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**The Last Will and Testament of the  
Ninety-Three Bais Yaakov Girls of Kraków (1942)**

In the winter of 1942-1943, a shocking report spread throughout the Jewish world, beginning in the Orthodox pulpits and press of North America and extending to other Jewish communities; the New York Times covered the story on January 8, 1943, under the headline “93 Choose Suicide Before Nazi Shame.” The story involved a group of ninety-three girls and young women associated with the Orthodox Bais Yaakov school system for girls, who, in the Kraków ghetto (the New York Times erroneously placed the ghetto in the better-known ghetto of Warsaw), had swallowed poison rather than be taken as prostitutes by German soldiers. One of the girls, Chaya Feldman, had managed to write a last will and testament and have it smuggled out of the apartment where they were being held in preparation for the soldiers’ “visit.” It was this letter, which ostensibly first reached a representative of the Bais Yaakov movement in Switzerland and was then forwarded to New York, that formed the basis of the report.

Here is the letter, written in a hard-to-identify language that has been variously described either as a Hungarian-Jewish dialect of German (with a fair admixture of Hebrew) or as Yiddish in German characters; the English translation follows:

11 August 1942  
Liber Freind Herr Schenkalewsky in New York,

Ich waisz nischt ob dieszer Brief wird Sie eraichen. Waiszen Sie noch wer ich bin? Wir haben uns in der Hausz von Frau Schenirer kennen gelaernt und spater in Marienbad wider getroffen. Wen diszer in Ihrer Hande erreicht, lebe ich nischt mer. Mit mir sint 92 Bes Jakob madschen. Noch einige Stunten und ales is nischt mehr. Gruszen Sie Herrn Rosenheim und unsern Friend Gutman, beide in England. Wir haben unsz alle in Warschau bei unser Freind sholemman getroffen und sholemszon war auch da. Wir haben gelaernt und dass Land wo der Brif gaeht hat uns gensendet Brodt. Wir haten vier Zimern. Den 27 Juli sind wir geholt worden und in ein dunkel Zimer geworfen (?) haben nur majim. Haben (?) aus dem Rosch Davit gelarnt und Mut gehabt. Unser Alter ist von 14 bisz 22, die Jungen haben Mairoh, ich laerne zusammen Mamma Soros taitsch, gud leben for hachem, aber gud zu staerben auch. Vorgeastern und gaestern sind wir heisz

gebadet worden und man hat unsz gesagt heuite nacht warden kimen deutsche Soldaten unsz besuchen. Wir haben geastern die schwio gethan zusammen zu sterben . Man hat uns geastern in ein grosses Hausz mit haeleem Zimern und schoenen Beten gesaendet. Deutsche wiszen nischt, das Bad ist unszere teville vor den Todt. Mat hat unsz haint alles genomen und nu rein Hemt geschaenkt. Wir haben all Givt. Wen Soldaten komen werden wir alle drincken. Haint sind wir zuszamen, laernen gansen jom vidujohi (?). Wir haben kaine moiroh. Dancken guter Friend vuer ales. Wir haben eine Bite, sagen Sie Kadich vuer unsz 93 ihre kinder. Baelde sind wir bei mama Soro. Es gruzt sie.

Chaja Feldman von Krako

11 August 1942

My dear friend Mr. Schenkalewsky in New York,

I do not know whether this letter will reach you. Do you know who I am? We met at the house of Mrs. Schenirer and later in Marienbad. When this letter will reach you, I will no longer be among the living. Together with me are ninety-two girls from Bais Yaakov. In a few hours all will be over. Regards to Mr. Rosenheim and to our friend Gutman, both in England. We all met in Warsaw at our friend Sholeman's, and Sholemsohn was also there. We learned that the land to which this letter goes has sent us bread. We had four rooms. On July 27<sup>th</sup> we were arrested and thrown into a dark room. We had only water. We learned David by heart and took courage. We are girls between 14 and 22 years of age. The young ones are frightened. I am learning our mother Sarah's Torah with them, [that] it is good to live for God but it is also good to die for Him. Yesterday and the day before we were given warm water to wash and we were told that German soldiers would visit us this evening. Yesterday we all swore to die. Today we were all taken out to a large apartment with four well-lit rooms and beautiful beds. The Germans don't know that this bath is our purification bath before death. Today everything was taken from us and we were given nightgowns. We all have poison. When the soldiers will come we will take it. Today we are together and are learning the confession all day long. We are not afraid. Thank you my good friend for everything. We have one request. Say kaddish for us, your ninety three children. Soon we will be with our mother Sarah.

