

**BOBBE MYSEHS & OTHER TRUTHS:**

**LIFE STORIES & STEREOTYPES OF TWO JEWISH WOMEN**

by

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### ABSTRACT

Who is the Jewish woman? There exist very predominate images of Jewish women. The first is found in traditional historical narratives. Here Jewish women are represented as the *Other* to the male norm, their stories told through the eyes of their male counterparts. The second image is the Jewish Mother stereotype. This representation has evolved throughout the past century to the point where she has become a pop icon. As with the former image, this one is created and formed by others. The question is, do these definitions of Jewish women capture the reality of Jewish women's lives today, and in the past? In order to answer this I look at the life stories of two Jewish women from the Canadian Prairies. Examining, comparing and contrasting these external representations with the self-representations, reveals the necessity to collect Jewish women's oral histories in order to fully understand what it means to be a Jewish woman.

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*For Rachel & Hannah  
Who have inspired me beyond words.*

*For Les & Sheryl  
Who have the shoulders of giants.*



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## GROUNDWORK & A PERSPECTIVE

I begin this narrative as close to the beginning as I can get, realizing that the project at hand has no definite starting point; rather, its genesis is the result of a multitude of my own personal, professional, and academic experiences. At the time, these appeared to be distinct, but now, with hindsight as an ally, I understand that each of these experiences was laying the cornerstones for the exploration into an understanding of Jewish women, their history, and their many representations.

This narrative begins with myself, as a young girl attending Conservative Hebrew School and my *Bat Mitzvah* at thirteen; then being the only Jewish student at a secular school in a small Ontario town; the constant comments that I do not look Jewish, and the few who choose instead to call me a dirty Jew; my introduction to anthropology and then feminism, and then oral history; and finally the first book I read exclusively on Jewish women and Jewish feminism in the final year of my undergraduate degree. Each event has led me to question various aspects of my own identity. I am, in part, a woman, Jew, anthropologist, feminist, daughter, granddaughter, and friend. These are all identities and positions I see in myself, and others see in me, but none are mutually exclusive. Quite the contrary, each overlaps and intertwines within another, connecting various aspects of the self so that no one may be ignored at any given time. I cannot forget the fact that I am a woman any more easily than I can ignore my political or religious affiliations. But when using the label 'Jewish woman' as a primary means of identifying one's self, what does this mean? With what are Jewish women identifying? What are the themes and events that mark turning points in their lives? How might ethnographies of Jewish women in Canada look?

In this postcolonial age of feminism and postmodernism, one realizes the immensity of this question, answering it is no small feat. Ponder the many answers for a moment and soon, from out of the background it comes, barely audible at first, but slowly getting louder and louder, or perhaps

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it is right in front of you, screaming in your face. It is the seduction of generalisation and brevity, and the appeal of the stereotype. "It's so comforting to describe a category of behaviour, determine that a group displays that behaviour, and then decide comfortably that all members of the group exhibit that behaviour" (Booker 1991:9). The problem? For the most part stereotypes are negative, inaccurate, demeaning, and all too easily accepted without critical thought (Bettelheim 1960 in Booker 1991). In the course of stereotyping one risks making sweeping generalisations concerning a group's characteristics, creating the appearance of homogeneity among individuals. Particular attributes are exaggerated and embellished, while they combine and intertwine to form a stereotype. In the case of older Jewish women, that stereotype is the Jewish Mother<sup>1</sup>, as seen on TV, and in plays, movies and books. In 1991, Janice Booker characterised the Jewish Mother as:

Castrating, controlling, overbearing, domineering, smothering, suppressive, collusive, imperial, imperious, autocratic, guilt-producing, suffering, emasculating; you get the picture. She wants her son to be a doctor. She wants her daughter to marry a doctor. She goes to doctors. She hates her daughter-in-law. She feeds her children chicken soup for every ailment. She makes too much food. She eats too much food. She goes to the hairdresser too often and wants to be supported in Hollywood style, with excesses of house furnishings and jewellery. That's what husbands are for. (Booker 1991:15)

Both Jews and non-Jews alike accept and perpetuate this and other images, often admitting that they know 'that kind of woman' (Gold 1997). Social scientists such as Sander Gilman (1986), Donald Horowitz (1985), and Judith Weinstein Klein (in Booker 1991) also conclude that Jewish men and women readily accept these stereotypes about Jewish women as the truth, or a degree of truth. In turn, they begin to stereotype themselves this way, thereby legitimating the image. Gerald Epstein (in Booker 1991:13) explains that stereotypes "become comfortable because people want to avoid persecution... People identify with their American [versus Jewish] background and once they accept that notion, then they are subject to the stereotypes. The culture

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<sup>1</sup> Jewish Mother is capitalised to indicate that this descriptor refers specifically to the Jewish Mother stereotype, and not Jewish mothers in general, non-stereotypic, terms.

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denigrates their Jewishness and they want to identify with the people in power; the tendency is to appease those in power.”

I begin my look at Jewish women, history, and stereotypes in Part I, “Lives, Stories, and Bobbe-Mysehs<sup>2</sup>: Jewish Women from the Centre,” with a look into the lives of two Canadian Jewish women. Chapters One and Two recount the life stories of Hannah and Rachel respectively, sisters now in their seventies, who began their lives on a farm in the Canadian Prairies. These stories were collected through an oral history method, “a process of collecting, usually by means of a tape-recorded interview, reminiscences, accounts, and interpretations of events from the recent past which are of historical significance” (Hoffman 1996:88). This process emphasises “the experiences and requirements of the individual—how the person copes with society rather than how society copes with the stream of individuals” (Mandelbaum 1973:177). The product of this oral history method is the life story/life history, a “retrospective account by the individual of his [*sic*] life...*that has been elicited or prompted by another person*” (Watson & Watson-Franke 1985:2). Using life histories as primary documents is essential in understanding how individuals construct themselves, as life stories often point to crucial events in a person’s life, turning points, constants and reoccurring themes.

I did not happen upon these women by accident. I have known them for my entire life, am deeply connected to them on a number of planes, and consider them an integral part of my own personal history. I conducted a number of tape-recorded interviews with each woman individually. One of the goals in undertaking oral history research, specifically for the collection of women's life stories, is to bring women's experiences onto centre stage as legitimate accounts of the past (Geiger 1986; Personal Narratives Group 1989; Moss 1993). Thus, I encouraged Hannah and Rachel to tell their stories in their own words, as they saw fit; as such there was no set interview schedule.

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<sup>2</sup> Bobbe-Mysehs is a Yiddish saying. It directly translates into grandmothers’ tales, but is also used to refer to a tale as a falsehood or a lie.

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Instead, the interview schedule consisted of an informal list of topics to be covered in each interview. This ensured consistency and a basis for comparison between the two stories. Questions within each topic were designed to stimulate conversation and memory, but only if needed, rather than to guide the course of the interview (Gluck 1996). These questions were only used when necessary.

Once the interviews were completed, the tapes were transcribed, edited, and the interviews written as though they were autobiographies (Geiger 1986:338). As the primary editor, I attempted to do as little as possible to alter the stories, not wanting to change them from the way they were told to me. Some degree of editing is unavoidable, but was limited to minor changes in sentence structure for increased readability. Names were changed to protect the privacy of the women and their families, however, place names remain the same. I have kept the place names because Edenbridge, the small Jewish farming colony in Saskatchewan where Hannah and Rachel were born, is quite famous in its own right; but, more often than not, its history is told exclusively through the experiences of men (Paris 1980a; Paris 1980b; Arnold 1983). The stories presented here offer an opportunity to view the settlement from a different perspective, while maintaining a context in both space and time.

Both Hannah and Rachel gave final approval on both the content and the form of the stories. After reading her life story Hannah commented, "That sounds exactly like me." With that statement, I was confident that the original integrity of the stories was preserved in the final product.

These two women do not represent a random sample, nor are they typical or atypical representatives of Canadian Jewish women as a whole. Hannah and Rachel are pieces of the whole, no more, and no less, representative of Canadian Jewish women than any others. How would one go about selecting a representative sample of such a diverse group of individuals? My hope is that these two stories will catalyse further discussion on the immense variety of Jewish

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women's experiences in Canada, the United States, and around the world. Moreover, I hope by telling their stories to expose a diverse audience to the reality of two Canadian Jewish women, and thus answer the question 'who is the Jewish woman?'

Feminist theory and practice are key in looking into the lives of women, with a great deal of work concentrating on the interpretation and reinterpretation of women's lives and experiences. This action is a means of reconstructing and understanding the world from the points of view of women (Personal Narratives Group 1989:4). Feminist theories look to

disrupt the most basic, the safest of ideas about Truth—and to force them to stand up to examination against other facts, standards, experiences, and perspectives...feminist theory assumes the fact of difference and asserts that if Truth rests on generalisation, it must take into account experience that has previously been ignored, forgotten, ridiculed, and devalued. (Personal Narratives Group 1989:262-263)

The focus of many feminist theories is not on one objective Truth, but on the many possible truths that exist in experiences.<sup>3</sup> These truths are not generalisations but specifics. These specifics link the differences among women's varied perspectives. Here, subjective experiences are viewed as "valid forms of existence," and their documentation is utilised as primary texts (Moss 1993:48).

Thus, as I begin to look into what is involved with being both a woman and a Jew, I focus on subjective texts in the form of Jewish women's life stories.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The truths that come out of experiences take place within a cultural context that provides the individual with a set of cultural meanings. Parr (1995) argues that the ways in which the individual interprets experience is directly the result of the cultural meanings available to them at the time. While I agree with this notion, it is also important to remember that the interpretation of experience need not be limited to these cultural meanings. It is possible for the individual to look beyond these cultural meanings to what might be possible in the future.

<sup>4</sup> "The appeal of oral history to feminism is easy to understand. Women engaged in oral history research with other women, have seen their work as consistent with the principle of 'research by, about, and for women' (Berger Gluck & Patai 1991:1-2). Oral history gives those who may have previously lacked a predominant social voice, the opportunity to make their opinions and perspectives heard. These new voices provide alternatives to existing historical categories that have most often come from male-centred culture, and thus may relate little to the lives of women. As oral history brings alternate historical narratives along side of traditional ones, the social hierarchies imbedded in narratives begin to equalise. The new historical voices have a readily identifiable body, challenging traditional notions of objectivity, and helping to (re)define who the knower is, and what can be known. The information collected through this method focuses on specific detail. It specifies and differentiates experience. Once the specifics are identified, then more general trends can be identified; however these trends resist closure and stasis. Finally, oral history changes the representations of women from objects to active historical subjects, participants in defining themselves and their history. Gluck and Patai (1991:2) sum up the inherently feminist nature of oral history stating: "It is also true that the telling of the story can be empowering, validating the importance of the speaker's life experience."

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The anthropological research that I undertake here is not traditional anthropological research. Victor Turner (1979) outlines M.N. Srinivas' development of the anthropologist and his/her research. The first stage, or birth, is "our natal origin in a particular culture. The second is our move from this familiar place to one far away to do fieldwork. In this process there occurs a "familiarization of the exotic" (Turner 1979:ix). Srinivas encourages the anthropologist to move one step further, to be thrice born. "The third birth occurs when we have become comfortable within the other culture...and turn our gaze again toward our native land. We find that the familiar has become exoticized; we see it with new eyes" (Turner 1979:ix). I have chosen to begin with this third birth, to do research in a familiar culture, to make the everyday foreign, to attempt to see it through different eyes. In the most general terms, the anthropology I do is an exploration into my own culture, my own background, but labelling it insider research is too much of a simplification. Narayan (1993) writes of the complex position and issues that the native anthropologist must confront in the research process. Not only am I doing research with those people with whom I have a social, cultural, and religious connection, I am doing research on what it means to bring multiple aspects of an identity together in one space. I am attempting to undermine the partial construction of knowledge and truth, by offering women's perspectives and voices which counterbalance the predominance of male voices and perspectives, and give a more fully human picture of reality (Personal Narratives Group 1989:3). In this process, I realise that I am not only a recorder of this perspective and voice, I am also an actor in creating it.

In Part II, "History and Stereotypes: Jewish Women From the Margins," I look at how Jewish women have been, and still are, represented by others, both inside and outside the Jewish community. Chapter Three, "History," focuses on the position and portrayal of Jewish women in Jewish history. Judaism is a religion and culture built around the desires and needs of men. The way we as Jews remember our past and construct our future involves choices and action, both influenced by an androcentric lens. Jewish women's traditions and experiences become harder to

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recover as a result. Jewish women are left in the position of *Other* to the male norm. Here, Jewish women's voices are removed, replaced by men's voices; Jewish women are thus left in a vulnerable position, lacking an influential voice, leaving them open to disturbing stereotypes.

One such stereotype, the Jewish Mother, is the topic of Chapter Four, "Stereotypes." Here I review how the characteristics associated with the Jewish Mother evolved, beginning in the 1880s and continuing until the present. In the course of this 110 years, the Jewish Mother image has changed from humble family heroine, to the comedic monster previously described by Booker (1991). The process was/is (as surely the image has not stopped mutating) aided by the sons and daughters of the original immigrant women on whom this stereotype is based, for it is they who have chosen her as the subject of their writing again and again. However, does the acceptance of the Jewish Mother stereotype, by Jewish women (and men), also mean this image is accepted as an ideal? Are those the characteristics being cultivated in successive generations of Jewish women? Does this reflect Jewish women's sense of self and the reality of their lives as they see them?

In Part III, "Representations and Representing: Jewish Women as Self," I look at the relationship between the images offered in Part I and Part II. Chapter Five, "Representations of Reality", looks at how the themes offered by the Jewish Mother stereotype also emerge in similar and different ways in Hannah and Rachel's life stories. Chapter Six, "Representing Themselves", specifically examines the themes that run throughout Hannah and Rachel's life stories in order to understand how each woman constructs her identity at various points in her life. The variety of experiences (female experiences and Jewish experiences) unveiled points to the necessity of creating Jewish women's history from the perspective of Jewish women, in order to more holistically illustrate the history of the Jewish people

As you read Part I, ask yourself—are these women and their stories recognisable as Jewish women? What makes these stories identifiable as Jewish women's stories? What makes them typical? What makes them atypical? When you come to Part II, compare the differing images, the

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multiple ways of understanding Jewish women. Are the Jewish women in Chapters One and Two distinguishable from the ways in which traditional history and stereotypes depict them? Which depiction is more familiar, more comfortable? With which depiction do you identify and why?

