“Tinged by the Holocaust:”
Gender, War and Jewish Identities

Pam Maclean and Michele Langfield

Prologue: Some individual stories

Eva U. grew up in a middle-class family in Berlin. Her father was a self-employed architect and her mother was a psychoanalyst. She describes the family’s response to Nazi persecution and the background to its decision to leave in the wake of the Kristallnacht (Crystal Night) attacks on Jews on 9-10 November 1938:

I think it [the realisation that they had to get out] came on them gradually. Well Kristallnacht of course was the catalyst. My mother didn’t talk about it frankly [so] I’m not clear of the chronology of the events but I know about Kristallnacht. We lived in a suburb, a nice middle class suburb. I didn’t see any synagogues burning or anything like that. [However] I went to this Jewish school and we were sent home early from school that one day and I came home and I felt odd. I saw shops already had “Juden: Don’t buy from Jews” written across the windows in big red letters and things like that but nothing smashed yet. But I felt that this place where I’d grown up wasn’t my home any more, they didn’t want me any more and I knew that very well. I mean even at school people had been starting to leave, to emigrate already for the last year or before that. That night, [Kristallnacht], we left the house so that my father would not be arrested and we walked around the streets for quite a long time. Then we went to the home of some Christian friends of my parents and spent some time there; I remember sleeping on a sofa. Then they were warned that the Gestapo was searching their block of flats, so we went down the back stairs and started walking again. We landed about 4 o’clock in the morning, I think, I don’t remember exactly, in the flat of a friend of my parents whose husband had already been
taken to a concentration camp, and we stayed there for about three weeks... So we stayed there and my father just didn't go out at all for three weeks.¹

The realisation that Germany was no longer home was deeply upsetting to Jews in Germany who had, despite years of Nazi humiliation, harboured hopes that the Germans would see sense, overthrow Hitler and embrace Jews as German citizens.

Although Germans had experienced the Nazi regime for the longest period, German Jews were often the slowest to recognise danger and organise emigration. Nazi policy was inconsistent and uneven in its implementation, periods of relative calm were interrupted by occasionally violent attacks. In Austria the situation was quite different. The Anschluss (Nazi annexation of Austria) in March 1938 occurred suddenly and was accompanied by public humiliations of Jews and arrests. Lisa came from an upper middle-class Viennese family. Her father held Czech nationality—a residue of the prewar Austro-Hungarian empire. When the Nazis annexed Austria he made immediate arrangements to emigrate to Australia, however departure held its own dangers. The family got word of the father's imminent arrest and that night left Vienna by train for Switzerland with only their suitcases, and Lisa describes how her father and mother negotiated their departure. She comments on the primary reason for leaving:

Well, certainly the Anschluss. Then the factory and everything was taken over by some Nazis and then we were reasonably safe because we were Czech nationals. Then somebody told my father he was going to be arrested the next day and that night we left. I think ever since the Anschluss my father had had tickets to Switzerland in his pocket.²

Her father took the initiative to ensure the family's safety but it was her mother who negotiated with the Nazis when it looked as if they would not be allowed to leave.
Q: It must have been very scary?
A: It was, look we were so shielded by our parents really. So while it was scary it didn’t really enter our consciousness all that much. When we got to the Swiss border they wouldn’t let us in although as Czech citizens we were free to go in there.

Q: Because you were travelling on Czechoslovakian passports?
A: Yes, oh yes. Mother persuaded them. She was very good.
Q: How did she do that?
A: Well, she was extremely charming. 

These incidents illustrate a major theme of this article, the influence of gender on responses to persecution and the immigration and settlement process in Australia. A further theme addresses how socio-cultural factors such as religious identification, class and nationality, influenced decisions to emigrate in the immediate pre-second world war period, not just from German-occupied countries, but from Poland. Socio-cultural factors also affected refugees’ sense of identity after years in Australia. “Mira” was seven when she left Poland in 1939. Her family was not escaping from Nazism but from Polish antisemitism. During the war Australians found such distinctions difficult to grasp:

We weren’t enemy aliens [like] the Germans and the Austrians. We were Polish. But I have to tell you something he [my brother] told me recently, which I didn’t know. He said that he went to enlist and he stood in the queue—and the Australians didn’t know the difference between Jews who were trying to escape from Germany and the actual Nazis—so he stood in the queue and when he got to the desk they filled out his form until it came to where he was born. He was born in the depths of Russia and the fellow said, “Russia, get out of here,” and wouldn’t accept him, which was his good luck.