Yours,  
Chaya Feldman from Kraków<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For this letter, the English translation quoted here, and a discussion of its authenticity as a historical document, see Judith Tydor Baumel and Jacob J. Schacter, "The Ninety-Three Bais Yaakov Girls of Kraków: History or Typology," in *Reverence, Righteousness, and Rahamanut: Essays in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aranson, 1992), 93-130. Baumel and Schacter conclude that while there is no evidence that the events described in the letter took place, they could have happened; the weakness of their argument rests, to my mind, on the weight of substantiation it places on intertextual rather than historical analysis, finding similar examples of female martyrology in Jewish literature. In these circumstances, "the actions of the victims, confronted by terrifying choices and realities, were governed by

The impression made by this story in 1943 can hardly be overstated: Rabbis preached emotionally of the girls at Sabbath sermons throughout North America, poetry and short stories were published about their ordeal, memorial services at which the will was publicly read were held throughout the free Jewish world, and, in the Land of Israel, streets and a park were named after “the 93.” Chaya Feldman’s one request, that Mr. Shenkalewsky recite *kaddish* [the memorial prayer] for his ninety-three “children,” was reportedly fulfilled by many other men and women, including one Jewish girl who, at her grandmother’s request, lit a memorial candle and said *kaddish* for the girls annually for over fifty years in honor of “my hundred little sisters.”<sup>2</sup> These activities quickly transcended the borders of the Orthodox community, reaching the entire spectrum of North American Jewry and that of the Land of Israel; now, the memory of the ninety three is kept alive almost solely within the loose international network of Bais Yaakov schools, where the story often functions as a hallowed point of entry into Holocaust education and, it could be argued, constitutes a critical part of the sexual-religious formation of female Orthodox adolescence.

Academic research into the story of the ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls has focused almost exclusively on questions of its authenticity, with a growing consensus that the story is implausible—in short, a pious fiction.<sup>3</sup> (This consensus view, which includes Orthodox historians and scholars, has only marginally limited the memorial uses of the story within the Bais Yaakov movement, where teachers and principals who avoid its mention do so without publicly objecting to its continued use elsewhere in the system.) Some of those who deny its authenticity consider the story not merely a pious fantasy but an egregious lie: Among the effects of the legend is to bring the events of the Holocaust into the orbit of religious narrative, and more specifically the martyrology of *Kiddush hashem*—dying for the sanctification of God’s name—providing theological meaning within a genocide that even within the Orthodox world is considered by many to have

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patterns of behavior established in similar situations over the course of centuries of Jewish pain and persecution,” Baumel and Schacter, 110.

<sup>2</sup> These and other responses are documented by Baumel and Schacter, who cite a telephone interview in 1990 with the woman, Arlene Stempler, who said Kaddish for five decades, 98.

<sup>3</sup>

rendered the possibilities for such discourse obsolete or even obscene. The old pattern of *Kiddush hashem*, in which Jews sanctified God's name by suicide rather than submit to the baptismal font, had no bearing on Jewish experiences in the Holocaust, which demanded Jewish survival above all, as Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the famed Rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto, clearly saw.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the story of the ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls describes a death that can be seen as a fabulous luxury when read within the context of Nazi methods of dehumanization and isolation. The story, grotesquely enough, is both Holocaust martyrology and erotic utopia: the girls, though their lives will soon end, are bathed, ensconced in beautiful surroundings, and supported by boon companions; they remain in control of the moment and method of their death, and to the end succeed in keeping their dignity as well as their "purity" intact, formulating the meaning of their lives and deaths in a missive that finds its way to a freer world and is faithfully remembered by their Bais Yaakov "sisters." It could be argued, then, that the effect of this message, and the exemplary and representative role it acquired in its various discursive mobilizations, is not only to glorify the actions of these beautiful martyrs but also to obscure and aestheticize the Holocaust itself. And it does so by clothing the Holocaust in a meretricious and seductive aura of female martyrdom, with its powerful fusion of Eros and death, piety and pornography, modesty and voyeurism, virile heroism and feminine innocence.

This potent brew is familiar enough from religious history, though it has played itself out somewhat differently—if dialectically—in Christian and Jewish circles, as Daniel Boyarin, Israel Yuval, and Susan Einbinder have amply demonstrated.<sup>5</sup> It may well be, in fact, that the vehemence with which the veracity of the story is denied in some quarters derives from more than the ideology of the uniqueness and incommensurability of the Holocaust, its resistance to "pious" or "didactic" uses. The story gives off a whiff, to many Jews, not only of pornography but more specifically of spiritualized pornography of a distinctly *Christian* cast. The fascination with rape and virginity, the

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<sup>4</sup> Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, who buried his Orthodox theological-halachic treatise in a canister in the Warsaw Ghetto, in *Esh kodesh* (Israel, 1960), speaks of the entire Nazi-occupied Jewish world as engaging in *Kiddush hashem*, and exalts survival as the highest form of resistance under genocidal circumstances.