Ultimately, what one finds is the difference is in the details, it is in the way experiences are interpreted by the individual, and how that is then incorporated into what already exists in the individual Jewish woman's life. The difference is a matter of voice which determines who is able to give shape to the definition and description of the Jewish woman. The point is that it is essential to listen and give authority to all voices so that the history of Jewish women can be properly integrated with the history of the Jewish people.

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*PART I*

*LIVES, STORIES & BOBBE-MYSEHS:*

*JEWISH WOMEN FROM THE CENTER*

*"This is how it should be. 'You cannot tell someone I know you.' People jump around. They are like a ball. Rubbery, they bounce. A ball cannot be long in one place. Rubbery, it must jump. So what do you do to keep a person from jumping? The same as with a ball. You take a pin and stick it in, make a little hole. It goes flat. When you tell someone, 'I know you,' you put a little pin in. So what should you do? Leave them be. Don't try to make them stand still for your convenience. You don't ever know them. Let people surprise you. This likewise you could do concerning yourself. All this, I didn't read in any book. It is my own invention."*

*Shmuel Goldman, Tailor— in Number Our Days by B. Myerhoff*

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The flow of Jewish immigration to North America began with only a trickle. In the seventeenth century small groups of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, escaping persecution in Spain, Brazil, the West Indies, and Holland, first arrived in North America (Kuzmack 1990:17; Antler 1997:4). By the nineteenth century that trickle grew into a steady stream with two additional waves of Jewish immigrants. The first wave, in the 1820s and 1830s, consisted of Ashkenazi Jews from Germany, who fled anti-Semitic restrictions imposed on them during the conservative reaction in Germany following the Napoleonic Wars. The second wave, in the 1840s, consisted largely of German-Jewish intellectuals who had been caught up in the unsuccessful 1848 revolution (Kuzmack 1990:7).

This stream of Jewish immigration to North America became a full-fledged down pour beginning in the 1880s and continuing until 1924. During this time over half a million Jews, the majority from Eastern Europe, immigrated to the United States and to a lesser degree to Canada. They left their homes for a number of reasons: as a means of escaping the anti-Semitism of the Russian pogroms, because of the terror of World War I, because of the Russian Revolution, and in the hopes of creating better lives for themselves and their families (Cantor 1995:151-164). The situation in Canada was different than in the United States. Some forty years prior to the beginning of the 1880s immigration, when there were already 15 000 Jews living in North America, there were only 154 Jews in Canada. "This difference may be traced to the fact that the American colonies became a relatively open haven for Jews and other dissenters by the mid seventeenth century, about one hundred years before Canada's doors were opened following the British conquest" (Arnold 1976:45). It is during this final immigration period, beginning in the 1880s, that the number of Jews immigrating to Canada began to increase, although it never equalled that of the United States.

The immigrants of this period were encouraged by the Canadian government to settle on the Canadian Prairie. Under the Homestead Act, an adult male could acquire a quarter section of

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land, one hundred and sixty acres, for ten dollars, and the option of buying the adjoining quarter section for an additional ten dollars (Robertson 1974:10). “He agreed to break the sod, erect a shelter and live on his property for at least six months of the year for a period of three years. Then the land was his” (Robertson 1974:10).

While the vast majority of Jewish immigrants chose to settle in growing urban centres such as Toronto, Montreal, and Winnipeg, a minority took advantage of the Homesteaders Act and settled in the virgin Prairies. Edenbridge Saskatchewan, founded in 1906, was one of several successful Jewish-farming colonies in Canada. It was there along the Carrot River, north of Star City, where two groups of Jews, the first from Lithuania via South Africa and the second from Lithuania as well, but via London’s East End, made their homes. The Edenbridge settlement, which never numbered more than fifty or sixty families, was successful well into the mid-twentieth century (Paris 1980a).

Among its original settlers was the Krensmen<sup>□</sup> family. In the following two chapters I will tell you two stories as they were told to me by Adam and Shawna Krensmen’s two youngest children, Hannah and Rachel. These chapters are an account of their lives, which began on a farm in Edenbridge, Saskatchewan. I have tried to preserve the way in which these two women told their life stories to me, changing little in the way of language and sentence structure, in the hopes that you might hear their voices as you read. Sit back and relax, read, and enjoy these stories at your leisure, but as you read, ask yourself if, from your own perceptions and experiences, these stories are recognisable as the stories of Jewish women? From what you have been exposed to, are their experiences, goals, and concerns typical of Jewish women as a whole? What is it about their stories that make them typical or atypical? I will return to the question of the typical Jewish woman in part II.

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<sup>□</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all names.

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## CHAPTER ONE—HANNAH

*I have known Hannah for my entire life and throughout those 25 years she has sporadically told me stories of her experiences as a young woman. These stories have always remained in my memories and many times I have played them out in my daydreams like old black and white movies. In this attempt to understand what Hannah's life was like growing up on the Canadian Prairies I try to put myself in her shoes so that I might face those experiences which do not exist in my world. But like watching a movie through a peephole, the entire picture never emerges.*

*When I approached Hannah requesting to hear and write down all these stories, she paused and looked at me as if to say 'what took you so long?' and then happily agreed. "I'm not going to tell you all my secrets," she warned. "I have to keep some things for myself." Her statement caught me off guard for I was not prepared for this sort of candid response. It was not until days later that I realised Hannah's comment was not just her way of ensuring some degree of control over the endeavour the two of us would undertake. She was telling me that these are not just stories she agrees to share, these are pieces of her life, pieces of herself that she gives away every time the stories are told.*

Where should I start? From history way back when? Ok, well...

My parents were married in London England in 1902. My mother was born in Manchester England and my father was born in Europe, Lithuania I think. My mother was Shawna David before she was married, and my dad was Adam Krensmen. And they had 4 children in London, England before they decided to immigrate to Canada. My father had a good business in London England. He was in the fruit business, but he always wanted to be a farmer. He grew up on a farm in Europe and even though he had a good business, and my mother came from a very wealthy well-to-do family in London, my dad was determined he was going to be a farmer. Then the government offered one hundred and sixty acres in Canada for ten dollars. My dad thought that was great so him, my mother, my four brothers, and a brother of my dad's who was single at the time left for Canada.

They came to Canada, to the wilderness in Ridgedale Saskatchewan, Edenbridge Saskatchewan it was called in later times, and to this day I don't know where they lived until my

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dad and his brother built this log house which as a child I remember living in. It had two large rooms and the bedrooms were divided only by curtains from one room to the other. I remember the long table in the kitchen, living room, dining room or whatever it was. That's where they lived for many, many years and then more children came and more children came, eleven in all. I was the first born in this nursing station, and then Rachel. I think it was like a hospital, but a nurse ran it. The rest of my brothers were born at home. My aunts were midwives. When I think of how difficult it would have been to have these babies with no anaesthetic or anything, it must have been terrible. I was the first girl born after nine boys so I was very popular for a short time until my sister came along. And thank goodness that was the end of the big family. Imagine 11 children. My brothers went up into the bush and made their own lumber and built their own larger house which I remember moving into. The old log house just sat on the yard.

As far as keeping *kosher* and things, they didn't once they came to Canada because they had no refrigeration for their food. They had to use ice blocks to keep the food cold. My mother came from a very religious family and my dad and mother kept *kosher* until they came to Canada, but once they got here it just wasn't possible.

We farmed grain but first my brothers and my father had to break all the land down so they could grow something because there was nothing but bush all around. My mother used to tell me there would be bears looking in their windows at night. I often wonder how my mother stood it because she came to live in the wilderness from a home that had everything. Her parents came only once from the United States to visit. They begged my father to come to the United States. They would buy him a farm, they would do anything just to take them away from this. But my dad refused. He said that he came here to be a farmer and that's what he was going to do. He wanted his sons to do the same, and that's where they all remained. My mom took one trip back to see her family in New York. She had only seen her parents twice after she got married, but she kept up

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correspondence with them all her life and when she died I carried on and I was able to meet some of them. I never knew my grandparents, I had pictures, but that was it.

Life went on and my brothers too became farmers. We knew we were Jewish but we never practiced going to synagogue because it was many, many miles away from us, but we always went to *shul* [or *synagogue*, the Jewish place of religious worship] on *Yontiv* [a collective term for the Jewish high holidays] I remember going to *shul* as a child running up and down the stairs. But that was as far as our Jewish practice went. The whole family, which was large at the time with all the sisters-in-law and brothers, always celebrated holidays like *Pesach* [or Passover, the Jewish holiday celebrating the exodus from Egypt] together. Everyone would come to my mother and dad's house. My mom did all the cooking for everyone. She made all the traditional food for Passover: *kenadlech* [dumpling], soup, chicken, and *tsimmis* [carrot pudding]. All the traditional foods she probably ate at home. I remember the crowds that used to be at my parent's house. The tables used to be all over the house. And because no one really knew the services or the prayers... we never had any Passover books to perform the *sedar* [the ritualised meal held on the first two days of Passover], I remember we all sang *Hatikvah* [the Israeli national anthem], but I can't remember why. I can't believe we all did it. That was the only Hebrew we knew, the only part of Jewishness we did. We always sang *Hatikvah* before we ate.

Now there was a man by the name of Mike Usiskin who also came from London, England and he taught us all Jewish. We could read and write Jewish, but we were never taught Hebrew. I think maybe Rachel was. As she got older there was another teacher who taught Hebrew. But the rest of us just knew Yiddish because that's all we were taught. My parents spoke Yiddish at home and Yiddish to the children, but they also spoke very good English, and we usually answered them in English.

But we always knew we were Jews and when we went to school amongst all the gentile children, there was always a war on in the schoolyard because someone always called us dirty

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Jews. My brothers, my sister and I, we would all go into one corner, all the Jews, and there would be a battle between the gentiles and the Jews. I remember that. A lot of verbal yelling, but my brothers never backed down from anything because there was a lot of anti-Semitism in the country at the time, although we mixed with gentiles all the time there was that constant little difference. My brothers always stood up for themselves, and they stood up for other Jewish men who were not able to do what they did. They would fight someone to get their point across. There were many fights because someone called us a dirty Jew, that's the way life was. As kids we never really understood why we were called dirty Jews because we grew up amongst gentiles. We knew we were Jewish and I thought we were just like everyone else, but I guess they were taught at home that we were something different.

There were many Jewish families living in Edenbridge at the time. There was a whole colony around us. The Edenbridge colony was divided in two parts, the south end and the north end. Our family was in the south end, and the Krauses and the Brewster's and the others were in the north end. They were closer to the synagogue. There was a hall in Edenbridge where we would go for picnics. I remember the Golden Jubilee festival that was held in Edenbridge. It was a celebration of the Jews in Edenbridge. I remember we drove from one end of the country all the way to the synagogue and that's where it ended. Of course at that time it was probably no more than ten or fifteen miles but it took a long time because everyone had horses and oxen pulling wagons. We had wonderful picnics in the hall and in the yard when we were children. We always had picnics. And I remember my parents taking us to dances and we would sleep on benches until they were ready to go home. It was an interesting childhood. We didn't know we were poor because everyone else was the same. We had enough to eat. We had gardens and my father raised his own chickens and beef. In the country it was different.

I was always the one to do the inside chores because my sister was more of the tomboy type and she liked being outside so she did the outside chores, especially during the war. Because

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we went to school and walked so far we probably didn't get home until five in the afternoon we didn't do many chores during the week. And my mother was very fussy. If we washed the floors she would redo it because her white wooden floors were scrubbed clean like milk. And for *Pesach* she would scrub the walls. She would have the house like spic-and-span clean. We could never really do it well enough for her. That's probably where Rachel and I learned to be so crazy clean. But we did dishes and things like that.

But we had lots of fun as children even though we had nothing. In the winter we went tobogganing with the horses and we'd go skiing on the hills. The snow banks would be up to the telephone poles and we'd ski on those. In the summer time we'd have picnics and all the Jewish kids were together. I always had lots of girlfriends because they all wanted to be friends with my brothers. And when I grew older we used to go to Edenbridge hall for dances. Big Bands would come and we'd go dancing.

I went on dates, but very closely watched by my brothers. If they didn't approve of somebody there was no way I could go out. When I was younger I could only go out if I went with them. When I was a little older my brothers were there to say whether they liked them or didn't like them. So that was kind of a challenge.

I mostly dated Jewish boys, but I remember once going with a gentile boy. He gave me a box of chocolates and my mother made me give it back because she didn't approve. In another instance, the boys brought bacon home and my father took it and threw it in the garbage and fed it to the animals because they wouldn't allow it in the house. They always had that Jewish feeling about them, they just didn't carry out the acts. They knew they were Jewish and wouldn't allow all this pork and stuff in the house. In fact I didn't even know what it tasted like until I was eighteen or nineteen years old.

When I graduated from grade eight that was it for school. There was no high school around Edenbridge, and no money to send me to a high school outside of Edenbridge. I had gone

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to a little country school that was very, very small. It seemed big at the time but when I've gone back, it has been small. It was one room that went from grade one to grade eight in one room. My favourite subject was history. I liked school and I wish I could have gone on with it but there was never any money and that was just the way of the world in those days.

So when I was sixteen, I left home and went to Saskatoon to work. I left because there was nothing to do in the country. There was absolutely nothing to do and I couldn't go to school. I knew there was something more than living where we lived. It was not my thing to be there on the farm, I just felt there were different things out there for me. My sister-in-law was ill one time and they sent me to Saskatoon with her. That was the first time I left the farm. When I left the second time, I think I knew I was never coming back. I went and applied for a job in a department store, Lerhes, and I got six dollars a week. And I lived with one of my older brothers, Nathan and his wife, in Saskatoon. I paid them four dollars a week, board and room, and I managed to clothe myself with the rest. I worked there for three or four years. It was during the war and there were no men to work in the shoe department, so I was a shoe-man, a shoe-lady. And that's what I did, I sold shoes. It was 1941, '42.