While Australians were suspicious of difference and had little appreciation of what these differences entailed, years after their arrival refugees are still dealing with unresolved issues to do with adjustment in Australia. “Marion” was born in Bremen, Germany, but
her father had Polish nationality. She was sixteen years old (a difficult and vulnerable age) when she arrived in Australia just as war was breaking out. "Marion" and her family had been deported to Poland in late October 1938 where they lived for eight months before their departure. "Marion" comments on how long it took her to feel comfortable in Australia. In contrast to her parents and her sister, "Marion" hated the situation:

It was so different. My resolve was that the minute the war was over I was going back to Europe, but of course when the war was over I was pregnant with my first child. In my mistaken imagination I thought [that] I didn't want that child to feel that dichotomy [of] not belonging anywhere. I wanted her to be born in a place and live there and have it as her home. And she never would have felt anything like this [if I had returned to Europe]. We didn't teach the children German and they still are sorry about that and I'm sorry about that, too, now. But it felt so different at the time; you didn't want to have anything to do with German things.5

Jews who escaped to Australia confronted the normal problems of migration and adjustment. In addition to this their first years were spent in a society at war. It was, however, the fate of their families and friends that increasingly tormented them. Slowly they became aware of the implications of the Holocaust, although the full truth was not revealed until the war ended. All were refugees from antisemitism but no one could have anticipated what actually occurred.

The project

This article draws on data from a series of interviews with now elderly Jewish women who arrived in Australia between 1938 and 1940.6 Most, but not all, now reside in Melbourne. Some came as part of a planned intake of 15,000 Jewish refugees from Nazism who were intended to come over three years from 1938.7 Others arrived independently and, in fact, included women escaping Polish, not Nazi, antisemitism. The women trace their experiences as children and adolescents in Europe, as refugees and migrants to Australia in the immediate prewar period, and as "foreigners" and "aliens" during
the second world war. They also reflect upon their subsequent lives, on their escape from the Holocaust and on their feelings about their original homelands. Although they did not experience incarceration in camps or ghettos, their recognition (or that of their families) of the threat posed by antisemitism was the prerequisite for the decision to emigrate. Issues of identity permeate these memories. Many of the women in our sample have rejected their places of origin as “home” in their later lives. Their subsequent experiences have shaped what they have become. As Macgregor Wise has written: “[H]ome is not an ordinary place from which identity arises. It is not the place we ‘come from’; it is a place we are” (Wise 2000:297).

The interview project began with the intention of focusing on single Jewish women who managed to escape to Australia just before the war by negotiating their way through a complex set of immigration requirements, sometimes facilitated by unknown male sponsors. As is often the case in research it proceeded to take on a life of its own. Respondents were recruited through a process of networking and recommendation from those already interviewed which resulted in a broadening of criteria. Women who arrived as children or wives were incorporated into the sample. Whereas the original idea was to focus on refugees from Nazism in Germany, it turned out that a number of women had left from Poland or Austria, rather than Germany. So far, twenty-six women have been interviewed, of whom nineteen left from Germany, three from Poland and four from Austria. Some of those living in Germany and Austria, however, did not hold German or Austrian nationality, a factor which had a significant influence on their experiences. The two youngest interviewees were seven on arrival in Australia, and the oldest was thirty-six.