<sup>5</sup> See Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford University Press, 1999); Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*; and Susan Einbinder, *Beautiful Death: Jewish Poetry and Martyrdom in Medieval France*, 2002

close juxtaposition of sexual violence and sexual purity, the focus on women as exemplary virgins and martyrs arguably resonates more powerfully with the Christian religious imaginary; by contrast, scholars have claimed, the martyred Jewish woman is much more likely to be a mother resisting her children's forced idolatry or baptism (as in the Maccabean martyrological tales and the Crusader Chronicles), or in one martyrological poem of the Crusader period, a bride whose marriage is consummated through the mingling of the bride and groom's blood.<sup>6</sup> Einbinder writes that "the overwhelming presence of married and pregnant women martyrs in Jewish texts may reveal less about Jewish demographics than about a Jewish feminine ideal—one in sharp, perhaps even polemical, contrast to the virgin saints and martyrs of Christianity."<sup>7</sup> In his study of an earlier era, Boyarin puts it more bluntly:

In the rabbinic world there can be no virgin martyrs. The daughter [in a Talmudic tale] has to escape from the brothel, not only to reopen and revalorize the trickster option, but also because she cannot die a virgin. . . . If the paradigmatic virgin for the fourth-century Fathers was the virgin martyr, the paradigmatic virgin for the Rabbis was the virgin in the brothel, who will, in the end, be a virgin bride.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast with this approach, Judith Tydor Baumel and Jacob J. Schacter, writing specifically about Jewish precedents for the suicide of the ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls, discern a tradition of what could be called "virgin martyrs" in such rabbinic stories as the Talmudic narrative of the four hundred girls and boys "who were carried off for immoral purposes" and leapt into the sea to avoid their fate (Gittin 57b). In this story, the girls commit suicide first, and the boys follow, reasoning that "If these girls for whom this [i.e., sexual intercourse] is natural act so, shall not we, for whom it [i.e., homosexuality] is unnatural [also commit suicide]?"<sup>9</sup> While the parallels between this Talmudic legend and the letter of the ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls are clear, the Talmudic story may still reinforce Boyarin's and Einbinder's point that, in Jewish literature, "natural" sexual intercourse is championed even within violent martyrological

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<sup>6</sup> The question of why sexual violence against Jewish women, presumably historically part of the context of Crusader violence, is absent in the Chronicles continues to attract scholarly notice. See, for instance, Ivan Marcus

<sup>7</sup> Einbinder, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Boyarin, 82.

<sup>9</sup> Baumel and Schacter, 122.

discourse: while the martyrs of both sexes resist sexual defilement through suicide, the narrated justification for the boys' suicide reminds us that heterosexual sex is "natural," even if prostitution is to be avoided at all costs. In contrast, the Christian martyrological system seems to view virginity, particularly of women, as a good in itself, rather than as the prelude to a proper marriage. Marriage and motherhood are thus retained and reinforced as Jewish feminine norms and ideals *in extremis*, at the moment of rape, suicide or infanticide that might seem to foreclose or contradict these options.

That such distinctions between Jewish and Christian martyrology can hardly be unqualifiedly upheld, however, is also evidence of the contribution of such scholars as Boyarin and Yuval, who recognize in the martyrological literature a form—traced in blood—of symbolic cultural conversation; as Boyarin writes, "martyrdom was elaborated by rabbinic Jews and Christians together via a tangled web of innovation and learning, competition and sharing of themes, motifs, and practices."<sup>10</sup> Within those stories that seem to exalt Jewish sexual purity and the martyrdom that protects it at the cost of life (including that of the ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls), we may find ourselves again within the sharp paradox of the Jewish-Christian martyrological dialectic, where walls built high against sexual contagion are nevertheless easily penetrated by the apparently irresistible forces of *cultural* contagion, which is to say, by the fluid nature of culture itself.

Despite the invitation to intertextual Jewish-Christian reflection proffered by these recent developments in Jewish Studies, I would like to resist the move I have just traced, not on the grounds of the incommensurability of Holocaust discourse with either Jewish or Christian precursor texts, but rather because it misses something basic about the document before us. The letter speaks of the girls neither as virgins nor as brides-to-be or mothers, but rather as something altogether different from either of those—Bais Yaakov girls, a cultural type that, in 1942, had only been in existence for a little over two decades and whose novelty can be seen precisely in its difference from, if not resistance to, more traditional (Jewish or other) models of femininity. That Bais Yaakov represented a *novum* in the construction of Jewish gender models was clear to all involved. Yosef Friedenson, editor of the Bais Yaakov Journal after the war and historian of the

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<sup>10</sup> Boyarin, 126.

movement, sets the novelty of Schenirer's project, given these traditional constraints, in stark contrast to the modernization of religious education for boys:

What's the difference between the educational institutions of "Agudath Israel" for boys and those for girls? The educational institutions for boys were primarily nothing more than a continuation of the old traditional-religious schools, even if these were modernized in some way. This was entirely different for the educational institutions for girls, which were organized by the Agudah under the name "Bais Yaakov." These were an entirely novel phenomenon, and even a complete reversal in the approach of strictly traditional parents to the problem of the education of their daughters.<sup>11</sup>

Sarah Schenirer's educational revolution went far beyond providing a rigorous education to Orthodox girls, though given the traditional opposition to Torah study for girls, that innovation would have been radical enough. Negotiating challenges from both parents and rabbinic authorities on the right, and a youthful generation of girls more attracted to socialism than Judaism on the left, Bais Yaakov comprised a broad array of educational and social institutions, with a distinctive discourse and cultural profile. In its greatest achievement, one centered in Kraków, the Bais Yaakov movement produced an elite cadre of young pioneers, activists, and social entrepreneurs who—despite and in service of their commitment to preserving and perpetuating the values of Jewish Orthodoxy—traveled Jewish Eastern Europe without adult supervision, founding new schools and chapters of the Bnos youth movement.<sup>12</sup> Bais Yaakov also drastically reshaped traditional modes of arranging marriage, but the emphasis of the movement in its pioneering years after the First World War was less on marriage and family than on the all-consuming goal of expanding the organizational structure for Jewish girls and women, a population long neglected by the rabbinic establishment. If the martyrological narrative of the freely chosen death of a group of such girls hardly fits into either