I sort of regret that I didn't take Rachel with me. She had to work so hard on the farm because she was left there during the war. The three boys had gone overseas and she was there with my other brothers to do manual labour, which was not good. I escaped all that. I didn't make any money, but I made enough to support myself. I felt I had to do it. The farm had nothing for me so I just left and made my own way. As little as I made, it was enough to keep me in my clothes. You could do a lot with two dollars in the 1940s.

You see war had broken out in '39 and that's when I had met Seth. My girlfriends and some others had come over to my aunt's the night before *Yom Kippur* [the Day of Atonement] and he was one of the boys that came over to visit. And I met him that night. And it was *erev* [the night before] *Yom Kippur* and we went for coffee and stuff, I could never figure out why everyone ate

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and he didn't order a thing. Gee that's queer, why isn't he eating? I never realised it was *Yom Kippur* evening and he was already fasting. I didn't really have the religious training. I knew it was *Yom Kippur*, but I didn't understand that people really fast. At any rate, after I got to know him better he explained to me why he hadn't eaten. Because it was *erev Yom Kippur* and he kept the holidays—that's the way he was brought up in his home in Melville Saskatchewan.

I think that first night we met we fell in love. It's just that you know someone is right for you. Six months later we were married because he was posted overseas. On a Sunday we were together at my aunt's house and he left to go back to barracks. When he got back to barracks he got his posting for overseas. He phoned me at my aunt's house and said stay there I have something to tell you. He came back and said he was being posted overseas in two weeks, and we're getting married tomorrow.

Our wedding was held in my aunt's house. It was in her dining room and the clock was chiming, it was very strange. Right in the middle of the service the clock was chiming and it was six o'clock. And we got a *huppa* [a wedding canopy] and it was in my aunt's dining room. It was just my very close friends and my father that were there. My mother had already died in December of a heart attack. She was fifty-six. I was married in February. Of course no one else could afford to come in those days. After, we left to Melville and spent about a week with his parents and then we went on to Winnipeg. Then he went overseas. He was overseas for three years. And that's how it happened.

In that three years he spent overseas I lived with Seth's parents. They were all alone, both sons were in the airforce, and their daughters were already away from home so they asked me if I would come and help them in the store. It was wartime and they couldn't get help, so I decided to do it. I was very reluctant at the time because I was only twenty years old and I felt I would lose my freedom by living with them. But through living with them for those years I learned a lot and I realised what being Jewish was for the first time in my life. My in-laws were the biggest influence

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in my life as far as being Jewish is concerned. Before I lived with them I knew nothing about how to be a practising Jew, nothing about keeping *kosher* or about the holidays. Even though we went to synagogue when we were children, none of us understood any of it because we didn't practice any of it at home, but my in-laws did.

My father and mother-in-law were very religious people. My father-in-law *dovened* [prayed] twice a day, they kept *kosher* and all the religious holidays. It was from them that I learned the traditions of being a Jewish woman. It was an education for me. Seth's mother worked in their store everyday, but she still kept the *kosher* home. She did her usual routine of cooking before she went to work so that everything was ready for that night's meal. I learned how to keep *kosher* so that when the war was over and Seth and I moved to our own home, we kept strictly *kosher* and my children went to Hebrew school and the boys had *Bar Mitzvahs* [a ritual that commemorates a boy's thirteenth birthday when he reaches the age of adulthood and can participate fully in Jewish religious life]. It was completely different than how I was brought up, and I guess that's why I am a much stronger Jewish mother than most Jewish mothers because I wanted my kids to be Jewish, to practice and know about Judaism.

After those three years with my in-laws Seth came home from the war. I think because I got to live with Seth's parents I got to know more about him. I often think if I hadn't lived with them, maybe the marriage would never have worked because we would have become total strangers; but, because his parents took me in and treated me so well and I got to feel so close to them, I felt that I was married and part of the family. It was a little strange when Seth got back because we basically had to start all over again.

I think by today's standards our marriage would never have worked. In those days once you were married you were married, you took your vows and that was it and divorce was never in your mind. You were married and you had to make a go of it, and I never thought of anything else.

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But when I think about, the generation of today could never stand that. I'm glad it worked for us, we had a good life.

Seth was a very loving person. My boys are really a good replica of him. They are both very kind and good husbands. His only fault was he loved to read day and night. He was a big reader, a great father and a good supporter.

When Seth came back from overseas we lived with his parents. Sheila was born ten months later and then we built our own home. Sheila must have been maybe a year and a half old when we finally moved out. And my father-in-law kept saying what's your hurry, why are you moving out? Even though I had already been there for years and years and years it had seemed.

When we finally moved out into our own home, my father came to live with me. My mother had died during the war, Rachel had gotten married, my brother Sam who had been overseas bought the farm, and my dad was all alone. I felt he needed a home and he came to live with me for the next five years. So in all the years Seth and I were together we really never had much privacy, but having my dad live with us was a great help to me. I had Sheila, and seventeen months later I had Martin. My dad would take Sheila in the carriage for a walk everyday, and he would feed Martin his bottle. My dad would say look at you, you work so hard and only have two children. And I think of my mother with eleven children, what did she do? My father said he never realised there was so much work to do with the children because he was always out making a living.

During those years I stayed home and worked in the store only during holiday times. I didn't work on a full time basis because I couldn't leave the two children. Seth worked with his parents in the store. It was a family business. My only regret is we should have moved on with our lives and went somewhere else at the time and tried to better ourselves, but we didn't, we just stayed on there. His father was the type that wanted his family around him all the time because he loved to stand and *doven* with them in the mornings and at night. My father-in-law died *dovening*.

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He put his head on his book and passed away. He was a very religious man, and he always meant what he did, it wasn't for show, that's the way he felt. I learnt a lot about Judaism from them, and tried to instil it in my children. Kept *kosher*, kept the holidays and maintained a Jewish home for all those years.

Seth died at the age of forty-seven. Sean was nine, Martin was sixteen, Sheila was seventeen and away in school already. I was forty-two. I have so many regrets for him. I miss what he missed in life. After he died I realised that maybe keeping *kosher* didn't mean that much anymore. I felt that had there been any meaning behind being that Jewish, they wouldn't have let this happen. So I took my dishes and mixed them up. It took me a long time to eat non-*Kosher* meat in my house. I guess I did it because I was so hurt. That was the end of my twenty-one years of keeping *kosher*.

Life was hard after losing Seth. It took a long time to get over it. I was left with no money and three kids. Sheila was already in school in Winnipeg and I had to pay one hundred dollars a month for her board and room. Martin was growing up and a few years later he was ready for university. So I had to make the decision to move out of the country into the city so Sean could have his *Bar Mitzvah* and Martin could go to university. On a wing and a prayer I went. I had little money again, and whatever I did have my brother talked me into buying a small house, putting a little money down. It was probably 1968 when I moved to Winnipeg so Martin could go to school and Sean could study for his *Bar Mitzvah*, and I could work. I got a job immediately.

Once I moved to Winnipeg, Sean went to school, Martin went to university, and Sheila was already graduated and gone to live in Calgary. Sean was taking his *Bar Mitzvah* lessons at the *Rosh Pina* synagogue. And through the course of all this I met Irving who I had known for twenty some odd years. My niece was married to his nephew so I had been to her wedding and to all the different functions so I knew him for over twenty years. I knew who he was, he knew who I was and we were married in 1968, thirty years ago. We were married in the chief Rabbi's study in

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Winnipeg. It was Irving's family and my close family, they were all there. We just had some coffee and stuff after the service, and then we left for our honeymoon, the first trip either of us ever took in the winter so it was very exciting. We couldn't imagine standing in Palm Springs in the sunshine when we had left thirty below in Winnipeg. It was wonderful weather and green grass and we were like two kids who had never been out in the world. It was so exciting. We had a wonderful time and shared it with a lot of people.

My only sad part was I had to leave Sean at home, he was so young and very upset. He'd never been away from me before and had gotten very attached to me after his father passed away. Sometimes I regret leaving him at home because he was so upset. I think he had a lot of sad moments when I was getting married because he felt he was losing me. It was very difficult for him. And when I look back now I think I've made a few mistakes, but you just don't know. And he seems to be ok in spite of it all. He's become a good father.

You know when you're young you're very lonely. I was forty-five when I got re-married. Your kids can only fill a certain void in your life and it's not everything. My children had to have the freedom to do with their lives like I did with mine and I became very lonely. You're used to having a companion with you all the time and it was very difficult financially for me to try and make a living. And Irving was there to help me financially in many ways, to afford me the opportunity to go into business and make a life for ourselves. He came from a marriage of thirty five years where his wife was very ill and he never had any freedom or chance to travel. And we did all those things, things I never dreamed would happen in my lifetime, like having a home in Arizona and going there for twenty years every winter, and travelling to places I had never seen. So I was really very lucky, very blessed. It was like a reward. Even when we went on our first trip in the winter for our honeymoon we got to see grass in February and we had never seen that before. So it was like we both had come into a new world.

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I feel very blessed even though I've had a lot of sadness. But with sadness comes little blessing here and there.

After we were married Irving and I lived in Winnipeg. We never went back to keeping a *kosher* home, but we did have a Jewish home. From our home, the boys and Sheila were all married.

You know as I raised my children I really wanted them to understand their Jewishness, to know they were Jewish and have all the advantages of being Jewish. Being Jewish is a birthright and that's what you believe in and you want your kids to follow the Jewish traditions along with you. Sometimes it's very difficult. There is a lot of intermarriage now in the world and you have to learn to accept a lot of things that you don't really want to. And that's the way it goes.

Now both Sheila and Sean married people who converted to Judaism. I think they knew how strongly I felt about being Jewish and how I wanted them to marry Jews. At first, I was not that excited about the fact that they were not going with Jewish men and women, but you get accustomed to it because that's the way the world is today. My son-in-law converted and took on the Jewish religion. He did all the right things, brought up his daughter Jewish and I felt very happy about that. Martin married a Jewish girl and we had no problem with that. Sean was very young when he was married and his wife converted also. Even though they don't keep a traditional Jewish lifestyle, I think their daughter knows she is Jewish and someday she will make a choice of what she wants to do with her life.

I have always had a very close relationship with my children. It was a much closer relationship than I had with my mother. But with my children it is a completely different story than with most because they lost their father so young. They all knew what I could provide for them and never asked for more. Martin used to go to university and I would say 'do you have money?' He would say 'I got a quarter that's more than I need.' Today it would never do. It left a mark on all of them because when you lose a parent so young you're probably always searching for

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something else. They've never really given me any problems in that respect. They never asked for more than I could get, and never wanted more than I could give to them.

When I think about it, to be honest, I never really knew my own mother because she was so young when she died and I was so young when I left home, I was just a child. When you're young, you don't pay attention to many things or ask many questions. I regret not asking her questions now. All I remember is her working very hard. I still have one letter that she wrote to me, but my mother and I never really sat down and talked. And when my dad came to live with me, I just knew him as a father and a grandfather. He was a very good grandfather to my children. He brought a lot into their lives. He was very quiet, very soft spoken. But in his younger days I think he was a very determined man.

I've really been blessed because I've had my kids for so long and I've been alive to interact with them which I didn't with my parents. I think this generation is much more open. You can talk about things like the way you feel, the way they feel. I wasn't as close to my parents or even to my own children when they were young, the way parents are close to their children today. I guess you just didn't talk about things the way parents and children talk today. I was in grade eight when I had my first period and I didn't even know what it was. I knew nothing about sex or anything like that. Parents never discussed those things with their children. Today, parents sit down and talk, but in our day and in my mother's day, you didn't do it. It's really too bad because I think it would have been better if I had discussed things with my children, but you just didn't do those things then. It was sort of forbidden.

In spite of that, I've always tried to teach my children things about being Jewish and I've tried to keep a close family. I kept all the Jewish holidays by having the children to my house even though they were married. It was for whoever could come. I did what I could do because most of them were married or were getting married. Martin could go to *shul* and *doven*, and I think Sheila knew hers. She went to Hebrew school too, but Sean didn't get much religious training because by

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the time he grew up in Melville there was no Rabbi. So when we came to Winnipeg, he learned his *Bar Mitzvah* but that was all. I think he found it very hard to interact with the Jewish kids because he was already eleven or twelve. You know had I been here when he was younger and sent him to Hebrew school he would have made more Jewish friends. I think he found it very difficult. All his friends in Melville were gentile girls and boys, so it was a little harder for him. As a matter of fact, he never had any Jewish friends at all. But with Martin being in university he met Annette and it wasn't long after that he was married. And they also carried on the Jewish traditions because her parents were. It was quite simple for him.

Education was also a very important thing for my children to have. I told Sheila that it didn't matter what she took, but she had to have an education because you never know when tragedy is going to strike you. For me, I had no education so it was very difficult. I could only get a job as a sales person which paid nothing. So I said to Sheila it didn't matter what she took as long as she got an education and could be self-sufficient if something was to happen to her. Martin went to school for the same reasons. There was no doubt that he would go. And Sean made his own career in the Ambulance Services which he has done very well with.

In spite of it all, being self-educated is sometimes a very good teacher. I ran a very successful lady's wear business in Winnipeg which allowed Irving and I to retire. At the time when I took over as a manageress, I knew nothing about it but I quickly learnt and then eventually bought it from the original owner, and Irving and I ran it for ten years. That made me feel I had accomplished something in my life. Up to that point, I felt I never really accomplished anything. I didn't have any education so I felt I had really accomplished something big by running this successful business. And because the business was so successful, Irving and I were able to retire and we were able to help the children whenever we could, which I was never able to do before because I never had any money. So I feel that was my greatest accomplishment. I've been successful in that respect. It was all hard work but after a while it came very naturally to me. It

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was truly a part of my life, and I'm truly proud of what I did. I had struggled for such a great part of my life and never had anything so it was great to be able to do all that.

Running a business built a lot of confidence in me. I had to deal with men travellers all the time and they can be very bossy and pushy, thinking they know more than you do. Its like men build houses but they really don't know what houses are all about because they don't know where to put the plugs. That's how it is when you run a business because they think they know what you can sell in your business, but they don't wear the clothes. So as time passed, I became more and more confident about what I could do.