While all the respondents were to some extent “tinged by the Holocaust,” since they lost family members who were left behind, and were conscious of what might have happened had they not come to Australia, their stories paint a remarkably diverse picture of resourcefulness, complacency, courage, luck, ingenuity and disappointment. Sarah claims that unlike others she has not been “tinged,” an evocative phrase which she coined herself. The multidimensional nature of their “Jewish” identities shaped their
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experiences, but so too did gender. Antisemitic persecution was not confined to one sex or the other (although it may have manifested itself in different ways), nor was the trauma associated with escape and resettlement. Nonetheless, girls and young women often responded differently from boys and men to their experiences, partly because of socialisation, but also because they did not have the financial resources to act independently. In the wider historiography of the Holocaust, there has been some resistance to the focus on gender, research that, it is claimed, diverts attention away from the enormity of the wholesale assault on Jews as Jews (Ofer and Weitzman 1998). On the other hand, our interviews confirm Judith Tydor Baumel’s warning against universalising the Holocaust experience: “Jewish victims are gendered subjects with class, local, cultural, and national identities that matter and complicate their Jewish identity” (Baumel 1998:330).

Interviewing women decades after their arrival in Australia enables us to examine, with the benefit of a longer perspective, how their experiences were shaped by and, in turn, shaped their identity. Nonetheless, despite its focus on the importance of positioning women in a socio-cultural and gender context, our approach is not reductionist. Individual women’s experiences defy generalisation. Their stories remain the cornerstone of this article because, whatever the limitations of oral history methodology, it gives the historian an immediacy of contact with events in the past that otherwise remains inaccessible. What is remarkable for such a small, and by no means representative sample, is the wide variety of stories told: stories that provide tiny pieces in a complex historical mosaic.

Crosscutting identities: “Jewish” and gender

Theorists of identity emphasise its fluidity and flexibility, arguing that it is contestable and always shifting and evolving rather than fixed (Hall 1997; Woodward 1997). Identity discourses are political, no more so than in the context of supposed race. Identities are constructed by marking out categories of difference, which are themselves dynamic. The construction and imposition of identities are historically and culturally specific and serve to exclude and
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marginalise certain groups of people who are denoted as inferior or threatening (Markus 2001; Tisdale 1996). Identity is a complex phenomenon, beset by contradictions and multiple overlays. Its formation is interactive, dependent not only on self-perception but also on the perceptions of others.¹⁶

Jewish identity, in particular, is far from a single unproblematic category. Prior to the second world war, European Jewish life was characterised by diversity and fragmentation. Jewish religious practice varied from liberal to ultra-orthodox. In western Europe many individuals of Jewish descent considered themselves secular Jews or converted to Christianity. In eastern Europe traditional practices continued, although younger, increasingly secularised, urban Jews were attracted to socialist ideas. Jews also varied in the extent to which they assimilated into the societies around them. In western Europe Jews often felt an integral part of their communities. They could be assertively patriotic and desperate to merge into their surrounding communities. German Jews emphasised the affinity between Jewish and German cultures, claiming that there existed a “symbiotic” relationship between the two. With some exceptions, they led a comfortable, middle-class existence, based on employment in the liberal professions or in business. Membership of the middle class, either in western or eastern Europe, was associated with assimilation and acculturation, whereas the poorer Jews, frequently of eastern European descent, maintained a sense of distinctiveness, whether religious, political or through identification with the growing Zionist movement.¹⁷ During the first world war Polish Jews were brought to Germany as forced labour and many settled after the war. Their presence altered the profile of Jews in Germany, introducing a group whose background was in trades and whose aspirations were not necessarily assimilationist.

The redrawing of national boundaries at the end of the first world war created complications for Jews in Poland and Austria. Poland incorporated Jews from the Hassidic heartland of Vilna (now capital of Lithuania), Jews from Lvov (now Lviv in the Ukraine), as well as Jews in Warsaw. Many Jews in Poland spoke Yiddish, not Polish, and identified themselves as a separate national group (Ury 2000).Occupationally Jews in Poland were concentrated in small-scale
business and trades. Unlike German Jews, the majority of Polish Jews lived in grinding poverty (Heller 1977:98-105). Vienna was home to over ninety percent of Jews in the Austrian Republic, a slight majority of whom were concentrated in the poorer suburbs. Wealthier Viennese Jews were prominent in commerce, banking and in the liberal professions. Austrian Jewry was divided between highly assimilated German speakers and recent Yiddish-speaking immigrants from former Austrian territories in Galicia (Austrian Poland) (Pauley 1992:207; 212-217).