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<sup>11</sup> See Yosef Friedenson, "Batey hasefer levanot beyt-Yaakov bepolin," in *Hahinukh vehatarbut ha-ivrit be-eyropa beyn shtey milkhamot ha'olam*, ed. Tzvi Sharfstein (New York: Ogen, 1957), 61.

<sup>12</sup> Orthodox literature on Sarah Schenirer includes Pearl Beinisch, *Carry Me in Your Heart: The Life and Legacy of Sarah Schenirer, founder and visionary of the Bais Ya'akov Movement* (New York: Feldheim, 2003) as well as Rubin, *Daughters of Destiny*. For an explicitly feminist overview of the Bais Yaakov movement, see Deborah Weissman, "A historical model for Jewish feminists. In *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, Elizabeth Kolton, ed. (New York: Schocken, 1976), and her 1994 dissertation, "The education of religious girls in Jerusalem during the British Mandate Era" (Hebrew University, Jerusalem). See also Agnieszka M. Oleszak "The Beit Ya'akov School in Kraków as an Encounter between East and West," *Polin* 23 (Nov. 2010), ed. Antony Polonsky, Sara Schenirer's writings have also been collected in Schenirer, *Gezamelte shriften* (Lodz: Bais Yaakov, 1934).

traditional Jewish or Christian models, that may be less because the Holocaust was incommensurable with previous instances of Jewish or Christian martyrdom than because the martyrs described in this particular testimony *also* had no historical precedent, either in the Jewish or the Christian world.<sup>13</sup>

In resituating the analytical framework from the long martyrological tradition to the much briefer discourse of the Bais Yaakov movement, I do not mean to suggest that the letter should be taken as a historical document in fact written by a Bais Yaakov girl. But neither do I claim that it does not matter who wrote the letter. It has been the orthodoxy of my academic training to bracket the question of literary authorship—following the New Critics’ dismissal of the intentional fallacy and Derrida’s pronouncement that “there is no outside the text”—and turn my attention instead to “close reading,” intertextuality, reader response, and cultural reception. But the possibly irresolvable issue of whether the story has any basis in reality presses back against this epistemological stance. It seems to matter rather greatly whether, in the letter, we are dealing with—to put it bluntly—a suicide note by a young woman or rather, say, a sexual fantasy written by someone else, perhaps a man, far removed from the genocidal scene; it may also be the case that this document is neither strictly true nor a deliberate lie, but perhaps some other genre whose inner logic has receded under positivist historiographical scrutiny.<sup>14</sup> Whatever its provenance, however, the epistolary form, as Elisheva Carlebach has emphasized, has to be read not as a precise expression of some material or psychological reality, but rather as among the most conventionalized and stylized genres.<sup>15</sup> What, then, are the literary tropes and conventions that shape this document? And if we accept the scholarly argument that we are dealing here with a fictional narrative, how do we assess either its literary or cultural significance?

Acknowledging the pressure of the historical questions even while bracketing them, my aim here is to trace within this letter and its reception history the outlines of

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<sup>13</sup> That this martyrological figure is something new is most clearly evident, perhaps, from one of the many mistaken details that have crept into its multiple retellings: the detail that the group was comprised of students and teachers from the Bais Yaakov of Kraków, when in fact the letter recounts that the group ranged in age from 14 to 22 but says nothing about their status within the structure of Bais Yaakov.

<sup>14</sup> I thank Elisheva Carlebach for this suggestion, made in personal communication.

<sup>15</sup> See Elisheva Carlebach, “Letter into Text: Epistolarity, History, Literature,” in *Jewish Literature and History: An Interdisciplinary Conversation*, eds. Eliyana R. Adler and Sheila E. Jelen (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2008), 113-134.

what seems to me the most prominent of its multiple discursive legacies, that of the discourse of Bais Yaakov. It is within this discourse that the letter, its ambiguous authorship, and its ambivalent reception, become legible. The initial stage of such a reading is genealogical, reading backward from 1942 to the prewar Bais Yaakov discourse it mobilizes as it redirects; but it is also anticipatory, reading forward, as it were, to the formative role this document played in the construction of postwar Bais Yaakov, when the movement slowly and painfully rebuilt itself on the memory and amnesia of the history of Bais Yaakov in the interwar years. The document thus functions diachronically as a pivot between the two eras of Bais Yaakov; as I will argue, the diachronic movement that can be traced between these eras also asserts itself as a synchronic tension *within* Bais Yaakov. By reading this narrative within the context of the movement in its less extreme moments, I am emulating the model laid out by Einbinder for understanding medieval Jewish martyrological poetry, which in her analysis forms a privileged arena for the negotiation of tensions within the communities from which these narratives emerge, and which they subsequently and profoundly shape.<sup>16</sup> As Einbinder writes,