Times then were so different than they are today. Its like two different worlds completely from what I live in and what I grew up in. Men were not like the men of today at all. My father was like all men in those days, they were the boss. That's the way they were brought up in Europe I guess, and feminism wasn't in the picture in those days because women never spoke up for themselves or stood up for themselves. Today, thank God, we have feminist women who can stand up for themselves and say what they want and do what they want to do. The strength I and the other women in my family have came out of what we'd seen as children. I can remember my father being very gruff with my mother because he wanted his way about everything. If that had been me today I would have packed up and left with however many kids I'd have. But that was her life, she married him and that was it, she didn't know anything else. So I think I like this world better, much better. I think that's why the women in my family are so strong. But some of it comes from my father too because he was a very strong opinionated man.

I became a very strong person because of what happened to me when I was only forty-two. Then I went into business and probably I became a really strong person through that also, but being strong isn't always good, especially for a marriage because you think you know everything. It makes it kind of hard because you're not ready to think somebody else knows as much as you do.

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Its bad too, its not always a good thing to be a strong woman. If you could just have a happy medium, things would be fine.

I still believe women should stand up for their rights, for what they believe and what they want. I'm very much a feminist even though I'm seventy-six years old. And I guess I learned that from life in general. You learn a lot in those years from when you're sixteen to when you're seventy six. As you grow older you just see things so different from when you were younger. That's all with maturity and experience and what happens in your lifetime. I am self-taught. I read a lot and I listen and I have lots of experiences that are very valuable too, because you can't learn that in books at all. In spite of everything, I think I've been very lucky. I found two men who treated me well and they respected my ability and I've been very lucky with my children and my grandchildren and God-willing someday my great grandchildren.

*What would you say to those great grandchildren today?*

I would say follow your heart and be honest with people. Don't let people walk all over you. Use your own mind and do what you think is right, and just follow your dreams and hopefully you'll find someone in your life who will be the right person. I think you know when they come along. You'll know. And other than that, just be you, I guess, and hopefully everything will work out. Go to school, get an education and see some of the world. Too many of us got married at eighteen and nineteen and never saw anything. And that's a mistake, I think. If you love someone you can wait forever for them.

*What does being a woman mean to you?*

Well first of all, being a mother which is very important. It is very important to have and raise children of your own. It's like a God-given gift. When Sheila was born, I thought I was the only person in the world to ever have a baby, you know? I think to be a woman today is wonderful because you have an education, you can do things for yourself and don't have to depend on anyone. Yet you can't be too independent, you have to have a balance somewhere along the way, which I

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wish I had. And other than being a mother and a wife I guess...as long as you have a good marriage and be a feminist. You have to know who you are, someone else can't tell you who you are. You are yourself and that's what you are. And I've learnt that. It took me many years, but that's why I'm such a strong person today. I feel that I've accomplished something, and I've raised some kids. Everyone says you did something right, but maybe I'm just lucky, or maybe its the circumstances they came from too. But whatever it is, I think I've really been blessed with two good marriages, three great kids and grandchildren. I mean what else do you want out of life? I feel that I've had it all. I really feel very blessed. I look after myself and hopefully it will continue so I can see some more good things in my life.

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## CHAPTER TWO—RACHEL

*Sitting across the table from Rachel I am struck by two things. On the one hand Rachel exudes strength, in the fullness of her cheeks, the confidence in her voice, and the muscles in her hands. And yet those same strong hands fidget desperately looking for something to do as I explain the purpose and philosophy behind our current venture.*

*Just as I am wondering how I might help Rachel relax—perhaps some tea—she leans forward onto the table, her hands stop. She places them palm down, spread out on the kitchen table. She stares at me looking deep into my eyes, and into my thoughts. “My life has not been easy you know. I’ve always had to work hard,” Rachel tells me, or perhaps she is warning me about what is to come. But it is the expression on her face and the emotion in her eyes that stick with me long after the two of us part ways. It is in this expression that Rachel indicates she knows more than I do, that all the work that went into building those strong hands has taught her valuable lessons and made her the woman she is today.*

My parents, Adam and Shawna Krensmen came from England in 1912, I believe it was. I think we all wonder why they decided to come to Canada, to the middle of nowhere. My dad saw a poster that said come to Canada, a quarter section of land for ten dollars. I think it was one hundred sixty acres for ten dollars. Well, he thought that was great, and he always wanted to be a farmer, so he decided he would come to Canada first and buy the land, and then he would send for his family. So he came over by himself and bought some land. He had three more brothers still in England, so he bought a quarter section for each of them. Now my father was not a wealthy person, but he was quite well to do in England because he had a fruit stand there and him and my mother lived quite comfortably. When he came here of course he knew nothing about farming, not a thing, but he wanted to do it anyway. Eventually, my father brought to Canada my mother, his three brothers, and his four sons that had been born in England, Ruby, Harry, Nathan and Max. Everyone moved out to the Saskatchewan wilderness. When my mother saw what she had come to, she was ready to go back. All around was wilderness, nothing but trees. But she stayed, and my father and his brothers began chopping down trees, clearing the land so they could build this log

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house and have a farm. I know that log house had only a few rooms, but I don't remember much about it. The memories I do have come from what other people have told me. When I finally came along, I was the eleventh and final one in the family, we had another house. I'm sure they made a fuss over me because I was the second girl born with nine boys.

By that time, 1924, I was born off of the farm, not like the rest of the boys and Hannah. I was born in Ridgedale Saskatchewan because they had a midwife there. I think my mother was taken to this midwife's house and that's where the kids were born. There were no hospitals around, or maybe by that time there were, I can't really remember, but I know all of the boys were born on the farm delivered by midwives. And I was the last one. I'm sure my mother was very excited about finally having some girls, but thank goodness they learned to quit after that.

I wonder why my parents had such a big family. Not everyone had so many kids. His brothers, one of them didn't have any family at all, one of them had only a couple of children, and the other had five children. Some of my brothers decided to have large families of their own. My twin brothers Dave and Phil had six and nine children. Not quite as big, but big enough. I really don't know how my parents managed to cloth and feed us, but I guess the older ones worked and brought money home to help out. Some of my brothers went to work so young, fourteen and fifteen, and they were working. Going out and making a living was a necessity in the country, not like living in the city. Now out on the farm we had chickens, gardens, and cattle and such so we could eat that. My dad or the boys used to kill the cattle or the chickens to eat.

There was lots of hardship that's for sure, lots of hardship. The fact that my dad didn't know anything about farming didn't help. I don't know really why he came out there, I have no idea. And he brought these three brothers with him who also didn't know anything about farming. Really none of them should have been there, but they came. And eventually, they made their homes out there and raised their families and that's the way it went.

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My dad was a very quiet person, never said much. On the farms there isn't much entertainment, but I don't think he needed any. After the boys grew up he didn't have to do as much farming. He had his garden, which he worked in, and he stayed around the house more and helped mom out because of course they had too many children. He was just a very quiet person, but I think he also must have been very determined to accomplish something out there, and he did. I would say he was just a plain ordinary farm person.

My mom of course worked very hard. She was also a very quiet person, but she loved dancing. My dad and her used to go to dances at the Edenbridge Hall all the time. Of course, she cooked and she baked constantly, and she was very clean. Her house had to be so spotless. I guess that's where I get it. All she knew was that she had to keep the house clean. Our house had wooden floors with wide boards. Come the weekend, Hannah and I used to have to scrub those boards. They were as white as snow at all times because my mom was very fussy. And I've learned to be a fairly good cook and everything. My mom never taught me how to cook you see because she was gone when I was seventeen. I learned more from Larry's mom because she was alive after we were married and I learned to cook from her. But as far as keeping a nice house and that, I learned that from my mom because she was always so fussy and we had to do things around the house. And I taught my girls to do the same thing as well. When I worked and the kids went to school they knew that when they came home they had to prepare suppers, and when they got older they had to cook it, ready for when we came home, and on the weekends they had to do the laundry. I guess you just pass these things on, mother things.

Of course with all the kids I think my mom was always tired because she had so much work to do. My older brother Max, he used to do a lot for her around the house. He used to bake bread for her when he got old enough to do these things. So they had help. Other than that I don't really know what else to say about her. She went about her own business, never got into trouble or

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anything. It's hard for me to say anything about her because she died so young, and I was so young. I didn't really get to know her like I should have.

As children we had a lot of fun on the farm, even though there was not much out there. There were always a lot of kids around with our own boys and the rest of the Krensmen families and all of our neighbours. When they were younger, the boys used to make threshing machines out of wood and pretend that they are threshing grain, or they would make wooden horses and pretend they were riding the horses. There were many more boys than girls out on the farm, but Hannah and I just played along with them. When I think about it, I think Hannah and I were the only two girls in all of the Krensmen families so we had to play around with the boys. Whatever they did, we were always in there with them. I'm not sure if Hannah played as much, but I did because I was more of a tomboy than she was. In the winter, we had a hill and this bridge a little way from the farm. In the winter time we used to slide down this hill and under the bridge, and then go climb back up the hill again so we could slide under the bridge again. We used to go out on the ice on the creeks and play around. We never had skates, we couldn't afford that, but we played anyway. We really had a lot of fun, probably more fun than kids who don't know what to do with themselves have now.

I also went to school out on the farm, but only to grade eleven. I didn't finish because in those days no one thought education was that important. Plus, being that my mother died so young, I sort of took over the household. You forget about what you should really know, what you should really be doing. A lot of times, I think I should have kept going to school until I finished, but I never did. I still got an education of sorts, I am a self-educated person, I just learn as I go. Of course, if I knew then what I know now I would do things differently. I would have gone to school more and finished my education, but...

The school was very tiny. It was just one small little room, maybe seven hundred square feet, and a bit of a basement. When I ended up going to school, I was going with Hannah, and in

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the winter time we used to take a horse and toboggan. Of course, Hannah sat wrapped up in a blanket on this toboggan and I sat driving the horse. The school was about two miles from our home. We used to take our lunches to school, because it was too far to go home, but by the time we got to the school our lunches were pretty much frozen solid. There were registers on the floor of the school, so we would put our lunches on there and thaw them out in time to eat—we probably only had syrup and bread and butter. And that's the way it went until I was fifteen or sixteen years old.

There was a bit of anti-Semitism growing up, I mean it was the country. When we were going to school, I can remember my brothers, the twins, they were going to school for a bit when I started. They were always getting into fights over something someone had said. Someone would call us a dirty Jew or something, and there would be a fight at school or on the way home. Hannah and I were always protected by the boys. If somebody said something to us there was always a fight on the way home from school. But I guess it was never too bad. Once I got older and moved off the farm, we never had problems. We had a lot of gentile friends and never had a problem.

I remember one of my teachers, the last one I had. She was a very nice person. I used to stay with her at her house every once in awhile. There were not a lot of other people around, and not a lot of young people when I got a little bit older, so when it came to exam time I used to stay with this teacher and she'd help me study. She was very nice. I never liked geography or history or math, but I was good in my spelling, I was good in my French. I wasn't really interested in school that much. It was never put into my brain that school and education were important, that I should be studying harder. No one really pushed me to do these things. Now I know how important education is and when we had our own kids we just said "you have to go to school, you have to learn and that's it." You learn from your bad experience I guess.

Other than that I don't know what to tell you.

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I also went to Hebrew school with a nephew of mine. We went all the way through together. At that time I could read Hebrew as well as I could read English. There was always a Hebrew teacher, and he taught a lot of the kids. We never really had a religious house though. I mean my parents were never religious, never kept *kosher* or anything. We used to go to the synagogue out on the farm, but just on the high holidays and such. There was a synagogue out in Edenbridge and there was a big Jewish community there. I can remember running around the synagogue, up and down the stairs. In those days, the women were upstairs and the men were downstairs. But even though we never kept *kosher*, never had Friday night supper, and never went to synagogue on a regular basis, we always knew we were Jewish, we always knew when the holidays were and we'd always have lots of people over. It's a lot like we do now. We had all the foods we were supposed to have. I mean we were Jews and we knew that on the holidays we ate this kind of food and that kind of food. I have the same food to this day and I'm not very religious. At *Rosh Hashannah* [the Jewish New Year], we had roast beef, or roast chicken, chicken soup, *tsimmiss*. At *Pesach*, there were always *matzoh* [an unleavened cracker eaten on Passover] balls and all those things you make for *Pesach*. We knew what there was to have.

By the time I was seventeen, all of these things stopped. I quit school when I was sixteen and then my mother died when I was seventeen. She was fifty-seven and died of a heart attack. This is when my life started. I had to do everything. I was the only one left on the farm. Hannah had left to go to the city. She was not a farm girl, so I was left with dad and my one brother. In the winter, my brother would go out into the bush logging and would bring home wood and stuff. I was home with dad and did everything a man and a woman would have to do. I was the type that liked the outdoor work and I worked very, very hard. At the time I just didn't think anything of it, I never thought that staying there wasn't the best thing for me. I should have, but I didn't. Now I think of how silly I was. I guess at that time I was a bit of a tomboy and I liked the outdoors. But when I think back now of how hard I worked and how silly I was to stay there....

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My mom's death had a huge impact on my life. The thing I remember is thinking "well I guess I'm here to do whatever there is to do now." Like all my young life is gone because now I have to become an adult and do all these adult things and with all the boys being away overseas, it wasn't easy. But you get through these things.

Now this was the time in your life when you should be socialising with other people your own age. Unfortunately, I never got that opportunity, not as much as most others did. I never really dated at all. At school we used to have dances and other social events. You might have lunch with a boy at school, or go to a dance with them, but really to say that anybody ever picked me up and took me out would be a lie.

Again, this is something you really don't think about until later. I limited myself and I think now that I could have been out in the world. But when you're out on the farm like that and you don't really have the chance to do anything, you never experience much. My sister Hannah went away when she was very young, and I was even younger and, of course for her, it was a different life all together. For me, life was just out on the farm working. Whatever time I had to go out to a school dance or whatever, that was my entertainment. When you think back there are things you would like to have done but never got the chance. Like going out, going some place further than just the town of Ridgedale, getting out of the country a bit. You think back now, I was really a country bumpkin, didn't really do anything. In a way you resent it, but I've had a good life and it made me who I am today, so I can't really complain. It made me a strong woman. It hasn't hurt me any.