Regardless of their background, one factor influencing how Jews perceived their identity in the interwar period was antisemitism. Their level of consciousness of antisemitism reinforced their sense of danger and marginality. In Germany the coming to power of the Nazis signalled the institutionalisation of antisemitism in a process of unpredictable escalation. For Jews in Germany this came as a shock because, despite the presence of antisemitism during the Weimar Republic, as mentioned earlier, many Jews saw Hitler's ascension to power in 1933 as an aberration that would soon blow over. Many were reluctant to recognise that they were physically at risk. In Austria antisemitism had been more culturally entrenched than in Germany but in the years immediately before the German Anschluss, the conservative government promised to protect Jews from threats posed by extremist antisemitism. It banned racial antisemitism, while at the same time initiating a process of "quiet" antisemitism. The reality was that Jews were increasingly restricted from holding government posts or positions in the arts (Pauley 1992:267-68). Austrian Jews were less naïve than German Jews about the implications of antisemitism. In Poland antisemitism was endemic. It was the product of centuries of institutionalised prejudice based primarily on traditional Catholic hatred of Jews. It developed quite independently of the racial antisemitism practised by the Nazis, although, as in Germany, it was strongly nationalistic in character. After the death of the liberal president, Jozef Pilsudski in 1935, the Polish government formalised a series of economic measures, designed to squeeze Polish Jews out of the economy. Antisemitic violence was rampant.
Gender traverses these socio-cultural constructs of Jewish identity in a number of ways that provide insights into the experiences of Jewish refugee women. As mentioned above, the study of the role of gender and the Holocaust is considered problematic; nonetheless, in recent years a growing historiography has emerged focussing on women and the Holocaust (Langfield and Maclean 2002; Baumel 1998; Linden 1993; Ringelheim 1993). Research has also extended into the area of gender and the Holocaust. It seeks to identify what distinguishes women’s experiences from men’s and has led to a consideration of family relationships in the Holocaust (Baumel, 2000; Baumel, 1998; Ofer and Weitzmann 1998). This focus has made a valuable contribution to the emerging social history of women and children subject to Nazi persecution.

In her recent study of German Jews under Nazi rule, Marion Kaplan (1998) argues that, as their male partners became increasingly marginalised from public life, many women experienced a sense of empowerment, previously denied them in a patriarchal society. Forced out of work and socially disengaged, men retreated to the private sphere where they felt isolated and ineffectual. Women stepped into traditionally male domains in the public sphere and as nominal heads of families, at times demonstrating remarkable ingenuity. Kaplan (1993:199-204) also suggests that women were more likely to recognise danger early and urge their husbands to leave. Fearing loss of status and financial insecurity, men were reluctant to emigrate and women would not go without them. Paradoxically, when emigration peaked after Kristallnacht, many women remained behind to look after elderly relatives or waited to follow their husbands who, once they had agreed to leave, decided to keep their families in Germany until they could find work and make a suitable home for them. This meant that by 1939 there were 135 Jewish women for every 100 Jewish men remaining in Germany.

A sense of crisis also brought about changes in gender roles in Poland. Celia Heller observes that Jewish mothers in interwar Poland took on additional economic responsibilities as their husbands’ financial situation worsened. Economic stress diminished the authority of Jewish men and enhanced the position of Jewish
women. Women also had become more well educated by attending Polish, rather than Jewish schools. This resulted in a relatively greater level of acculturation into Polish society and identification with Polish nationality by women than men (Heller 1977:241-4).

Women’s experiences

As we turn our attention now to the interviews we can see the interplay of socio-cultural and gender factors in women’s stories. The following section examines these issues by focusing on a number of specific questions.

Were men or women more likely to recognize danger?

