



# HARVARD POLITICAL REVIEW

## FEATURES

### Lifting Up The Lower East Side: Uptown Jewish Women, “Ghetto Girls,” and the Effort to Redeem Jewish Female Delinquency in New York, 1900-1924

By **Author** June 11, 2013

New York City, Progressives often lamented in the early twentieth century, had plenty of problems. But one problem in particular eluded easy solutions and troubled reformers who hoped to overhaul the reputation of the East Side and its Jewish immigrant inhabitants. “New York’s biggest problem is not its police, its fires, or even sanitation;” insisted Miss Trenholm, the Head Worker of the East Side Settlement in 1912: “It’s its girls.”<sup>[1]</sup>

During the peak years of immigration in New York, Jewish women reformers established systems and institutions to address the problem of female delinquency within the Jewish community. My thesis examines the social and cultural underpinnings of the reform institutions that American Jewish women created to rehabilitate transgressive Jewish girls. It evaluates three institutions in particular, all of which were founded, supported, and run by Jewish women for Jewish girls: the Columbia Religious and Industrial School for Jewish Girls on the East Side of Manhattan, started in 1900; the Cedar Knolls School for Girls, created in 1911 and expanded into a countryside institution in Westchester County in 1917; and the Lakeview Home for Unmarried Mothers on Staten Island, founded in 1905. The central question of this thesis is how, why, and with what degree of success uptown Jewish women employed institutions to reform delinquent Jewish girls.

Building on Mary Odem’s argument that female reformers were motivated to carve out professional opportunities as “New Women” of the Progressive Era, this thesis turns to Jewish female reformers who created a unique version of reform, prompted by shame, a desire for a cohesive Jewish community, and professional opportunity. This reform largely succeeded in shaping the Jewish community that emerged as the twentieth century progressed, although it did so often at the expense of the delinquent girls, many of whom found themselves, thanks simply to teenage sexual dalliances or innocent public outings, unwittingly institutionalized for the supposed greater communal good. This thesis argues that the reform efforts of uptown Jewish women did more to police and to punish downtown Jewish girls than to protect or promote Jewish American community and cohesion. American Jews ultimately did achieve the community cohesion they desired as the twentieth century progressed. It stemmed, however, not from the social, sexual, and gendered notion of Americanization that Jewish female reformers enforced, but from Jewish economic upward mobility and successful assimilation in the United States.

Chapter One focuses on the social discourse that surrounded Jewish girls’ transgression on the East Side. By examining a wide variety of cultural materials, we meet the downtown Jewish “Ghetto Girl” and the uptown women who sought to reform her. The figure of the Ghetto Girl appears time and again in both fictional and non-fictional accounts of Jewish life in early-twentieth-century New York. She comes into acute focus through the lens of characters like Mamie Fein and Lillie Rosenfeld, sensational and seductive girls who struck fear into the hearts of uptown Jewish women with their gaudy get-ups and their aggressive Americanization. Prescriptive literature, fiction, and press accounts allow us a glimpse

into the problem that Jewish female sexuality and delinquency posed for the identity, the unity, and the outside perception of the New York Jewish community.



Chapter Two confronts the main question of the thesis by turning to the three Jewish female reform institutions that sought to address the problem of female delinquency. While the Columbia School took a preventative approach to Jewish female delinquency, the Cedar Knolls School welcomed wayward girls like fifteen-year-old Florentina Rog, a Yiddish-speaking recent immigrant arraigned at Coney Island for loitering with a group of boys and girls, who had already come into contact with the courts. Girls who were sent to the Lakeview Home had taken their transgression one step further than mere "waywardness": Lakeview sought to shelter and reform Jewish unmarried mothers. In these institutions, Jewish female reformers created a maternal style of reform, one that stood in for their charges' purportedly inadequate immigrant mothers. The so-called "inmates" of the institutions, they hoped, would absorb the Jewish American maternal ideal that reformers had modeled for them and eventually create proper, mother-centered Jewish American homes of their own.

Chapter Two paints a picture of Jewish female reform institutions by synthesizing girls' stories, reformers' writings and speeches, and institutional records. It draws on annual reports, journal articles, press, and non-published archival materials to recreate and evaluate the environment and the aims of the Jewish female reform institution.

Although many have argued that Progressive women reformers pursued projects of reform based on their own professional and personal agendas without great regard for the concerns or expressed interests of their subjects, their actions were more complicated and require a more nuanced explanation than the existing scholarship has provided.<sup>[2]</sup> Addressing Jewish female delinquency was not simply a matter of standard moral reform, imposed on those who failed to conform to white, middle-class, Christian standards. Reformers sought to forestall and defuse ethnocentrism and anti-Semitism in the United States, which they believed this female transgression exacerbated. They sought to dissolve the shame it bred both within and without the Jewish community, but they also used shame to their advantage to accomplish their reform goals. They attempted to preempt Christian moral activists and monopolize reform among young Jewish girls, thereby conserving their Judaism and preventing conversion. And, most of all, they wished to create a viable Jewish American community that, they believed, must be centered on homes where moral, Jewish women presided as mothers. Jewish female reform institutions aimed to cultivate just this sort of moral maternal figure and in the process shaped the future of respectable Jewish American womanhood. The ongoing quest for a respectable, maternal-centered New World Jewish community, however, came at the expense of its girls' autonomy and social liberation. It created inmates in institutions instead of the independent Jewish American women whom it hoped to generate.

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[1] "New York's Biggest Problem, Not Police, But Girls: Immodesty, Extravagance, and Ignorance are Among their Characteristics, says Miss Trenholm, Head Worker of the East Side Settlement," *The New York Times*, August 4, 1912.

[2] See: Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*; Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*; Alexander, *The Girl Problem*. This critique also applied with regard to female prison reformers. See Estelle Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981); Anthony Platt, *The Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).