During the war there were not a lot of men around and even fewer Jewish men. But there was one at least. Larry only lived about two miles away from me. He never left with the other men when he was called because of his bad eyesight. So, he was on the farm as well. Now

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remember, we are cousins so I had known him my whole life. What attracted me to him? Well, he was a pretty great guy. It makes you wonder because I hadn't gone out with too many men, so how did I know he was so great? I don't know, I just did. During the war, we were seeing each other quite a bit and we liked each other very much. That's what keeps you going sometimes. He was always so good. He would come and help me with the chores on the farm. I never even thought about going out with anyone else, and I don't think he ever thought about it either. We felt we were good for each other and that was it. Eventually, we just decided to get married. We were married in '44, during the war. You know this is what happens when we are always together and there are no other young people around. The boys were over seas when we did get married. I guess it was the way it was just supposed to happen, and that's what we did.

Once we decided to get married, my sister-in-law that lived just a half mile up the road from us made me this shower. That was on June 11, 1944. I had probably two hundred people there at the shower. All the people in the country were there. I must have gotten at least a dozen Pyrex casserole dishes, because that was the thing in those days. And then, on the wedding day it rained, but people still came. Like a brother of mine came from Edmonton and my eldest brother went to meet him at the train. We had a lot of people. A friend of mine, myself, and my sister-in-law helped cook and after the wedding, we went to Melfort for our honeymoon and it was muddy. We had this old dodge car that ate gas like crazy. The rabbi came out from Prince Albert. I don't know how we got him out there, but we did. After the wedding, we went to Melfort and had to take the Rabbi with us to take him back to the train. We ploughed mud the entire way there and finally, we ran out of gas with the Rabbi in the back seat. So he said in Jewish "there will be help coming from the east." Well, we sat there and sure enough out of the east comes this truck. In those days, they had these gas trucks that drove around, but to get gas you used to have to have a gas coupon during that time. Larry was working for the Co-op store at that time and, by coincidence, he had on his leather jacket with the Co-op logo on it. This gas truck comes up

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behind us and asks what our problem was. Larry said we ran out of gas. "No problem" he said, "just open up and I'll fill up your tank"—just because he saw Larry was wearing the jacket. We made it into Melfort. Other than that, I don't remember much about the day of the wedding. I was so young, I had just turned twenty, and I guess it wasn't such a significant wedding as you have now, but I still had a gown and lots of family and people from around the country came to celebrate. I can't even remember what all we did, just sat down and ate I guess, maybe a speech or two. Who remembers.

That was July 6, 1944 and here we are today after almost fifty four years. I guess we did the right thing. We have three great children, some grandchildren and a great grandchild on the way, so I guess everything turned out fine.

After we were married, we bought a farm near Gronlid Saskatchewan and that's where we settled and worked very hard. I helped out as much as I could. Shelly was born in '46, and after that Betty and then Evan. We had a girl that used to help out with the kids and I still helped out on the yard, looking after the cattle and stuff when Larry was away, killing chickens for dinner. It was never an easy life. It was always a hard life even before I was married on our own farm. That was the only way you got to eat in those days because to go into town to buy stuff, you couldn't afford to do it. Your farm never brought in that much money, so you had to work hard to get enough food to eat from the farm not the store.

No, it wasn't an easy life, but still I think our lives were good because we enjoyed everything. Whatever we did, we still had a good life, had fun even though it was working hard. You just don't think much about it at that time. You work and then you play, so it's not so bad.

We were on our farm in the Gronlid area for nine years and during that time, the boys came back from overseas, all of them, each in one piece. Soon, they all bought farms and settled into their lives. Life just went on and no one ever really talked about what happened once the war was over. Everyone knew what Hitler had done, but I don't think it had the effect on us then that it

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does now. Again, because you are older now and back then when you're so young you don't realise what's going on in the world. I don't know if we talked about it that much. When the boys came home, we were just so happy everyone was all right, and not realising what the Jews went through. I myself knew a lot less than most people because I was not into it that much. But you take Larry for instance and he would know everything about what happened at that time. I knew, but I didn't really put it into my mind that it was so horrible. Now it's a different story because you think about what all went on. Of course, you see people on TV now, and that's when you realise just how bad things were. Back then, they didn't tell us that much. Its just been in the past decades that they've really told us exactly what has happened. At that time, men were just coming home and starting over again. Life just went on and everybody fell into place and tried to ignore what had happened.

When we finally got off the farm, Larry and I moved into a small town called Beatty in Saskatchewan, near Melfort. We had all three children with us, Shelly, Betty, and Evan. Shelly was born in '46, Betty in '49, and Evan in '53. I was thirty when Evan was born, and that is when we moved to Beatty, in 1955. There we opened a small service station and restaurant. We worked very hard there trying to make a living. There would be grain elevator crews that came to the town for six weeks at a time and we had to feed them. It was things like that. It wasn't easy, we worked very hard just like on the farm.

The children, well the girls really, had a hard time in Beatty and I think they were very unhappy. They were having some problems with the girls in school and were always coming home upset. These girls were calling them dirty Jews or something like that. If you ask Shelly now she'll say "I don't even want to talk about Beatty!" because she hated it so much. Beatty was the kids' worst time. There was no synagogue or Jewish community in Beatty, but there was in Melfort which was only, maybe, thirty miles away, so it was close enough to drive there. But Beatty was just a small hamlet and some of the girls were so bad.

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When it was time for Evan to start school, we decided to sell the business and move to Melfort. That was about 1960 or so, maybe a bit earlier. We moved mostly because the kids were having so much trouble and were so unhappy. And of course we didn't feel we were in a position to do anything because we had a business to think about. We had to think about our chances of making a living if we were to go and do something. We told the girls that they had to ignore them, what else could we do at the time? You can't go and tell this family off and that family off, and expect that not to affect your business, your livelihood. These were young girls who really had no cause for what they were doing, but I guess they had to learn something from home, something from their parents. The girls dealt with it somehow, but they would never go back, never.

When the kids started school in Melfort, there weren't any problems. As soon as we moved, I got a job selling shoes in a shoe store and I think Larry was working in a service station. Eventually, we got some money together and bought our own business, a locker plant. It was a frozen locker plant and grocery store, and we had it for about four or five years. The girls were going to school and Evan was too, but he was also doing his *Mafter* [the portion of the Torah read every week on the Sabbath] lessons because he was twelve already. Before he turned thirteen and was going to have his *Bar Mitzvah*, we moved again to Winnipeg.

Evan had his *Bar Mitzvah* in Winnipeg. The girls never went to Hebrew school, only Evan. I didn't think it was important to send the girls. As kids, we were never brought up to be religious and do those things, which is too bad. So when it came to sending our own kids, although we had the opportunity, it wasn't a priority. But of course their regular schooling was not an option, they had to complete their education. And now they are all doing well. Evan has his business and Betty has hers, and Shelly is at the courthouse.

So where was I? Oh yes. So we had moved to Winnipeg and that was about '66 or '67 because Shelly had just gotten married. We opened up a grocery store, had that for a few years, sold it, and then Larry went to work for one car dealership, and I went to work for another

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dealership. We stayed in Winnipeg until '74 when we moved to Vancouver. When we got to Vancouver, we took over a new and used furniture store, then we had a bottle depot, and then that horrible hamburger stand. Eventually, the girls were in Medicine Hat and Evan was with us in Vancouver. Then Evan moved to Medicine Hat and we all decided Larry and I should go to Medicine Hat and that's where we are right now. We're happy in Medicine Hat with all our three children. And now we're retired and that's all there is to that story, I guess. But having my kids around all the time is great and the kids are close to one another. Family is very important, that much we instilled in them.

Now through all this, the kids were getting married and having kids of their own. As they were growing up, Larry and I always tried to tell them what the facts of life are all about, how you should carry yourself and how to make a good person of yourself. I think we've done a good job with them.

Parents and children are not like they used to be. When I was young there was not much said around the home. I think whatever we learnt, we learnt on our own. And of course my mother passed away when she was so young and I was so young. I had to learn fast about what to do and what not to do. I never really got the chance to sit down with my mother and my dad was a bit strict in a sense. I don't know if they didn't have time for us, but I never talked to them like the way we sat down and talked about things with our children. You learn to talk about things.

It was very hard for me to learn the facts of life. At that time, I was so shy and in those days you didn't talk about sex or anything like that. I guess you're like an animal, learning by instinct. I had no one to tell me about it. Hannah was already gone because she left when she was 16 and I was left on the farm alone with my dad and my brother. So it wasn't easy, but I suppose you hear about it from other kids and I guess that's where I heard about it. No one ever sat down

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with me. It was not like it is now. It was a no-no to talk about things like that. It wasn't easy for me being seventeen and naïve. And having only brothers was not much help.

So you learn all these things and what you don't learn I guess it comes natural to you. But thank goodness I never got into any sort of trouble. But of course with our own kids we sat down and talked to them about sex and stuff. You learn to talk about these things. Times change and you have to learn to change with them. We see that in our kids all the time. Our kids now are intermarried which is a big change since my day. I've never been a very religious person, so Judaism has never been a real marker for me in that respect. But I've always known that I'm Jewish and if anyone ever said anything bad, I know I would not like it and would speak up. We never really had any problem in that respect, except in Beatty. Our kids also know that they are Jewish, but now that they are intermarried, I often wonder what will happen with their children. You wonder if they will be Jewish or even realise that they are Jews.

It was difficult at first when the kids decided to intermarry, but its been so many years now in my family that its not even an issue anymore. I don't feel that people are any different than I am. I respect them for what they are. It would be nice to be able to say that they married in their own religion, but as long as they're happy. The only thing that bothers me is with their kids. What are they going to be when they grow up? But I don't know if they thought of that before they got married. But there is nothing one can do about it, and if they are happy that's the main thing, but I often think about the children. What will they be, what do they tell them. But I have nothing to say against any other religion because I was never in the position to say I was better than anybody else. With my family right now I couldn't think of anyone better than Ron and Joan. They are very good to us and everything, so really, what can you do?

None of my grandchildren have had any religious upbringing. The grandchildren really aren't going one way or the other, as far as religion is concerned. I think they should have had that Jewish heritage. Maybe if Evan had insisted that Joan convert it would be different, but his first

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wife converted and it didn't really mean anything. You really have to take it into your heart, you just can't say well I've converted. For a lot of it depends on the man too, they have to make a lot of effort to have a Jewish family and Jewish home, but this is the way things are now. There are not a lot of Jewish people around, the grandchildren don't have a lot of Jewish friends, my children are the same way. You have to learn to accept changes.

I've done a lot of things in my life, and I've been my own biggest influence in my life, no one else. I've always worked and have somehow brought things out in myself that I never knew I had. I was a warranty clerk in a dealership and I just learnt that myself and became very good at it. I think being successful is just a matter of what you want to make of yourself. I really pushed myself to be able to learn whatever I needed to. I could go from job to job and do whatever with no problems. I could work in a shoe store, a dealership, and a lady's wear store, all without problems. And when Evan started his business, I worked with him and helped him along where I could. You just learn to do what you have to do. I have a very strong work ethic because I always had to work hard as a child and could always work anywhere. I've always felt good about that. Even owning our own business came naturally to me. I suppose the fact you can learn all these things is just in your genes. We never had any experience. We never worked at anybody else's place. It just comes the same way like when Evan and Betty went into business. Its just something that you know how to do. You figure out what you're supposed to do and that's the way it was. My older brother, one of them, he was always in business too. I guess you just do these things. You make mistakes, find out what you've done wrong and keep on going. We were quite successful at whatever we did, so it was all right. I never had anyone to tell me what to do at any time in my life, but I'm glad I don't have to do these things anymore. I've had it as far as working is concerned.

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Of course I have some regrets. One of the biggest is the fact that I never got into the world much I was always on the farm. My three brothers went to war and one of my brothers and myself and my dad were left. I did what I had to do. I worked out on the yard and I did the housework. We had wheat and cattle that we had to milk, shift cream and stuff like that. We had chickens. And that was what I did because everyone had gone to war.

I have some regrets when it comes to my father as well. My dad died about fifty years ago. Shelly must have been about two years old. He was living with Hannah a lot of the time in Melville, but he was out at the farm with us when he passed away in Melfort. He had a stroke. He was widowed very young and lived a secluded life. Nowadays they would get married right away or something, but in those days that is another thing that never happened. He must have been a very lonely man, which is very sad. When you think back you realise these things, but when you're younger you don't think about them. Now, I think back and I realise that he had a lot of years, that he was by himself.

There was always someone on the farm and he stayed on the farm with whoever was at home. But after a bit, he started staying with Hannah in Melville and then he'd come back and stay with us for a little while, and then go back to Melville. He was just sort of drifting around from one place to another. I'm sure it was a very lonely life for him. I never thought then that maybe he's sort of missing something. Now, lots of times I think about it. You see people now who have lost their mates and they are so lonely and maybe they find themselves another mate. We never talked about that in those days, but he must have been a very lonely man for a long time.

Eventually, he had a stroke and was in the hospital for a little while and then passed away. That was the end of our parents. I was already married at the time of course, but its a funny thing, your life turns on and you sort of forget about all these things, about what's really going on around you. Now that I'm older, I think more about it than I did then. You just don't think about how lonely people are or what's happening around you when you're young. There are so many other

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things to think about that seem more important. But now I think about it and sometime wonder about him, how his days went by. He used to go to bed very early because he didn't have anything to do. I don't think we even had TV then. Lots of things you regret after.

I don't know what else I can tell you.

*What advice would you give your great grandchild?*

You have to grow up to be your own person, be a good person. Like they say, do unto others that you would have them do unto you. I think one must not be prejudiced against people. Everyone else has a life that they came to this world with. Marry happily and make sure you go out in the world and do things before you get married. Get to know what's going on in the world, not like I did. I didn't really get out in the world. I would have liked to have seen how other people lived, what they did. I never really knew till after we were married. Not until after we got on our feet a bit did we really get out of the country. A person should get out and do things before they rush out and get married and get tied down to a family and all that. Be yourself and be happy.