Women’s ability to network widely opened up windows of opportunity. Margaret (from Germany) describes how her mother organised the permit for Australia, but also notice the representative’s mistaken sense of security in Germany:

The manufacturers’ reps used to come in to buy things and mum was the smart one and one day a man called Mr. Gans came to sell his ribbons, I don’t know what he sold but he was a rep. She said to him—this must have been about 1936: “Herr Gans, when are you going, when are you leaving?” because there was a definite feeling that you had to go. He said, “Oh, I don’t have to go. I’ve got a marvellous job with a very nice Catholic family. I’ll be all right.” She said to him, “Do you know anybody im Ausland?” meaning outside Germany. “Yes,” he said, “actually I’ve got an uncle in Australia but he’s broiges with us.” Broiges [in Yiddish] means not talking to us and she said, “If I were you, I would write to him because I’m sure he won’t be broiges if you write and ask if you can get out. You are a young man.” He was back six weeks later and she said, “What are you doing here, you’re not due back for another six months” and he said, “I came to tell you, you were right. They gave me the sack and I have written to my uncle and he has sent me a permit and I just wanted to thank you and to ask you if I can do anything for you, if I can be of any help to you.” She said, “You can. When you get there, get us a permit.” Which
he did. So when we came to Australia in ’38, he met us on the wharf.\textsuperscript{22}

At other times, it was men who first recognised the danger and acted upon it. "Mira’s" father (from Poland) initiated her family’s emigration, motivated by the direct experience of antisemitism. He was familiar with Australia as a possible destination through family contact and by extensive reading. For many Poles, migration was not unusual.\textsuperscript{23} Herta (from Austria) attributes the recognition of danger to her fiancé. Herta emphasises:

Lucky, the only word I can say. I tell you quite frankly, if my fiancé hadn’t been so determined, my father and I would have landed in the gas chamber because my father and I never would have left.\textsuperscript{24}

The emigration of Ilona’s family (of Hungarian and Dutch background) was prompted by her Dutch grandfather who warned her parents: “You must get out. You must get out. It’s going to get worse.” And he put up the money to get a visa for them to go to England. Obviously wealth contributed to the ability to escape.\textsuperscript{25} Sometimes it was a family decision. Anne G. (from Austria of Czech nationality) relates:

I’m sure they [her mother and father] mutually agreed that that’s the only way. In fact, I do recall quite clearly after we got to Switzerland that it was dad’s secretary who alarmed us the evening before we left, that she heard on the grapevine from the Nazis that they were going to round up all the Jews that were Czechoslovakian subjects. That night we packed our bags and left.\textsuperscript{26}

Did men and women play different roles in the process of migration, for example, in gaining documents, networking with emigration agencies, negotiating with Nazi authorities and packing?

Margaret (from Germany) believes her mother was very much the driving force in the family. She even got a bit of money out.
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My mother used to go away for the weekend to Switzerland where... I think they had a bank account. She would put some money into, in those days you had cocoa tins and she would seal it with tape... black and waterproof. She would get in the train and she would tell the people that she was going away for the weekend and she went by herself because she said my father would have had a heart attack. She didn’t always tell him what she was doing. She would put the money into the cocoa tin and getting near the border she’d go to the toilet, she’d put the cocoa tin in the cistern which in those days you had, a cistern with water, do you remember? She would sit down quietly in her seat and the customs people would come in and she had nothing to declare and when they got off the train she’d go and pull the thing out of the water. And she did it a few times. I think we had somebody over there who shipped it to us when we arrived here so we had a bit of money saved up.27

Lisa (from Austria of Czech nationality) recalls:

I think from the moment the Anschluss came, my mother even more than my father did the applying for various places and everything like that. Then the Australian visa came through.28

Anne V.’s mother (from Germany) took over most of the administration for the move:

She had to go to Berlin and get the passports and all these sorts of things and so she thought I could supervise the packing.29

Sonia (from Poland) remembers her mother buying a diamond ring:

I remember my father saying you can come out with fifty pounds or you can come out with two hundred or more but they wouldn’t let you out with a lot more. I remember my mother saying she had a bit more than she was allowed to take out but you were allowed to buy anything to take with you. So she went and bought a little diamond ring that she thought, well, she can’t take money out so when we were in
Warsaw on the way to Australia she bought a little diamond.30

Eva F. (from Germany) emphasises her mother’s key role in the decision to emigrate:

My mother agitated. My mother was always at her best if she could be resourceful and think of ways to get things done. My mother wrote a letter to the Prime Minister of New Zealand with photos of her three blonde daughters with a letter to say that she’d heard New Zealand had more men than women and she had these three good looking girls. It empowered her, she could do something and I think one of the worst things for somebody like my mother... was to be paralysed, to not be able to think of ways to help things along.