Jewish martyrological poetry is not just a literal endorsement of “voluntary martyrdom.” This is a way of restating that the poetry of martyrdom is about more than martyrs; its idealized depictions of martyrdom communicate a surplus of meaning above and beyond the advocacy of defiance unto death. . . [T]he image of the martyr was not intended as a prescription for the annihilation of Jewish communities, but as an ideal that encapsulated the conflicts of Jewish identity under stress and offered a symbolic mediation of their contradictions.<sup>17</sup>

It is my argument, as well, that the document before us is most fruitfully read within the larger context of the dramatic changes in Jewish female religious identity in the twentieth century, as embodied in the Bais Yaakov movement from its origins to the present.

The Bais Yaakov context brings a number of details in the letter into focus: The first of these is the presence of girls, close companions, who have been separated from their biological families, who neither appear in the scene nor play any part in the larger

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<sup>16</sup> Where Einbinder describes a consensus acceptance of the martyrological ideals in the poetry she examines, the narrative explored here has itself become a flash point for controversy within the community it reflects, or fails to reflect. This is an important difference, and worth exploring further.

<sup>17</sup> Einbinder, 24.

social universe constructed by the letter. The particular pleasures of the story, which I think can hardly be denied, are intricately connected with the cohesion of the group—they are not a random collection of individuals, or girls and women ripped from their more “natural” family connections with parents or children, spouses or siblings, as in other Holocaust scenarios. Nor does the letter provide us with many clues about the institutional framework in which these girls, with their eight-year range in age, have been brought together and continue to interact. Is Chaya their teacher, as some references to the letter have simply assumed? The larger institutional structure of Bais Yaakov appears most fully not in the immediate present described by the letter, but in its prewar background, with Chaya Feldman’s mention of meetings with a number of male figures in the movement, one of whom is also the addressee of the letter and apparently a Bais Yaakov leader in New York; Feldman (or the unknown writer of the letter signed with that name) has been to Schenirer’s house and met male leaders of the movement, though she is not sure that they will remember her, or that her letter will reach them; nevertheless, she seems confident that they will survive her. In these passages, Feldman refers to the founding figure of the movement rather formally as Mrs. Schenirer. By contrast, within the homosocial world of the girls with whom she spends her last hours, Feldman refers to Schenirer as *Mama Sore*, a more intimate, Yiddish form of *Sore Imenu*—our mother [or matriarch] Sarah, spiritually present in her Torah despite her death in 1935, is also the figure with whom they will be reunited after their own deaths. For those in the know, the power of the document is no doubt amplified by its setting: in Kraków, where Schenirer spent her life and where she founded the first of what would become a vast network of girls’ schools, and where the crown jewel of the system—the teacher’s seminary—was located (the other two seminaries were in Vienna and Czernowitz). The letter, then, emerges from the cradle and heartland of Bais Yaakov, and it encompasses and oscillates between the two poles of Bais Yaakov experience in the prewar era: on the one hand, the idealized centrality and intimacy of the relationship between each Bais Yaakov girl and Schenirer, her “mama,” and the more formal and official structure headed by a variety of rabbis and political functionaries from the Agudas Yisroel, the Orthodox political movement that early on adopted, supported, managed, and domesticated the Bais Yaakov movement.

Alongside this presentation of what looks like Feldman's *bona fides* and close connections with both dimensions of the leadership—Schenirer and the Agudah—the scene described in the letter appears to be an intimate, female-only sphere, in which Schenirer's presence only intrudes to provide spiritual sustenance, upholding and reinforcing the more “horizontal” connections among the girls, whose fear lessens as Schenirer's Torah is quoted and who emulate her model of Torah study. While the Orthodox world had long provided a variety of homosocial settings for boys and men, it was Schenirer who first succeeded in constructing such a setting for girls, turning the Orthodox establishment's neglect of girls and rigid sexual segregation into a warrant for the creation of a vibrant girls' youth movement. Bais Yaakov in the years between 1917 and the Holocaust far transcended what we usually think of as a school system, with its dormitories, summer camps, nature worship, youth culture, ecstatic rituals, literature and anthems, quasi-missionary networks of young girls traveling through Jewish Eastern Europe to start new schools—Bais Yaakov was, as Deborah Weisman has termed it, “a total institution.”<sup>18</sup> The connection between *communitas*—the erasure of normative rules, hierarchies, and social boundaries—and sacrificial death is a long-sanctified one; one First Crusade poem thus depicted a scene of collective obedience that erased generational and gender boundaries:

Together, whole-heartedly, the remnant was willing.  
They went to their Maker, they fulfilled their worship energetically.  
...  
Together fathers and sons, bridegrooms and their brides  
Hasten to the slaughter as if to their wedding chamber.<sup>19</sup>

If the Crusader literature retroactively constructs a community of solidarity, this letter both describes such sacrificial solidarity and builds on prewar discourse that had already combined the elements of *communitas* and sacrifice as a recipe not for death but astonishing growth: Schenirer's memoirs record her speeches at graduation rituals