*When Rachel finished her stories and the tape recorder was shut off we discussed what to make for lunch. We got up from the table and Rachel opened her arms and gave me a long deep hug and whispered 'thank you' in my ear. Just then her husband, their family historian and storyteller, walked into the kitchen. "How did everything go? You didn't need me for anything?" he questioned. Rachel looked at him and with no hesitation she stated, "No, it's my life and I told it in my own words." Then she turned to me with a smile of satisfaction on her face.*

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**PART II**  
**HISTORY & STEREOTYPES:**  
**JEWISH WOMEN FROM THE MARGINS**

*“Cultural identity... is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in the mere ‘recovery’ of the past... identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.”*

*Stuart Hall—“Culture, Identity and Diaspora.”*

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*I'm not sure if it was the comment itself, or the nonchalant attitude with which it was said, but either way I sat there in a state of shock. The Academy Awards were on television and the winner of the best director award—Schwartz somebody, or was it Goldstein?—stated in his acceptance speech that the award was for his wonderful mother 'who makes Jewish mothers look good.' About a minute later my phone rang. It was a friend who was listening to the same words. I picked up the phone and heard her ask, "Can you believe what he just said?"*

I asked myself, from this am I to understand that for the most part Jewish Mothers “do not look good”? I have a Jewish Mother, how might she measure up to this gentleman’s preconceived notions of the Jewish Mother? How would the two life stories in the previous chapters compare? Are their lives indeed typical of our understanding of Jewish Mothers? Does his comment insinuate that all Jewish Mothers are basically the same, his being the one exception to the rule? Can we really lump Jewish Mothers together like that? With all the questions that arose from that statement, there was one issue that was obvious, there in full stereo sound, was evidence of the pervasive and overwhelmingly negative image that surrounds older Jewish women, and the cultural acceptance and perpetuation of this image. In the next two chapters I explore how Jewish women have come to be represented in both historical accounts and popular literature as the Jewish Mother. First, I look at the way Jewish women are represented in the Jewish historical narrative, and how this representation is directly related to their position in that narrative. In this sense, the Jewish woman is cast as the *Other* to the male norm, her voice set apart from the mainstream. Second, I will look at the development of the Jewish Mother stereotype over the past 100 years, and the varying ways in which largely male Jewish authors have portrayed, and continue to portray it. This stereotype has, to a large extent, come to define Jewish women by and for others, but does it define Jewish women in the ways they wish to be defined? Where does one place Jewish women’s self-representations among those that have been created for them?

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## CHAPTER THREE—HISTORY

*"I want to do something very important. Like fly into the past  
and make it come out right."*

*Marge Peirce. Woman on the Edge of Time.*

### **The Nature of the Historical Record: History as Marked & Unmarked**

History is defined by the Canadian edition of the Collins English Dictionary (1981) as: the "record of past events; study of these; past events; train of events, public or private; course of life existence; systematic account of phenomena." Today, on the cusp of the twenty-first century, it should not be surprising that locating women in traditional historical accounts is a challenge. Like other subordinate groups, the historical experience of women has differed greatly from their dominate male counterparts; however, unlike other subordinate groups women have always shared the world with men equally in the sense that half of the world's experience has been theirs (Lerner 1979:160). And yet, women in general, and Jewish women in particular, are overlooked or are at best marginalized in history. Why you ask? The short answer is that we live in an androcentric world and consequently understand history in male centred terms. The representations and communal experience of women are thus highly distorted and/or largely unacknowledged; but this does not explain the process through which this happens. This process is considered below.

History provides the facts of existence; it tells how groups arrived at a variety of positions in space and time, how events played out on the world stage and the results of those events. More than this, however, history is the collective memory of a group that is formed and shaped to give meaning to the past. History is a social necessity which fulfils four functions in satisfying human needs. First, history serves as a source of personal identity. As memory "it keeps alive the experiences, deeds, and ideas of people of the past. By locating each individual life as a link between generations...history connects past and future and becomes a source of personal identity" (Lerner 1997:116). Second, history provides for a collective immortality as it roots the individual

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in a continuum of human experience that extends far beyond the human life span (Lerner 1997:116). Third, history is a “shared body of ideas, values and experiences, which has a coherent shape, becomes a cultural tradition, be it national, ethnic, religious or racial” (Lerner 1997:116). Finally, history provides an explanation. Patterns of past events become illustrations of philosophies, evidence, models, or contrasts to the present (Lerner 1997:116-117).

For Jews, a sense of history and remembrance is essential. “Jews have survived as a people with a clear sense of a collective memory,” a pivotal aspect of communal religious life (Joseph 1998:179). In the *Torah*, Jews are commanded by God to *zakhor*, to remember (Exodus 20:8). In the *Torah*, *Zakhor* is used 229 times as a verb, and 47 times as a noun (Joseph 1998:179). The act of remembering is ritualised in the form of storytelling seen in the annual recounting of the stories of Purim and Passover. Thus, history, as a collective memory, is what Judaism is based on.

As one considers the social functions of the historical record, it is essential to ask whose history is it? Who are the actors and who are not? What is recorded and what is not? The answers to these questions can reveal a great deal about the nature of the historical record. In the decades and centuries prior to the rise of the women’s movement and feminism, history was, and to an extent still is, thought to be an all-encompassing representation, an account of how everyone experienced the past. In the process of creating history, the historian is/was trusted to “arrive at some approximation of the truth... [to] separate fact from fiction” (Newman 1989:214-215). This approximation of the truth must be coherent in terms of present ideologies; thus history links the past and the present together. “Making history means form-giving and meaning-giving. There is no way to extricate the form-giving aspect of history from what we are pleased to call the facts” (Lerner 1997:117). In both form and substance, traditional historical accounts are considered factual. The emphasis on fact and truth is a vital aspect in understanding history, for its

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acceptance is based on the social preference for objective facts that are free from bias and ideology.

Through these eyes, history, or more accurately the historian, is similar to Danto's (1985) notion of the Ideal Chronicler. This is the position of the unmarked, the omniscient being able to record all events as true, factual, natural entities. The knowledge produced by the unmarked body appears to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time (Haraway 1988; Abu-Lughod 1990). The unmarked body has no fixed position, no specific space to occupy. Its body is hidden from view, and consequently it is able to see everything. Like the revolving movie camera showing the lives of all characters, the unmarked exists to show events as they happen. The absence of a fixed perspective means that the vision of the unmarked appears to be holistic, objective, factual, and free from bias. History then, as an unmarked body, creates representations that are truthful and carry with it an aura of scientific-like authority, which allows for all-encompassing depictions.

When feminists and others (cf. Parr 1995) began asking, 'where are the women?', unmarked historical accounts were challenged by marked historical accounts—similar to the stories found in Chapters One and Two. The marked "are the embodied others who are not allowed *not* to have a body, a finite point of view, and so inevitably disqualifying and polluting bias in any discussion" (Haraway 1988:575). The marked has a body that is fully visible and occupies a specific fixed position. The visible body means that its perspective is readily identified and can be pinpointed to a specific person, group, place, or interest; its origins can be traced to its creators and their biases can be exposed and deconstructed. The knowledge produced becomes readily identifiable and therefore questionable because it is not considered objective like the knowledge of the unmarked position.

More than the distrust felt toward the infecting nature of personal bias, the negative connotations associated with the marked stems largely from a fear of emotion in academia. By fear of emotion I do not mean to invoke any sort of psychological theorising about the nature of

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contemporary society, but to point to the influence this need for objectivity has had on perceptions. Behar (1996) illustrates this fact when she comments on a paper given by a colleague at a feminist anthropology conference. In the course of the remarks the speaker suddenly changed her tone and began speaking passionately about a very personal story, eventually breaking into sobs. “When my colleague had finished speaking, a terrible silence, like a dark storm cloud, descended upon everyone. A part of me wished the cavern in the middle of the room would open up and swallow us all, so we wouldn’t have to speak” (Behar 1996:17). It is this discomforting effect emotion and hence bias has that led to a preference for the sterile uncluttered nature of the unmarked position.

The notions of marked and unmarked history is not only a theoretical concept that exists in academic circles. These concepts are taught to us throughout our lives, while a preference for the unmarked is quickly and consistently developed. Allow me to demonstrate with an example from my own life. In my final year of high school, I opted to take a twentieth century history course. We were taught about the wars that have been fought beginning with World War I and ending with the Gulf War which was playing itself out around the clock on CNN, before our very eyes. The best way to learn the material, the teacher informed us, was to simply memorise the lectures given in class and then regurgitate the information for the exams, our personal opinion was not required or even desired and would inevitably lead to a lower grade. At the same time, I was taking English Literature in which one of the required texts was The Diary of Anne Frank. This material was treated as novels are often treated, with everything from its literary merits to its content to the development and eventual demise of the author herself being discussed, debated and even argued. Here, the personal opinion of the students was central to the learning process. These two classes could not have been more different, but why? Why were we not reading The Diary of Anne Frank in the history class, why were we not learning the history of World War II and the Holocaust in English Literature to place the diary in historical context? Why were we expected to memorise the history of World War II and not the history of Anne Frank?

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The answers to these questions are directly linked to the marked and unmarked historical accounts and the social preference for objective history. In the history class, the students were taught unmarked history. There was no discussion of the events because it is understood that they are objective facts not open for debate. The diary, on the other hand, is obviously marked and only in its loosest definition was it, at that time and place, considered to be an historical account. The diary is an individual story written from one person's perspective. Consequently, it is treated as a marked account and as such is open to all kinds of debate and discussion. By the end of these classes what became overwhelmingly clear was that history was fact and was therefore better than the stories found in the diary which were fraught with a young girl's emotions and therefore could never be trusted as an accurate account of the truth. With these ideas developed at a very early age, notions of what is historically significant become very narrow and reflect Western society's androcentric tendencies.

#### **Jews, Women, History, & the *Other*: History as Marked & Unmarked**

Let us move for a moment beyond the simple dichotomy of the marked and the unmarked history so that we might understand the true nature of both in order to explain why the female half of the human experience is all too often overlooked. Specifically, I will consider why "most accounts of the Jewish community, Jewish economic activities, religious movements, personal piety, and folk religion either omit mention of girls and women, or include them in the most marginal way" (Magnus 1990:29). The historical accounts that come under the rubric of Jewish history are far too numerous to consider here. For this reason, I will use biblical history of the *Torah* as an example.

My use of the *Torah* may not please all readers, especially since it is largely a religious document, and may not be the same as the archival sources used by historians; however, the *Torah* is an appropriate narrative to consider because of its age and because it acts as a template for the patterns of historical writings that have followed it. More than this, however, the *Torah* stands as

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a dominant ideology constructing both men and women. This ideology is then interpreted by various religious sects, from the ultra orthodox *Hassidic* Jews, to Reconstructionist Jews. My use of the Torah then is as a history of the dominant ideology and social roles of men and women in both religion and culture.

The *Torah* is a history chronicling the beginning of the world and the events that shaped contemporary Jewish people. This is largely a family history: Adam and Eve and their sons Cain and Abel, Cain's son Enoch, his son Irad, and his son Methusael. The pattern continues throughout the stories, always mentioning the sons, and only sometimes mentioning in the names of the mothers and the daughters. These written words create a continuity with the Jews of the past and for outlining the duties of being a Jew in the present. Further, "understanding contemporary Jewish women, whether secular or religious, requires awareness of the traditional Jewish teachings about women" (Heschel 1991:31) as these attitudes are still found in the majority of Jewish communities around the world.

The *Torah* is akin to other traditional historical narratives in that it is unmarked. The stories in it have no fixed perspective, and thus appear to be all encompassing narratives. The *Torah* has no author to whom one might attribute the act of writing. It is not a personal account and thus it is taken as objective and truthful. But where does this account leave Jewish women positioned in history? They are left in a position of *Other*, removed from the centre of the Jewish narrative.

As a religion and historical experience, men have shaped Judaism almost exclusively (Heschel 1991); as a result Jewish women are provided with a very specific position in culture and in history. Jewish women's lives and experiences are filtered through male perceptions and told with male voices. Thus, Jewish men are in the centre of Jewish religion, culture, and history and Jewish women are peripheral. Consider, as Kaye/Kantrowitz and Klepfisz (1989) do, the story of Dinah in Genesis 34 as a primary example:

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Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her by force. Being strongly drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob, and in love with the maiden, he spoke to the maiden tenderly. So Shechem said to his father Hamor, 'Get me this girl as a wife.' Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah; but since his sons were in the field with his cattle, Jacob kept silent until they came home. Then Shechem's father Hamor, having heard the news, came in from the field. The men were distressed and very angry, because he has committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter—a thing not to be done.

From here the story of Dinah goes on to say that her brothers follow through with acts of vengeance on Hamor, Shechem and the townspeople for having treated Dinah like a whore, but there is no indication of how Dinah felt. The story is told strictly through the perceptions of Dinah's male relatives. "The men were distressed and very angry" but how did Dinah feel? Was she attracted to this man, or was she seduced and/or raped (Kaye/Kantrowitz & Klepfisz 1989:3)? What were her reactions after she lay with him? The focus is on how this defilement hurt the people of Israel and how the men took care of the situation and not the response of the woman involved.

Asking what is not said in this story is just as important as looking at what is said, as it is Dinah's voice, the woman's voice, which is left out of her own narrative. Why did she go out looking for the daughters of the land? What was she planning on doing when she found them? Did she ever find any before or after her encounter with Shechem? How did she feel about her encounter with him? Dinah is not her own person in this history, in her own story. She is referred to as the daughter of Jacob, borne by Leah for Jacob. Dinah is the sister of the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Did she long for sisters and daughters to gather together to form the tribe of Dinah (Kaye/Kantrowitz & Klepfisz 1989:3)? Dinah's feelings and emotions, like that of other biblical women, are never revealed in her own words, she is never allowed a voice of her own with which to express herself. The same argument can be made for countless other biblical women. What would the story of Adam and Eve read like if Eve had been able to express herself? Would she talk about her desire for knowledge? How did she feel about her role as a helpmate for Adam?

