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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gudrun Maierhof. *Selbstbehauptung im Chaos: Frauen in der jüdischen Selbsthilfe 1933-1943*. Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2002. 387 pp.

Gudrun Maierhof. *Selbstbehauptung im Chaos: Frauen in der jüdischen Selbsthilfe 1933-1943*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2002. 390 S. + 11 s/w Abb. EUR 39.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-593-37042-2.

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Published on H-German (February, 2004)



Writing the history of Jewish women in Nazi Germany, Gudrun Maierhof set out to commemorate the courage of individual women and the importance of the organizations they sustained. Besides achieving this ambitious goal, Maierhof has assembled a wealth of previously overlooked information about the inner workings of the entire Jewish community from the Nazi takeover through the last deportations. Drawing on an immense array of primary and secondary sources, Maierhof vividly chronicles the saga of everyday life among Jews as they confronted escalating assaults on their dignity, rights, property, and ultimately their lives.

Given the sheer quantity of data Maierhof has amassed, *Selbstbehauptung* could have become a tedious compilation of organizational charts, official statements, statistics, and programs. But instead of focusing on the accumulation of detail, Maierhof made conceptual choices that produced a vivid and coherent history of a tragic epoch. By emphasizing urban self-help and passing lightly over activists who worked outside the mainstream (in, for example, Hachsharah and Zionist organizations), she maintained a tight focus. By including extensive quotations from her subjects she conveys Jews' despair and courage in the face of "Ausgrenzung, Verfolgung und Gewalt" (p. 301). And by weaving biographical sketches of leading Jewish women into her organizational history, Maierhof keeps her subjects' humanity at the center of her account and simultaneously corrects the male-centered approach of most histories of this period (p. 207). Alongside such celebrated "Vertrauensmaenner"

as Hannah Karminski and Cora Berliner, Maierhof introduces us to lesser known women—such as Recha Freier of the Youth Aliya, Bertha Falkenberg (president of the Berlin chapter of the Jewish Women's League), Paula Fuerst (director of the Theodor-Herzl School), and Hildegard Boehme (*Reichsvertretung* officer). Aware that she had discovered an immense quantity of material about many hitherto unknown Jewish activists, Maierhof also performed an invaluable service to other historians by including a wealth of information (biographies of Jewish activists, statistics, organizational charts, and documents) in the appendix.

Perhaps because women had been socialized to be more flexible than men, Maierhof suggests, they often took the initiative while men hesitated. The fact that more men (many of them rabbis and professionals) than women emigrated accelerated women's prominence in Jewish organizational life. For the most part, women's activities remained centered on the organization of welfare activities and on the preservation of family life as a refuge from persecution. "Women's concerns" that may have been seen as trivial before 1933 became preconditions for survival after that date.

Maierhof divides her account into three periods: 1933-1938, 1938-1941, and 1941-43. Early in 1933, the Juedische Frauenbund (recently severed from its Christian affiliates) formed a unified front with other Jewish women's associations. Jewish women civil servants (who were dismissed more often than men because they could

not claim Front Soldier exemption) met the escalating demand for paid and voluntary social services, office work, and leadership positions. As Nazi Party bosses confiscated Jewish property and unemployment rates among Jews skyrocketed, Jewish women trained young people for alternative careers and redoubled their charitable activities. During stage two, after the November pogrom in 1938, relatives of the 30,000 Jewish men incarcerated in concentration camps worked frantically (and effectively) to achieve their release. Maierhof insightfully explores the devastating paradox that on one hand the pogrom made it clear that Jews' survival depended on emigration, yet on the other, harsher regulations made exodus terribly difficult for all but a fortunate few. Even as the need for solidarity against mounting peril became acute, fragmentation took its toll on morale and funding. Against overwhelming odds, women's organizations created centers to facilitate emigration and organize children's transports.