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<sup>18</sup> For more information on the early political environment in which Sarah Schenirer founded Bais Yaakov, see Agnieszka Oleszak, “The BeitYa'akov School in Kraków as an Encounter between East and West,” *Polin*; Shoshana Bechhofer, *Ongoing Constitution of Identity and Educational Mission of Bais Yaakov Schools: The Structuration of an Organizational Field as the Unfolding of Discursive Logics* (doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> R. Qalonymos bar Judah, “Et haqol qol Ya'aqov,” quoted in Einbinder, 27.

exhorting new graduates to dedicate their lives to sacrificial service and keeping their “purity” in the face of the onslaughts of modernity.<sup>20</sup> In what became an often-repeated analogy (included, as well, in her will), she described the young students and teachers of Bais Yaakov as modern incarnations of the young priests that served in antiquity the Jerusalem Temple. “The priests were responsible for preserving the sanctity of the Temple, and now that sacred burden is yours! You are going out and building Temples! Like the priests your hearts must be pure.”<sup>21</sup> In this discourse, purity referred not to sexual practices but above all to “foreign” cultural influences, which Bais Yaakov girls were encouraged to resist partly through an appeal to their service in creating a Jewish culture for girls—rather than reproducing Jewish tradition within the patriarchal sex-gender system.

Given this admixture of radical and conservative impulses in Schenirer’s writings throughout her eighteen-year career in Bais Yaakov, the distinction between an early “radical” period and a later “conservative” period of Bais Yaakov can hardly be upheld. The middle and late 1930s in fact saw both the growing institutionalization of the early movement and an upsurge in its commitment to communitarianism: communal urban settlements sprang up in industrial cities for recent Bais Yaakov graduates entering the workforce, and in 1934 a group of Bais Yaakov girls “ascended” to the young (secular) city of Tel Aviv to found an urban kibbutz, dedicated to bringing Torah education to

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<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the sacrificial rhetoric of Sarah Schenirer, see my “Legitimizing the Revolution: Sarah Schenirer and the Rhetoric of Torah Study for Girls” (unpublished paper).

<sup>21</sup> Here, as elsewhere, Schenirer resists inscribing this new type in Jewish life, the Bais Yaakov girl, in a narrative of domesticity and family, suggesting that Jewish girls must be educated to raise Jewish children (a narrative widely used by others in the movement). Schenirer’s models are males, young men with an important role and the kind of mobility that her students did in fact enjoy, in their travels throughout the Jewish world founding and staffing schools. The priestly analogy is not entirely new; Chava Weissler has shown that it was popular as well in the women’s supplicatory prayers, *tkhines*, in which women envisioned their work in the kitchen—especially when burning the piece of dough that was the last remnant of priestly sacrifice—as a continuation of that of the priest. Here, though, not sacrifice but purity seems to be the focus. In one speech to the graduates of the summer intensive institute to train new teachers, Schenirer told the new graduates: “Before the High Priest would go out for the sacred service they would ask him, ‘Is there perhaps something alien (*epes fremd*) in your heart?’” Schenirer continued: “You are going out into the great world, and pure, childlike souls will be entrusted to you. How terrible will be your sin if your heart is not, God forbid, pure, given over completely to our holy thought.” The impurity to which Schenirer is referring is presumably that of the larger, *fremd*, world, and this exhortation was an attempt to inoculate the graduates against contagion. For a discussion, see Naomi Seidman, “Legitimizing the Revolution.”

Zionist youth. It may be no accident that these developments coincided with the growing centrality of the figure of Schenirer to the movement, after her death in 1935. Schenirer, who was clearly influenced by the ethos of socialism and other radical youth movements, even as she positioned Bais Yaakov as a combatant against this influence, had championed solidarity, communalism, and the corollary principle of self-governance; in the Bnos youth movement, which Schenirer also founded (as she did Neshei Agudas Yisroel, the women's arm of Agudas Yisroel, and Basya, a social organization for younger Jewish girls), Schenirer decreed that adults, herself included, were forbidden to speak at public meetings of the adolescent girls who both participated in and ran the movement. There is good reason to believe that Bais Yaakov often fell short of these high-minded principles, in part because of the position it held at the convergence of traditionalism and radicalism, piety and enthusiasm. Evidence of the constricted nature of this "democratic" movement might be sought, for instance, in the autobiography by "Esther" submitted to the YIVO autobiography context in the 1930s, in which the memoirist describes the pressures to conform by the leadership of her Bnos group, despite the explicit ideology of open discussion of ideas (interestingly, along the male model of Talmudic argumentation). On beginning her journey from Orthodoxy to Socialism, Esther describes the difficulty of leaving Bnos:

I returned to Bnos, but they weren't happy with me. First of all, I opposed what was being said there too frequently. We had a certain 'freedom' to speak out, but this wasn't what they had in mind. Rather, they envisioned the Talmudic argumentation of the good old days in the yeshivas, when even a certain number of questions regarding the 'outside world' were discussed. But all of this was used as a means of showing that 'our way' was everlasting, that 'our way' was correct, that we were God's chosen people. So it was no wonder that they found my outspokenness a hindrance.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, at least the principle of self-governance and egalitarianism, avowed by the organization and often explicitly associated with Schenirer's memory, continued to energize the movement even as it expanded and was submitted to ever-more-ramified forms of institutionalization and rabbinic supervision.