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And what about Lilith, the first woman? Why did she choose to defy her place in life by not lying below Adam? Did she have a different vision for the future? Was she really the demon she is made out to be for refusing to be subordinate? Again and again, stories which are actually about women only deal with the reactions and actions of the men, the male point of view in a woman's story.

This pattern is also found in Jewish Biblical laws called *Halakhah*. These laws are implemented and practised to serve God as an observant Jew. Like biblical history, these laws leave the Jewish woman without a voice, and without the possibility of being an observant Jew. Women are rarely addressed directly in these laws, only when their actions affect the lives of men. Niditch (1991:2) reminds us that "the statutes preserved in Scripture present the image of a strongly patrilineal culture in which women are in some instances highly marginalized and fenced out and in others fenced in...Biblical law is material edited, preserved, codified ...and not necessarily a reflection of actual lives." But even where the law may not reflect how people actually lived their lives, it constructs the differences between men and women beyond biology. As well, it has a profound effect in creating idealised images of Jewish women from the culturally dominant (*read male*) perspective.

There is a specific subset of Biblical laws concerning women's ritual purity. These state that the Jewish woman is required to immerse herself in a special ritual bath called a *mikvah* following menstruation, childbirth, and any discharge. Prior to bathing, Jewish women are considered impure, although they are still required to perform social and religious obligations. The only restriction placed on them is contact with their husbands, as men are said to become polluted by an impure woman. The purpose of the bath then is not for the sake of the woman, but rather the sake of the husband and his piety. Further, in *Halakhah*, Jewish women also have restricted legal status. They can only acquire a divorce, a *get*, if their husbands permit and give it. They face male bias in prayer and synagogue ritual activity (Schneider 1985:34).

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Many synagogues today profess that, in a modern age, they have brought women into participating in the rituals of communal prayer. Today women are given *Bat Mitzvahs* [the female version of a *Bar Mitzvah*] so that they might be counted among the *minyan* [a quorum of ten required for public rituals]; they sit with men in synagogue; they hold prominent positions in Jewish society. These new-found positions do not change the male focus of Judaism. While women can now be counted for a *minyan*, they are often only counted as a last resort if not enough men are present. Men and women now sit together in *synagogue* (in Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist congregations), but their traditional roles are defined in other ways. For instance, women are exclusively in charge of preparing the *Oneg Shabbat* [the meal after the Sabbath services]. Women's prominent positions are often dwarfed by an overwhelming majority of male rabbis and male synagogue and society presidents, while the positions they do gain tend to be enabling roles. This is not to undermine the amazing accomplishments made by individual Jewish women and their organisations, but to point out that the male bias faced by Jewish women in the distant past is alive and well today. It simply manifests itself in different forms.<sup>6</sup> Being a Jew is still almost exclusively equated with being male, and thus Schneider's (1985:35-36) comment still rings true: "since being a Jew has been defined by specific acts—of prayer, dress, appearance at communal worship—a woman's exclusion has been tantamount to prohibiting her from defining herself as a Jew."

The *Torah* and *Halakhah* are clearly not objective historical accounts, neither are they as unmarked as they initially appear. Like Dorothy's encounter with the Wizard of Oz, we see that

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<sup>6</sup> The dominance of men and the male perspective in Jewish religion, culture, and society occurs today, however the differing sects within Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and secular—have made varying efforts to include women more fully in public activities. While in the Orthodox sect women are still very much in traditional roles separated from a male sphere, in sects such as Reform, Reconstructionist, and to a lesser degree Conservative, women's roles are much less traditional as they are accepted as leaders of community organisations, and are ordained as Rabbis.

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there is a man behind the curtain who is the source of the voice of the unmarked narratives. Thus, the Jewish woman is represented as *Other* in contrast to the male norm. The identification of a source in the marked and the unmarked narrative, means one must rethink traditional conceptions of history, realising that the difference between the marked and the unmarked position is not as large or as definite as it appears at first glance. The knowledge produced by the unmarked is not necessarily objective, but is rather objectified. It appears to exist as a natural entity in and of itself, removed from any associations with the milieu in which it was created. But someone did create the narrative and that person(s) exists/existed in a social context, therefore the history is positioned in that context (even if that context is unknown or unacknowledged by the authors). The unmarked does have a body and a fixed perspective just like the marked; the difference is the position. For the unmarked that perspective is the dominant position, the all knowing, all seeing **THEY** who, for Haraway (1988:575), “constitute a kind of invisible conspiracy of masculinist scientists and philosophers.” Haraway argues that **THEY** do have a position in history and society and accordingly do not speak for everyone and they do not speak without bias. The dominance of men in Jewish culture means that the unmarked body is that of the religious, highly educated men who usually come from a high and/or prestigious socio-economic status. Thus, the criteria used to judge this history reflects the upper-middle class male bias and therefore “may be inadequate or inappropriate to the history of women. So long as these criteria are applied dogmatically, as if they were absolutes rather than derivatives of a particular body of knowledge, women’s history cannot exist” (Magnus 1990:30). This bias influences the history of the Jews, while also influencing and creating representations of Jewish women.

### **Jewish Women & Expressions of *Other***

The Jewish woman holds the position of *Other* to the male norm in Jewish religion and culture. In a multitude of societies around the world that are dominated by the thoughts and actions of men, the women are socially constructed as different from the norm and in this respect

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Jewish culture and religion is not unique. As such, women's perspectives tends to run alongside that of their male counterparts, opposed to the androcentric norm, and therefore are disregarded as representative of the Jewish people. By leaving out the voice and experience of Jewish women the historical record remains as only a partial representation of reality. It becomes difficult to connect past and present generations of women and difficult to form an identity based on the past. These are not just feelings and issues existing in academia. They exist and are felt by Jewish women in their everyday lives. Jewish American women writers such as Cynthia Ozick, Tillie Olsen, Grace Paley, and Delmore Schwartz articulate these issues in their writings.

These authors reveal the complex reality of forming an identity that combines personal issues, political issues and the designation of the *Other* in Jewish culture. Here women struggle to balance American and Jewish identities. In her story "Toward a New Yiddish: Note" (1983), Ozick sums her own self image stating that she is "perfectly at home and yet perfectly insecure, perfectly acculturated and yet perfectly marginal" (Ozick 1983:152). Here she expresses the contradictions that exist as an everyday part of her life as a third generation American Jewish woman. She is on the edge, sitting on the fence in no-woman's-land, not accepted fully as Jew because she is female, nor as American because she is Jewish. Ozick's sense of obscurity is even more apparent when she compares herself and her life situation to the Diaspora stating "Diaspora, *c'est moi*" (Ozick 1983:158). Here Ozick illustrates the fact that she does not have a comfortable space where the many aspects of her identity might be expressed, accepted, and not *Othered* as Jewish women have been in the past. While in name she is both American and Jew, it is apparent that for Ozick neither identification gives her much comfort, and, as such, she feels her writing speaks to neither group even though she finds associations with both groups.

In Tillie Olsen's novel Tell Me A Riddle (1961), a similar feeling of obscurity emerges as Olsen depicts an elderly immigrant Jewish woman who has spent much of her adult life adjusting to life in America as a Jew. In her final moments of life, this elderly woman renounces Judaism and

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all other organised religions. For this character, Judaism is the religion of her fathers in the Old World and represents a way of thinking not appropriate to life in America. As an interesting twist in the novel, the woman's American born daughter looks to her for a link with the past and with tradition but does not find it. Like Ozick, Olsen's characters find themselves akin to the Diaspora. When reflecting on the Judaism of her past, the elderly immigrant woman states, "Candles bought instead of bread and stuck into a potato for a candlestick? Religion that stifled and said: in Paradise, woman, you will be the footstool of your husband, and in life—poor chosen Jew—ground under, despised, trembling in cellars" (Olsen 1961:89). Here the character rebels against a determined adherence to a faith that is persecuted and against long-ingrained gender expectations that reinforce her alienation from a religion that in turn persecutes because of her status as a woman (Aarons 1987:383). As she approaches death, her isolation increases as she cannot fulfil the externally defined notion of what older Jewish women, mothers, and/or grandmothers should be, nor can she value the notions of equality and freedom for these have been denied in her life in America.

Issues of identity, place, historic patterns and relationships with others are also present in many of Grace Paley's and Delmore Schwartz's stories. In Paley's story "Faith in the Afternoon" (1983), the main character, Faith, struggles between the world of Judaism which is associated with the past and her parents, and the modern progressive world of America. As she gets older, after having left the world of Judaism, Faith turns to her mother in an attempt to build a bridge between her two worlds. In the end, she finds that she "remains inevitably outside of both worlds, her predicament ironically similar to the very immigrant parentage against which she shields herself" (Aarons 1987:386). A similar pattern is found in Delmore Schwartz's "America. America!" (1978) where one sees the desire in the characters to connect with the past, for a connection with their Jewish identity; and yet there is always a sense that the characters, despite this fastening, remain outside of the Jewish world, the *Other*.

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While the literature of American Jewish women writers is not a mirroring of reality, it is a selective interpretation of reality in that their stories and characters come to represent their own experiences and attitudes. What is clear from these and other authors is that there is a continuous bond between Jewish women and their past. For both men and women, Judaism is an aspect of identity that cannot be ignored, but it can be consistently uncomfortable, especially when it is at odds with other aspects of identity. It is this sense of difference that Jewish women feel, a difference which is at the very heart of Jewish religion and culture, that results in the status of *Other*. For Jewish women, their sense of difference and discomfort stems largely from their position of *Other*.

Over the past few decades, both Jewish and non-Jewish men and woman have begun writing histories and oral histories of Jewish women. This literature has begun to move Jewish women out of the position of *Other*, and into the centre of historical narratives as actors. Here history is told from Jewish women's perspectives, it is told using Jewish women's voices. This body of literature will be discussed in Chapter Five. Now, let me turn to how Jewish women are represented through the Jewish Mother stereotype in popular culture.

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## CHAPTER FOUR—STEREOTYPES

*Question: How many Jewish mothers does it take to screw in a light bulb?  
Answer: None. She says, "For me I don't need lights."*

*Mama asks: "How much does it cost to send a telegram?"  
The clerk replies: "Where to, Madam?"  
Mama answers: "To my son, the medical student."*

### The Jewish Woman as Jewish Mother

As the *Other* to the male *Self*, Jewish women are in the position of being subordinate, lacking social power and influence. With no authoritative voice with which to socially construct themselves, Jewish women must/can define themselves through others,—usually their husbands and sons—and thus face a prescribed set of externally defined norms, essentialised images of themselves (Siegel 1987:41). The absence of historical connections with foremothers and a status as the ‘second sex’ create a situation for Jewish women where isolation and obscurity grow, leaving others open to produce and perpetuate stereotyped images of them. The most prominent stereotype of older Jewish women is that of the Jewish Mother or the Yiddishe Mama.<sup>7</sup> This stereotype comprises all the trappings of ageism, sexism, and anti-Semitism based on physical appearance, mannerisms, and personality characteristics. The Jewish Mother has evolved and re-evolved in America<sup>8</sup> to the point where she has become a mainstream cultural icon. The development of the Jewish Mother stereotype began in the 1880s—with the mass immigration of Jews to North America—and continues today. In the course of the stereotype’s development, the

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<sup>7</sup> As the present body of work deals exclusively with Jewish women over 70, it will not explore other common stereotypes including the Jewish American Princess (JAP) which refers exclusively to young Jewish women.

<sup>8</sup> While the evidence discussed here comes from the United States, I am using it to indicate the situation in both Canada and the United States, referred to collectively as America/North America. While I do not reference Canadian material directly, as there is none that exists, it is quite obvious that the Jewish Mother stereotype is not constrained by political boundaries. In my own life, and in the lives of Rachel and Hannah, there is evidence of this stereotype in experiences.

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Jewish Mother has metamorphosed from an object of reverence, to an object of ridicule. For many Jews and non-Jews alike, this stereotype is a large part of their cumulative image of Jewish women, the first picture that emerges in the mind when someone puts the words Jew and woman together. This image is “moulded by the daughters and particularly the sons who grew up to write books and plays about her, disseminating an image that has left an imprint on American culture as a whole” (Bienstock 1979:174). Bienstock (1979) and Baum, Hyman and Michel (1975) have produced pivotal works on the changing Jewish Mother stereotype. As such the following discussion draws largely on their research.

When the Jewish woman came with her family to North America, she was simply an immigrant wife and parent, “of interest to no one but her immediate family and the ethnic community in which she made her home” (Bienstock 1979:174). Coming largely from traditional lives in the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe, the ideal social roles of men and women were clearly defined and regulated, largely by religious obligations. Like other women of the time, Jewish women were expected to cook and clean, take care of their children and the household, all in accordance with Jewish law. They were enablers, a role prescribed to them by over five thousand years of Jewish tradition. As an ideal, male piety and religious scholarship was so highly valued that some women made up for their husband’s lack of earning power by participating in wage labour to support the family (Burman 1987:39). Ideally Jewish men were expected to be scholars and pontificators of *Talmudic* wisdom, serving God through study, prayer, and ritual, although economically this was not always possible or desirable.<sup>9</sup> While men may have had to work in order to help support their families, this work was secondary to religious scholarship. As Burman (1987:39) notes, “male status was closely bound up with religious scholarship, which represented a primary avenue to

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<sup>9</sup> These social roles were/are ideals, something to strive for, and did/do not necessarily reflect the reality of people’s lives.

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social recognition and an important source of political influence.” The paid labour undertaken by women, on the other hand, was a primary role. While in Europe men and women’s social roles were readily acceptable, but in America, this was not necessarily the case. Jewish families, and in particular Jewish men, found there was:

little room for the Old World Talmudist. Forced to find work as a peddler or sweatshop labourer, he [the pious Jewish man] suffered a tremendous loss of dignity and self-esteem. In the meantime his wife, long trained in the practical art of making ends meet, effectively ran the household, always maintaining a humble acceptance of the male prerogative (Bienstock 1979:176).