We had to make a list when we emigrated of everything we were taking, when it had been bought, how much was paid for it, because you see, what people did, people who had money bought up things they were planning to sell when they got out. So my father, I can remember, he wrote this list, he typed it. He was a very slow typist and he had done it in the rough in handwriting and I sat with him. I was very attached to my father, and I dictated to him what he was typing. And he had headings and sub-headings and underlined in red and my mother would come and say, “I don’t know why you are taking all this trouble to be so orderly. Just write hanky, chest of drawers, cutlery, carpet, in any old order”—but he insisted. He had to show the Germans that he was decent because he always equated being German with being decent and he had to show them that he was more German than they.31

At this stage in their lives, Eva F.’s parents were German first, Jewish second. Even after emigrating, her father clung to characteristics that he identified as German.

Our interviews sustain the argument that women played key roles in devising innovative survival strategies, preparing for emigration, organising not only the packing but also the means of travel and escape. Under impossible circumstances, women were resourceful, taking over when men were shattered and humiliated
and finding ways of resisting. "Mira" felt that this was true in her case:

My father had lost his standing by not being able to practise his profession. I think that happened to a number of men. He did not adapt as well, whereas my mother, who hadn't wanted to come because we were living comfortably, adapted much better. And she was very practical, my mother. When dad decided we would emigrate, it was my mother who did all the packing. Dad walked back and forth, nervous, and mum packed. And everything came intact.\textsuperscript{32}

Eva U. testifies that her mother was more active than her father altogether.

My father was very withdrawn, very quiet, very introverted, a bit of a \textit{Luftmensch} (a dreamer)... I think he found it harder to leave and also much harder to adjust here [in Australia]. Well, they both came from assimilated families... they felt more German than Jewish. They were not at all religious; they felt like Germans. My father had been a soldier in the first world war, not that he liked it, he hated it, a dreamer like him... I'm guessing now, but very likely my mother said a year before, "Look, we must get out" and he said, "No, no. It will pass." You know, a lot of German Jews took that attitude. "This can't last. This whole Nazi regime is not like the Germans we know, it must pass."\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{What was the effect of the upheaval and relocation on family relationships?}

Although women often initiated the migration process, in leaving they encountered personal problems because of their reluctance to abandon elderly parents who, owing to their age, were unlikely to gain immigration permits (Baumel 2000). Thus, men often emigrated ahead, and, if possible, women and children followed (Kaplan 1998; Koonz 1986). As Anne V. relates: "My father left six months before us, so he must have left early in 1938."
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Sonia explains her circumstances:

My father’s parents were dead but my mother’s parents were still alive and she had sisters. And she didn’t want to go so my father said to her, “Let me go first and if I like it, if I can make a business or something, if I know that I can earn a living...” She said, “No, either we both go or we don’t go at all.” That was very clever because otherwise I would have been still left there. So he said, “OK, we will both go.”

Migration and resettlement often shattered traditional family relationships and gender roles. Eva F. recalls that in the late 1930s her mother did not cope well with children in that situation.

I can remember a couple of times she went off to stay with her mother in Hamlin, the Pied Piper town, not that far from Hanover, never told us where she was going. For me, as the youngest and very dependent on family security, I was petrified. My oldest sister thought this was a great challenge for her. So now as an adult I can understand that we gave our parents a difficult time.

As people began to disappear in 1938, Germany was a dangerous place for men to be. Women were not taken to concentration camps at that stage and were often left to manage alone. Eva U. had two uncles who were arrested during Kristallnacht.

They were both in concentration camps for something like six weeks and they were let out on the condition that they had somewhere to get out to—within a month, I think. So one of them went to China and the other [who did not survive] went to Holland.