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<sup>22</sup> Esther" in *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust*, ed. Jeffrey Shandler (New Haven: Yale, 2002),

During all these internal developments in Bais Yaakov, one aspect of the movement remained intact—the commitment to providing a rigorous Jewish education for girls. The girls in the letter, in another striking and resonant detail, are not reciting Psalms together, a prototypically female pious activity, but rather *learning* “David,” a less normative activity simply incoherent outside the Bais Yaakov commitment to forging an elite, intellectually engaged cohort of religiously educated Jewish girls, dedicated to Torah study—an activity from which they had either been previously forbidden or for which no religious value accrued to women.<sup>23</sup> The very term “learning” is worth noting: It is not a simple synonym for studying or reading, but in Yiddish, an ideologically loaded verb that signifies (even without an explicit object) Talmud study, the most privileged of masculine activities. While the recitation of Psalms, especially at moments of great distress, is a normative activity for pious men and especially women, the study of Psalms is a less familiar phenomenon, combining the liturgical and the academic, female supplicatory prayer and male study session in one devotional activity.

I think it is from this complex intertextual perspective that we should read one of the historically less plausible details of the letter, the absence of soldiers or guards from the immediate scene, as well as their symbolic presence—they remain all-too-present in its incipient future. On the one hand, the letter constructs and mirrors the Bais Yaakov and Bnos ideal, in which girls and young women can build for themselves a religiously meaningful life outside the presence of men, and without the interference of older adults of either gender. Nevertheless, the purely female world of the letter is constructed under the most extreme heterosexual duress, under the threat of rape or worse. It could be argued that Bais Yaakov discourse, which delighted in the energies and freedoms enabled and generated by the female homosocial—in which girls and women could create their own forms of Judaism—was also imbued by the discursive, institutional, and heteronormative presence of men and masculinity. The adoption of the movement in the early 1920s by Agudah; the decision to locate its first full-time high school in Ponevitzh, site of the world-famous yeshiva; the reported pressure on Schenirer to remarry for decades after her brief first marriage; and the growing presence of men in the leadership

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<sup>23</sup> For the question of Torah study for girls, see Zolty, S. P. (1993). *And all your children shall be learned: Women and the study of Torah in Jewish law and history* (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1993).

of the Bais Yaakov Journal and other organs of the movement all set real and symbolic limits on the agency of Bais Yaakov girls and women. By the postwar period, when Bais Yaakov was charged with the more conservative role of rebuilding Jewish life around traditional and bourgeois structures of marriage and family, the homosocial enthusiasms of its pioneering era were subsumed to more normative goals, though never entirely forgotten. The story of the ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls in Kraków provided the postwar movement with a heroic saga of Jewish suffering for the sake of female modesty, in which the kernel of radical innovation was veiled by the more pressing dictates of sexual obedience, conformity, and “purity.” As Shoshana Bechhofer has described the Bais Yaakov discourse of the postwar era, the early years were folded into “an account of Jewish history in which the perfection of the past [was] the goal to be attained,” along with “issues of family integrity, respect for parental authority, the centrality of the home, and Jewish pride.”<sup>24</sup> In this cultural environment, prewar Bais Yaakov was portrayed “not as an innovation per se but as a restoration of a previous idyllic state; and this idyllic state is the ‘wholesomeness’ of the Jewish family and home.” In this revision, Schenirer’s project was not to replace the traditional home but to restore it to the pristine innocence that modernity had corrupted.

The memorialization of the ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls arose in this context and, it could be argued, achieved its longevity because it spoke to two crucial aspects of the movement in which the story circulated: On the one hand, the female homosociality associated with the movement’s prewar period, born of sexual segregation and the marginalization of women but transformed into an arena for female creativity and solidarity; on the other hand, the growing centrality of a traditionalizing discourse of Jewish home and family, in which normative sex roles are restored to their primacy. Against the heroic, horrific backdrop of Nazi rape, the narrative spoke to the need for both quietist piety and enthusiastic resistance, female solidarity and the inescapable presence of men.

The normative and the novel are combined, as well, in the *telos* of this martyrology: the girls foresee rejoining in death not God, nor their own immediate

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<sup>24</sup> Bechhofer, 154.

