I said, "Yes." And after a pause she said to me, "We don't have any Jewish students." I said, "I'm sorry about that. I don't mind being the only one." She said, "We don't place Jewish students." And I said, "You don't have to place me; just train me. I'll get my own job." And she paused, and pretty soon she said, "I'm sorry, but I can't accept you or your money." And that was the end of the conversation. My money was returned to me, pushed back across the desk and I was asked to leave the office.

TEACHING

Sara Bashefkin Ryder was born on St. Paul's West Side in 1906 and worked as a clerk in a grocery store before attending St. Cloud Teachers' College (now St. Cloud State University); she graduated in 1928. She was rejected by several rural schools because she was Jewish and finally found a position in a remote northern part of the state.

To get to Nemadji, one had to go by bus to Barnum, Minnesota, and then get someone to drive you four and one half miles to Nemadji. . . . [We] three teachers lived in the teacherage, a frail two story house about 100 feet from the school. . . . We had outside plumbing . . . [and] we had to get our kerosene outside from a tank It was not too easy . . . [c]oming from large cities. . . . However, we all stuck it out for two years, patiently waiting to return to civilization and home.

EXPERIENCES OF RECENT RUSSIAN IMMIGRANTS

The saga of immigration and job seeking has continued in recent decades. Russian Jews who began arriving in the 1970s were typically well educated. Those who were engineers or computer programmers were often able to transfer their skills to American jobs. Sophia Shankman Rosenauer and her family left Leningrad for St. Paul in 1977.

So I went through the school for five years and got a master's degree in mechanical engineering. I started to work for one consulting firm in Leningrad. . . . [After I moved to St. Paul] I worked for Control Data for seven years, . . . and in May 1990 I started to work for a consulting firm in downtown Minneapolis. . . . And this is exactly the same [work] I did in Russia.



Inna Gendelman Brezman, her husband, Michael, and daughter, Anna, arrived in the Twin Cities from Leningrad in 1979. She had been trained as a nurse.

Oh, my adjustment was a little bit more difficult because I didn't know any English. I had questions of what to do. Felicia Weingarten arranged a tour for me in a hospital. [Weingarten, a Holocaust survivor who arrived in St. Paul in the late 1940s, befriended Soviet immigrants who moved to that city.] I was terrified. When I saw all the equipment in the American hospitals here, I was absolutely terrified of doing anything near that hospital. Maybe because of the lack of language, maybe because I was overwhelmed with all that high tech. Then I had to go for four years back to school—start all my education over again. . . . So I decided to go to a dental assistant school. . . . I worked with a dentist in downtown St. Paul. . . . After [my daughter] Jessica was born, I didn't stay with it. First of all, because I thought my English didn't improve there at all. You can't talk to people with their mouth open. . . . So I stayed with Jessica for six months at home, and then I went to beauty school, which was only six weeks. I was able to choose my own hours working as a manicurist so I could juggle babysitters and baby. . . . I meet wonderful people every day, and I do blabber a lot. My English improved a lot, to the point that I understand more than my husband does.

The photo on page 168 is courtesy Violet Mekler; on page 169, Renell Silver. All the others are from the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest, St. Paul.



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