According to Kate, her mother adjusted better to the whole experience than her father while acknowledging that “she was ten years younger than he was and much healthier.” Indeed, many of the fathers in our sample were considerably older than their wives. Sometimes the change in family dynamics was temporary. At other times, women continued to play a more equal role in their relationships on arrival in Australia.

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The loss of class and occupational status for middle class men, which had begun in Germany, often continued in Australia. Anne V. (from Germany) says:

My father didn’t like it that he always had a very lowly job. He had always been a manager, ever since he was a very young man, and then he had a very lowly job.36

On the other hand, men who were lower-class tradesmen in Europe were often able to pick up where they left off making adjustment easier. Paula’s father (originally from Poland but resettled in Germany) set up his own house-painting business in Australia.

All he needed was to go through a house and say, “Right, it’s going to cost so much” and that was it.39

What were the gender-specific responses relating to reproduction at the time?

Oral history facilitates an illumination of personal and private space through the intimate relationship that develops between interviewer and interviewee. This especially applies to women and issues of sexuality. In particular, the reproductive role of women empowered them to counter genocidal policies, the aim of which was the biological destruction of Jews as a group. Katharina von Kellenbach discusses examples of Jewish women who deliberately became pregnant under Nazi rule as an act of defiance in the face of total destruction (von Kellenbach 1999).40 Women migrants, too, countered genocidal intentions by becoming parents. Did women migrants feel a cultural obligation to ensure a continued Jewish existence and identity by having children? If so, what was the effect on their family relationships? In contrast to the examples given by von Kellenbach, for the families contemplating emigration in our interview group, the unpredictability of the future brought different, sometimes desperate, responses. For example, Kate (from Germany) explains:

When we made final plans to leave, my mother found she was pregnant again. Because everything was so uncertain my parents decided that she would have an abortion. This
was fraught with anxiety because it was strictly against the law, but we had a Jewish doctor friend who agreed to help. My mother regretted it all her life and it probably would not have made much difference to our poverty here, but times were so uncertain it seemed the best thing to do.\textsuperscript{41}

Similarly, Margaret (from Germany) describes the effect of the Nazi regime on her parents' family planning:

Hitler made no bones about it, he wanted the Jews out and at first they thought he was a nutter and they'd had a few before. As my mother once said, "We had so many changes in government before 1933 that we assumed this one would go too." In fact, my parents had two children, I was born in '30 and my brother in '28 and they intended to have two more kids. They wanted a family of four but they said they'd wait until this lunatic was gone and he didn't go. So they only had two children.\textsuperscript{42}

On the other hand, Sonia (from Poland) states:

Well, my mother always said, "We were meant to leave maybe to raise a new generation." She always felt there must have been a reason.\textsuperscript{43}

Was their sense of Jewishness weakened or strengthened by the events of the war?

Before coming to Australia, Lisa and Anne G. (from Austria of Czech nationality) had never been to a synagogue. Their parents and grandparents were completely secular. Anne G. says: "We were agnostics and religion never came into it." On arrival in Australia they increasingly mixed with Jews rather than non-Jews because of their shared language and background. The girls became closely involved with the Liberal Synagogue youth club:

The liberal Jewish community had Temple House in Alma Street and I think this is where we met... a lot of other young people, a social club. Yes, we did meet there quite a bit in the early days but I didn't go to religious things but I went to the social club.\textsuperscript{44}
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The reinforcement of Jewishness was an inevitable outcome of persecution, emigration and the experience of the second world war and the Holocaust. Sarah’s mother (from Poland) rejected the Polish language and culture and taught her children Yiddish after settling in Australia:

I think they would have gone to synagogue [in Poland] because of the connection of my aunt with the synagogue. I don’t recall religion playing a big part in my life, it probably did but one thing was interesting, I couldn’t speak Yiddish in Poland. We only spoke Polish and when we came here my mother refused to speak Polish any more. So we learnt Yiddish and we never learnt proper Yiddish because we never had lessons in it but my mother refused to speak Polish, she was very angry [because]... the Poles were antisemitic, because she left her sister and she was very distressed for the next ten years of her life, she was very depressed about her sister especially after the war when she realised what had happened.48

This supports P.Y. Medding’s view that there was a heightened Jewish consciousness after the war, which mobilized the activities of Jews everywhere in the work of cultural maintenance and encouraged those who had previously only marginally identified as Jewish to support them, attracting the peripheral to the centre (Medding 1972:98).