In the autumn of 1941, when Nazi policy banned emigration and deportations began, women's work entered a new phase. With a disproportion of 70,000 men to 108,000 women (p. 307) Jewish women's situation became increasingly vulnerable. Nevertheless, with only meager resources women provided food and shelter for an impoverished population, compiled lists of deportees, comforted those slated for deportation and collected provisions for their voyage, and notified relatives. As Maierhof mentions in passing, this work has elicited accusations of collaboration, notably by Hannah Arendt and Raul Hilberg (pp. 258-263), while others have described the same acts as "inner resistance" (pp. 156, 309). Maierhof wisely avoids either/or judgments and instead examines the self-understandings of the women whose lives she chronicles.

While agreeing that Nazi coercion in these final years destroyed the autonomy implicit in the term "Jewish self help" (p. 150), Maierhof respects the integrity of the women she portrays. Against the assumption that all Jews who remained were trapped, for example, she quotes at length from the letters and memoirs of women who declined visas procured for them by friends and relatives abroad. Reading these passages reminds us that choices made by the vulnerable can be simultaneously capitulation and resistance. Consider, for example, a friend's description of Cora Berliner's refusal to leave: "Sie lehnte dies wiederholt ab, mit der Begründung, dass fuer sie das Leben seinen Sinn verlieren wuerde, wenn sie die von ihr in Deutschland betreuten Menschen, die ihr Vertrauen in sie gesetzt haetten, im Stich liesse" (p.

189). Martha Mosse explained, "Trotz erheblicher Bedenken entschloss man sich dann doch, mitzuwirken—wie die Gestapo wuenschte—weil man hoffte auf diese Weise so viel Gutes wie moeglich im Interesse der Betroffenen tun zu koennen" (p. 260).

A novelist could scarcely have written a more tragic and inspiring account of forceful women who preserved their humanity by aiding others amidst wretched circumstances. Maierhof's skill at combining background information with fine-grained descriptions of remarkable women could have made this gripping account accessible to general readers. But unfortunately, the rich detail of *Selbstbehauptung* remains crammed into a German dissertation format. The abrupt topic changes and tentative interpretative passages convey the impression of carefully organized research notes awaiting a final revision. While specialists may find scholastic-style headings and sub-headings useful, a general public may reject them as reader-unfriendly.

The attentive reader will discover Maierhof's interpretations dispersed throughout the book and to some extent recapitulated in her conclusions. She generously credits earlier historians' work and approvingly cites studies by, among others, Otto Dov Kulka (pp. 57, 158), Dan Diner (p. 257) and Marion Kaplan (p. 143). She corrects errors in earlier histories, about, for example, the dissolution of the *Reichsvertretung* (p. 148) and the impact of the November 1938 pogrom on women (pp. 136-138). Besides expanding our knowledge of women in the Jewish community, Maierhof explores what Americans would call "gender," and what she terms variously as *Geschlechtsspezifische Arbeitsteilung* and *Erfahrungen* (pp. 138, 258, 290). In my view these formulaic categories inhibit discussion of the broader discursive context—of attitudes, assumptions, and cultural conventions related to gender. In several passages, for example, Maierhof implicitly faults Jewish men's persistently patriarchal attitudes. Even though women provided vital services to the community, their male colleagues continued to accord them lower pay and status (pp. 188, 258, 311). Despite evidence that in crises like natural disasters and war cultural stereotypes about gender remain constant even as conventional gender roles shift, Maierhof seems to hold Jewish men to a higher standard. A more capacious conceptual framework could have allowed Maierhof to develop a more nuanced interpretation.

Despite these minor weaknesses, *Selbstbehauptung im Chaos* is the fullest account I know of the heroic efforts of Jewish women and organizations who worked

tirelessly to preserve a modicum of security in the face of lethal danger.

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Citation: Claudia Koontz. Review of Gudrun Maierhof, *Selbstbehauptung im Chaos: Frauen in der jÖ¼dischen Selbsthilfe 1933-1943* and Maierhof, Gudrun, *Selbstbehauptung im Chaos: Frauen in der jÖ¼dischen Selbsthilfe 1933-1943*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2004.

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