families, but rather “*Mama Sore*,” Mama Sarah. The term recalls a ubiquitous trope in the *tkhine* literature, the prayer tradition of Ashkenazic women, in passages in which the biblical matriarchs, with Sarah at their head, are called on to intercede with God on behalf of the praying woman. Here, though, the reference is to the more-recently deceased Schenirer, who was and still is often referred to by this epithet. In Bais Yaakov discourse, Schenirer is linked with the matriarch Sarah through her “barrenness” (although she was not barren but rather unmarried during most of her adult life), which is redeemed not by childbearing, as it is for her biblical counterpart, but by her mystical adoption as a mother by her “children” in the Bais Yaakov movement. The reunion in death (in an odd sense, this is a school reunion) of Schenirer and her ninety-three “daughters” thus reinforces the social ethos of the movement, which mimics as it replaces the traditional Jewish family, just as it mimics and dramatically rewrites Ashkenazic women’s liturgical traditions. This hybrid reconfiguration characterizes as well the letter’s sole request, that the receiver(s) of the letter should recite the kaddish in honor and memory of these martyrs. This act of traditional piety to be performed for these girls is to be carried out through non-traditional methods, which is to say, not by members of their immediate family. Girls and women as well as the male addressees of the letter took it upon themselves to fulfill this request, despite the fact that girls and women do not normally recite *kaddish* even for family members, just as the memoirs of Bais Yaakov graduates, and even the historical description of a male functionary in the movement, report with pride that Schenirer’s students non-normatively sat shiva in the Kraków teachers seminary and recited Kaddish at her 1935 (they were excluded, by local custom, from attending her funeral, where a string of rabbis delivered the eulogies).<sup>25</sup> This response expands the hybrid character of the letter itself to its cultural reception, inscribing as well as reflecting Bais Yaakov’s commitment to alternative forms of kinship. These cultural practices, however, were also normalized rapidly enough. Writing in 1953 of the thousands of Bais Yaakov girls killed by the Nazis, Judith Grunfeld, an

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<sup>25</sup> See Joseph Friedenson.

early teacher and important figure in the movement, described not the recitation of the memorial prayer but rather “the continuation of the movement” as “their Kaddish.”<sup>26</sup>

The reception of the letter in the postwar period introduces a new variation in the tension that had been present in Bais Yaakov from its inception: the need to revitalize girls’ culture in the name of a tradition suspicious of youth, women, and change.

Bechhofer has analyzed the attempts in postwar Orthodox historiography to suppress certain aspects of Bais Yaakov history in conformity not only with rabbinic authority but also the need to honor the memory of a destroyed community. The early historiography, as Bechhofer describes it, forthrightly acknowledged that Bais Yaakov emerged from Polish Orthodoxy’s failures in educating, nurturing, engaging, and valuing girls and women:

[T]he rigid gender differentiation of Polish Jewry was a key contributing factor to the assimilation of Jewish girls in Poland. Once access to and interest in education took hold among Polish Jewry, the existing enculturation strategies left girls with insufficient religious grounding, thus undermining their allegiance to Judaism. According to [Judith] Grunfeld, the enlightenment of Western Orthodoxy helped inspire, equip, and free Sara Schenirer to create a woman-centered Hasidic life . . . through the Bais Yaakov movement, saving Eastern European Jewry from spiritual demise.<sup>27</sup>

The early memoirs and frank historiography gave way to more pious description of the movement after the war, when the earlier narrative “seems to have become too much of an indictment of Polish Jewry . . . to be sustained in the public memory.” Postwar writers hardly diminished veneration of Sarah Schenirer, but they narrowed her role to a conservator of tradition; in the process, the literature suppressed her implicit indictment of “the rigid gender differentiation of Polish Jewry.” The letter of the ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls strikes the required note, combining—in itself and in its ritual uses—a conservative gender ideology with the memory of “a woman-centered Hasidic life.” As in Einbinder’s examples, the aim of such discursive work was not to produce “voluntary martyrs,” but to restrain the unruly energies of the movement (and of its

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<sup>26</sup> Judith Grunfeld, *Sara Schenirer: The story of a great movement*. In L. Jung (Ed.), *Jewish Leaders*, (Jerusalem: Boys Town, 1953).

<sup>27</sup> Bechhofer, 95

adolescent girls) in the service of a family-oriented, bourgeois Orthodox revival on North American and Israeli soil.

Read from this perspective, the letter bridges the prewar and postwar worlds of Bais Yaakov, just as it embodies the tensions that marked the movement from the outset. While it records a horrific wartime experience, it remains true to the imagined and remembered ideals of interwar Bais Yaakov and reaches forward to hope that these ideals persist into the future. The uncertain provenance of the letter and the question of who wrote it may be asked as easily of the movement as a whole. The document before us, whoever held the pen, channels a range of competing impulses beyond the piety, obedience, and self-sacrifice in the didactic foreground: underneath this veil we may discern the desire for female self-determination, passionate devotion to a founding figure, a fascination with beauty and the dangers and power of sex, and rage at an enemy. But Bais Yaakov, at its origins and indeed at every stage of its development, never spoke simply. The Orthodox world had succeeded in building the highest walls between men and women, but the discourse of Bais Yaakov was never, could never be, so segregated. Within it, the patriarchal and the female homosocial, the voices of young girls and those of white-bearded rabbis, promiscuously intermingled. The very figure Schenirer chose as analogy for the Bais Yaakov pioneer, the young priest guarding his purity, was touched by cultural contagion, transsexual ventriloquy. And it could hardly be otherwise: Revolution in the name of tradition, resistance in the name of modesty, these provided the setting for a discourse split at the heart, even as it imagined itself whole and pure in its vibrant life and beautiful death.