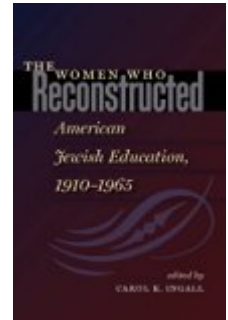


Carol K. Ingall, ed.. *The Women Who Reconstructed American Jewish Education, 1910-1965*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010. xiv + 243 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-58465-856-6.



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The Women Who Reconstructed American Jewish Education is a collection of essays about important but woefully understudied and underappreciated women outstanding in the field of American Jewish education. As editor Carol K. Ingall explains in the introduction, the eleven women profiled in the book “planted the seeds of social reform and progressivism in the soil and soul of American Jewish education” during professional careers that spanned the twentieth century (p. 1). Few of these women’s names are known to any but specialists today, despite the key role most of them played in religious education, a central feature of modern American Jewish life. Examining American Jewish history through the lens of education has the potential to shed new light on old problems, such as acculturation, transmission of tradition, gender roles in the workplace, concepts of generation, technological and pedagogical change, and the structures of institutions. The distinguished group of historians and scholars and practitioners of Jewish education who contributed to this volume do indeed offer a fuller picture of

the history of American Jewish education, as well as a valuable feminist biographical reclamation of the lives of notable American Jewish women. That the anthology overall does not provide anything like a gender analysis of American Jewish education and misses multiple opportunities to embed its subjects in the most up-to-date American Jewish women’s history is perhaps a failure of form rather than intent.

The greatest strength of this book is the fluid definition of Jewish education it employs. Far from being confined to the classroom, American Jewish education has encompassed settlement houses, camps, children’s literature, adult education, and the arts. The essays collectively demonstrate the vital part women played, not only as teachers but also as conceivers, developers, and refiners of a wide-ranging approach to Jewish education that reached far more learners than most traditionally defined Jewish schools ever did. The impulse for these expansive ideas about Jewish education may have been rooted in the progressive theories of social thinker John Dewey, espe-

cially as interpreted by two central American Jewish educators, Samson Benderly and Mordecai Kaplan. Virtually all the contributors try to attach the women they write about to Benderly, Kaplan, and the educational institutions they established, such as the Bureau of Jewish Education in New York and the Teachers Institute at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Yet the women who actually put much of this philosophy into practice and then became involved in teacher training and educational materials seemingly occupied positions of equal importance in delivering and expanding Jewish education.

As is often the case with edited collections, the essays in *The Women Who Reconstructed American Jewish Education* are uneven in quality. Some of the profiles, such as Shuly Rubin Schwartz's piece on Rebecca Aaronson Brickner (drawn from her prize-winning *The Rabbi's Wife: The Rebbetzin in American Jewish Life* [2006]) and Rebecca Boim Wolf's piece on Jessie Sampter, do a particularly good job contextualizing their subjects and drawing out their significance. Other essays veer dangerously close to hagiography and tell readers little beyond the facts of previously little-known lives. There is no question that all of these women carried out important religious education during their lifetimes and deserve to be integrated into future analysis of American Jewish education, but the kind of contribution history practiced by some of the authors is not the most successful strategy for making that case. To be fair, it is also possible that the widely varying sources play a role in the content and quality of each essay. Miriam Heller Stern and Jonathan Krasner had much more material, including archival resources, to work with in their essays on, respectively, Ethel Feinman and Grace Weiner's settlement house activities in San Francisco and Sadie Rose Weilerstein's authorship of Jewish children's literature than did Ingall in her essay on adult educator Anna G. Sherman. However, the oral histories that some of the authors rely on so heavily yield methodological problems that

compromise the usefulness of the research presented in the volume.

There are some other problems with *The Women Who Reconstructed American Jewish Education* as well. First, the title is not apt. These women participated in the *construction* of American Jewish education. The book demonstrates quite clearly that they were insiders who helped build institutions and profited from them, not outsiders who charged in to reform them. They were also affiliated not primarily with Reconstructionist Judaism but with Reform or Conservative Judaism (was there no important Orthodox Jewish woman educator? The thousands of girls who attended Bais Yaakov schools, especially after World War II, might disagree). Second, not all the essays' bibliographies are as attentive as they might have been to work already published that covers some of the same ground or that might have provided much deeper context. Third, the hermetically sealed nature of some of the essays means that the authors do not talk to each other, if at all. Sylvia Ettinger, a dean of the Teachers Institute, appears in essays other than the profile by Ingall, yet there is no attempt to treat any of these women as anything other than heroic individuals who appeared to work alone, or possibly with their Jewish educator/rabbi husbands. This is a missed opportunity to demonstrate--or at least explore the possibility of--a network of Jewish women educators that clearly requires further investigation for a more comprehensive picture of American Jewish education, a picture that has been dominated by such early twentieth-century giants as Benderly and Kaplan.

Finally, another dimension of missed opportunity is the lack of gender analysis across the book as a whole. Did boys and girls have access to different kinds of religious education based on gender, and what did these educators think or do about that? What did these women think their role was in the Jewish community? How did they see themselves as women and as professionals?

Did they grapple with work-life balance? What did they think about feminism? About Jewish feminism? About Jewish practice, ritual, and law in general? It is too obvious merely to point out that in American Jewish education, as in American education generally, women tended to stay teachers while men moved into administration. Some of these questions are answered for some of the women, but overall there is a curiously insular quality to the volume that may make it most valuable for suggesting avenues for further research. Happily, many of the contributors have in other work brought a much more analytical lens to the history and practice of Jewish education.

Despite some significant issues, there remains a great deal to learn from *The Women Who Reconstructed American Jewish Education*. It may provide primarily, though not exclusively, contribution history, but the book nonetheless performs valuable service in recalling to life the central role women played in the development of American Jewish education in all its variety. Each essay makes a compelling case for the importance of an individual woman who, regardless of obstacles, offered her skills, talents, and ideas to a field where she could achieve success both for herself and her community.

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