Conclusion

There is no attempt to generalise here from the varied experiences of these women. Rather, we are reading these very diverse testimonies for themes that warrant further investigation. While patterns are emerging, there are also notable exceptions. What is most difficult is the task of differentiating between responses made at the time and responses made when interviewed many years later with the benefit of hindsight. It is clear, however, that socio-cultural factors have been instrumental in the circumstances of the emigration of our interviewees and in shaping their subsequent lives.
Endnotes

1 Interview with Eva U., 6 December 1999.
2 Interview with Lisa, 23 December 2001.
3 Ibid.
4 Interview with “Mira,” 3 January 2001. (Pseudonyms have been used at the request of some interviewees.)
5 Interview with “Marion,” 16 November 1998.
6 Two of the respondents have subsequently died. One respondent first emigrated to New Zealand, only coming to Australia in the 1950s.
7 Pressure was put on Australia to take refugees from the Greater German Reich (Sherman 1973). See also Langfield (2000) and Langfield with Yule (2000).
8 Some of the respondents’ fathers or husbands/fiancés, however, were subjected to incarceration or deportation from Germany.
9 We have already written on how those who arrived as children remember their experiences in Langfield and Maclean (2002).
11 The term “Jew” is used advisedly here. A number of our respondents were not practising Jews but were classed as such by the Nuremberg Laws [1935], that defined a Jew as a person descended from four grandparents who practised the Jewish religion. Some were practising Christians.
12 Milton (1984:300) argues that in Germany Jewish women were more likely to be subjected to verbal insults from Nazis than the physical brutality unleashed on men. Also see Kaplan (1998).
13 For criticism of a feminist perspective see Langer (1998).
14 Here our approach differs from that of Baumel whose focus is on the effect of persecution on women’s roles in Jewish communal organisations.
15 For a more detailed discussion of oral history methodology in relation to this project see Langfield and Maclean (2002). Also Portelli (1991).
16 For a sophisticated analysis of identity formation, see Loza (2003) chapters 2 and 5.
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17 See Hyman (1998) for an excellent comparison of demographic differences between western and eastern European Jews.

18 Bukey (2000:133) is less sanguine about Jewish perceptiveness about the dangers of antisemitism. He contends that the community falsely believed that their positions were secure and underestimated the possibility that the government would be overthrown by the Nazis.

19 According to Baumel, women’s testimonies began to be collected systematically in the 1970s by oral historians. Of relevance here is Lixi-Purcell (1988) and Lixi-Purcell (1994).

20 Fuchs (1999) argues that Nazism was characterised not only by its racism but also by its misogyny.

21 This compared with 1933 where there were 110 Jewish women to 100 men, Lixi-Purcell (1988: 3).

22 Interview with Margaret, 19 June 2001.


24 Interview with Herta, 29 July 2001.


26 Interview with Anne G., 12 December 2001.

27 Interview with Margaret, 19 June 2001.

28 Interview with Lisa, 23 December 2001.

29 Interview with Anne V., 22 March 1999.

30 Interview with Sonia, 19 June 2001.


33 Interview with Eva U., 6 December 1999.

34 Interview with Sonia, 19 June 2001.


36 Interview with Eva U., 6 December 1999.

37 Interview with Kate, 23 February 2001.

38 Interview with Anne V., 22 March 1999.


40 See Fuchs (1999) who argues that Nazism was characterised not only by its racism but also by its misogyny.
Interview with Kate, 23 February 2001.
Interview with Margaret, 19 June 2001.
Interview with Sonia, 19 June 2001.
Interview with Anne G, 12 December 2001.
Interview with Sarah, 18 May 2001.

Bibliography


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