Thus, the Jewish mother, highly valued in America for her practical skills and fiscal responsibility, arguably made the adjustment to life in the New World more easily than her male counterpart. At the very least, the roles Jewish women had become accustomed to in the Old World, were useful and acceptable as working class women’s roles in the New World. In North America, these skills were essential for the survival of the immigrant family. Due to the Jewish man/father’s ideal social roles, he was considered less experienced in devoting himself to wage labour and work in the sweatshops, and was therefore often seen as unfit for this new life that North America demanded of him, and as such he lost a great deal of (self)respect afforded to him in Europe (Bienstock 1979:176). In the literature of this period (the 1880s to 1930s), Jewish Mothers are depicted as positive, if not heroic, forces. They are the supporters of traditional values, earning money so that their husbands might, to a limited degree, continue to study and learn. At the same time, Jewish Mothers are also depicted as “protecting their families against the repercussions of their husbands’ impracticality” (Baum, Hyman & Michel 1975:191) (cf. the literary works of Yeziarska 1925; Asch 1925 & 1946; Cahan 1896; Raphaelson 1925). Gradually the Jewish Mother, in reality and in literature, became the *de facto* head of the household in accordance with her control of the family’s financial well being.

The prominent position Jewish women held outside the home in America was at odds with the emerging dominant middle class American (versus Jewish) ideals of the roles of men and

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women, and it was meeting this middle class social position to which Jewish immigrant families strived (Baum, Hyman and Michael 1975; Bienstock 1979). In urban America, it was the men who were expected to be the sole economic providers for the family and the women were expected to be proper ladies (Baum, Hyman and Michael 1975; Bienstock 1979). The characteristics which Jewish women had cultivated in Europe that enabled them to fulfil their roles were soon considered inappropriate for middle and upper class women in America. As Baum, Hyman and Michael (1975:189) note:

Their mothers had been accustomed to sharing in the support of the family and being 'out' in the world, and had developed personalities in keeping with these functions. They were robust and direct, energetic and independent. Female charm, in the recognised American sense, was not one of their virtues.

But there was a reluctance on the part of Jewish women to give up their roles, as their husbands were often not prepared and/or not able to cope with the reality of supporting a family themselves and many still held on to Old World values that maintained menial labour was for women. In Asch's (1925) novel The Mother, this attitude is exemplified when the Jewish husband and father, Anshel, goes off to work as his wife Sarah weeps stating, "Alas! That I have lived to see this day when Anshel, the celebrated Reader of Scripture, must become a sewer of shirts like a common woman!" (Asch 1925 in Baum, Hyman & Michel 1975:197). At the other end of the spectrum, there is Alter Brody's play Rapunzel (1928 in Baum, Hyman & Michel 1975) which displays a very different female attitude toward Jewish men's social obligations. In the play, a mother complains to her daughter, "The only kind of business your father ever did was exchanging stories with the synagogue do-nothings" (Brody 1928 in Baum, Hyman & Michel 1975:197). In the decades following the turn of the century, Jewish women faced multiple conflicting roles and attitudes. On the one hand, popular ideas held that Jewish women should work and support their families, while allowing their husbands time to study scriptures. On the other hand, popular ideas also held that Jewish women should cultivate themselves in proper 'lady-like' fashion in order to

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become a part of the middle and upper classes, a marked change from the traditional roles and expectations.

Hannah and Rachel's lives give us an interesting perspective on these issues for two reasons. First, their parents were not religious people in Canada. Although both mention that their parents were religious prior to immigrating, traditional notions of the necessity of male prayer and study did not carry over into their lives in Canada. Once in Canada, their lifestyle changed dramatically. In Europe they were business owners in an urban area. In Canada, they were farmers in a rural isolated area. Here it was difficult to obtain *kosher* meat and attend services with regularity as it was far and difficult to get to the synagogue. Further, there was a lack of needed community support to maintain an Orthodox lifestyle. Second, Hannah and Rachel grew up in the country on a farm rather than in a major urban centre like Montreal or Toronto. The way of life and the roles of both Jewish and non-Jewish men and women were markedly different from city life. In their life stories, we see that the roles and work performed by men and women were complementary to one another. Society, rather than ability defined traditional social roles. In Europe men were ideally expected to study because that is what religion and society dictated they were to do. Much of the early literature surrounding Jewish immigrants took the social roles as an indication of physical ability, and surmised that because men and women did specific things, they were incapable of doing other things. Unlike what is stated in the literature, there is little sense that any of the men in Rachel and Hannah's lives were unfit for participation in wage earning labour in Canada, in fact their father had been a business owner in Europe. Their father seems to have had difficulty initially making a living as a farmer. However, their father's and their family's difficulty may have more to do with the fact that they, like other pioneers, came to the virgin prairie after having been business owners in England. Like all immigrants, the period of adjustment was awkward.

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Missing from the literature are the adjustments Jewish women also had to make. It is doubtful that Jewish women fell as easily into American life as many authors would have us believe (cf. Yeziarska 1925; Ash 1925 & 1946; Cahan 1896), nor did all Jewish immigrant women work in wage labour. "I often wonder how my mother stood it because she came to live in the wilderness from a home that had everything" Hannah reflected, "And of course she worked very hard." The fact that Hannah, Rachel, and their parents, brothers, and spouses always worked, is an indication that the largely urban American middle class ideals of the male working as the sole family supporter did not manifest itself to a large extent in rural areas. By the 1930s and into the 1940s, the children of the initial immigrants were also faced with conflict in their lives, caught between the world of their ancestors and the world of mainstream North America. Many young Jews, as a means of participating more fully in American life, engaged in socialist and communist political movements, and began to protest the abuses of the American system and capitalism (Bienstock 1979:178).<sup>10</sup> By this time, many Jewish families had made great financial gains, thanks to the efforts of the Jewish Mother, and to an ever-increasing extent, the Jewish father. The quest for wealth and the accumulation of wealth in a class-based society is at odds with socialist and communist ideologies. In the American Jewish family during this time, it was the Jewish mother who was most closely associated with financially supporting the family (Bienstock 1979; Baum, Hyman & Michel 1975). Therefore, she was a symbol of the very bourgeoisie aspirations her children were rebelling against. The children who write about her detest the Jewish Mother's capitalist goals. Thus the Jewish Mother stereotype takes on negative and contradictory connotations, largely due to the political and ideological conflicts between mothers/capitalists and children/socialists-communists (Bienstock 1979; Baum, Hyman & Michel 1975).

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<sup>10</sup> The participation of Jews in socialist movements did not just begin in the 1930s and 1940s. This was, and still is, a common tradition among Jews, especially in the Old World, where constant persecution spurred quests to change existing systems of economic and political power.

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The Jewish Mother stereotype is characterised as a hard working woman whose practical skills and family devotion, which borders on martyrdom, brought her family increasing financial success; but it was these skills that are an indication of the Jewish Mother's immense materialistic greed. In striving to meet the goals of middle class America, the Jewish Mother stereotype becomes a woman who is so devoted to her family she is overprotective, overwhelming, overbearing, and so concerned for her children's well being that she controls their life-choices to ensure they lead to success—that is financial success. At the same time, the Jewish Mother is also represented as lazy, selfish and arrogant, lacking the proper social background to be considered a lady and having fallen into the trap of conspicuous consumption, an evil of the capitalist system—according to her socialist and communist children (Bienstock 1979).

These many images are captured in the literature of the period, including Clifford Odets' (1935) play Awake and Sing, Gold's (1930) Jews Without Money, and Weidman's (1937) I Can Get It For You Wholesale. In both Odets' play and Gold's novel, the Jewish Mother is characterised by her extreme martyr-like devotion to her family, but this devotion is represented only in terms of ensuring her children's economic/capitalist successes: "She would have stolen or killed for us. She would have let a railroad train run over her body if it could have helped us" (Gold 1930:158). Because this extreme devotion stems from the Mother's desire to see her children financially successful, it is interpreted and portrayed as monstrous by authors and playwrights influenced by socialist and communist ideologies (Bienstock 1979:180).

The negative association of the Jewish Mother and money/greed manifests in Gold's (1930) representation of the Jewish Mother, "the foolish, over-decorated wife of the parvenu" (Baum, Hyman & Michel 1975:199): "Mrs. Cohen, a fat middle-aged woman, lay on the sofa. She glittered like an ice-cream parlour. Her tubby legs rested on a red pillow. Her bleached yellow head blazed with diamond combs and rested on a pillow of green...She looked like some vulgar, pretentious prostitute, but *was only the typical wife of a Jewish nouveau riche*" (italics added).

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The Jewish Mother is represented as a flat, static character, who is observed by others, but does not observe herself.

In Weidman's novel I Can Get It For You Wholesale (1937), the stereotypic Jewish Mother is again materialistic, but here we see how this tendency has imprinted itself on the Jewish Mother's son. Harry, the main character devotes his life to making money, eventually turning to unscrupulous means to do so. Although his mother eventually disapproves, Harry continues his dealings. "Here a mother who has infused her son with her own materialism discovers that he has left her far behind" (Bienstock 1979:181). The literature of the 1930s and 1940s marks a vital shift in the representations of the Jewish mother stereotype. For the first time her actions, activities, mannerisms, and even appearance become grotesque. Each of these literary works associates the Jewish Mother with money and making money. At first, she is the greedy money-maker, and then, as her husband and sons make financial gains, she becomes the greedy money consumer. It is only the negative characteristics, and none of the positive ones that authors focus and expound upon. This trend continues to the present.

Following World War II and the establishment of the state of Israel, the Jewish Mother continued to be represented as materialistic, greedy and overly devoted to her children, but now with comic overtones. By the 1940s and 1950s, the children of the initial Jewish immigrants had firmly established themselves in American society (due largely in part to the efforts of their parents), long surpassing their immigrant parents in terms of American education, wealth, and social status. The Jewish Mother, in her actions and her attitudes, thus becomes an object of humour and the butt of jokes. This is especially evident in the illustrations of Arthur Kober. Kober's drawings of the Gross family found in the *New Yorker* link the mother with the desire for wealth, but he chooses to poke fun at her for the pretensions she has acquired in her pursuit of success on American terms (Bienstock 1979: 182).

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Rothbell (1986), in a study of the Jewish Mother image, looks at jokes involving Jewish women from the time of immigration to the 1980s. She finds that these jokes appear in ever increasing numbers from the 1920s to the 1970s. In the 1920s and 1930s, jokes about the Jewish Mother amounted to only four percent of 'Jewish' jokes. This increased to eleven percent in the 1940s; eighteen percent in the 1950s; twenty percent in the 1960s; twenty-one percent in the 1970s. Rothbell further notes that the content of the jokes also changes. Before the 1950s, the jokes paint a more positive picture of the Jewish Mother as "self-sacrificing, poor, pious... who confronts a new language, customs and institutions" (Rothbell 1986:120). After the 1950s, new themes emerge: "overprotection, boasting about children, clannish ethnocentrism, and a general ignorance and incompetence about matters practical, political, ethnic, cultural and sexual. In these new themes, normal parental behaviours... are all made ridiculous by exaggeration to the point of absurdity" (Rothbell 1986:121).

By the 1960s and 1970s, the Jewish Mother had become so entrenched in popular literature and the media that social scientists began to study her habits (cf. Blau 1967; Besdine 1970; Bart 1971 in Bienstock 1979). The underlying message of each of these studies is that the Jewish mother is unique among mothers, to the point where she belongs to a separate species (Bienstock 1979:173). Separating the Jewish mother out of mainstream society was not only done by the social scientists, but also by her children. As in the 1930s, the 1960s was a period of rebellion against the status quo, thus many young Jews "began blaming the mother for fostering the traits of which he himself feels ashamed. By turning the Jewish mother into a comic monster he assuages his guilt feelings about how his own material success as well as his own estrangement from his ethnic and familial roots" (Bienstock 1979:185). The stereotype of the Jewish mother as comic monster was and still is that of a domineering woman whose sole focus is on her husband and children (Priesand 1975:6). She is overbearing and controlling of her husband, overprotective of her children, constantly nagging them, feeding them to excess, and in between making them feel

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guilty about everything (Medjuck 1988:90). In the child-centred Jewish family in America a Jewish woman's success was seen as dependent on how well her children assimilated—how well educated they were, how well they married, how good their career choices were—but at the same time, the Jewish mother was blamed by the Jewish community if her children became too assimilated, too attached to her, if they forgot about their Jewish roots. If a Jewish woman's son becomes a doctor she was praised for raising him so well, and if he then chose to marry a non-Jew, the mother was cursed for not raising him well enough.

Dan Greenburg, Bruce Jay Friedman, and Philip Roth have each written novels which create and perpetuate this comic monster image of Jewish Mothers, playing on the attachment she has to her sons and the attachment they in turn have to her. In Greenburg's How to be a Jewish Mother (1964), which went through six printings in a single year (Bienstock 1979:185), the reader is offered step-by-step instructions on the quintessential techniques of being a proper Jewish Mother. He covers everything from the use of guilt to food distribution to relaxation to thrift. "All the chapters, of course, embrace the overfeeding, over eating stereotype: Jews overeat, Jews prepare too much food, Jew's social life is based on food, etc., etc." (Booker 1991:16). It is interesting to note, however, that on the back cover of the dust jacket there is even a picture of a lean, fit Greenburg being spoon-fed by his mother (Booker 1991:16). There is an entire section which tells how Jewish mothers react to current events and each reaction indicates the stupidity and ignorance the Jewish Mother has about everything but her role in the kitchen. Whether the topics are covered in a malicious way is for the reader to decide. Some might find it amusing, others might find it insulting. The Jewish Mother in this book is an object, her actions typical of a larger group of Jewish women; however, much of the book's humour capitalises on the preconceived notion of the Jewish Mother stereotype.

The Jewish Mother of Friedman (1964) and Roth (1969) differs from Greenberg's (1964). Where Greenberg's Mother image is nothing more than an individual her children must endure,

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Friedman and Roth instead spotlight the hyper-bond between mother and son which, for them, often borders on the erotic. As the Jewish Mother withdraws her attentions from her husband and daughters, she places them on her son. The authors represent this attention in terms of the negative effects it has on hindering the son's emotional growth (Bienstock 1979:186). Bruce Jay Friedman's book A Mother's Kisses takes this bond to its utmost extreme. In the novel, Joseph sets off for college with his mother accompanying him to help him adjust to his new life.

"Although Joseph still requires mothering, he is obsessed with sex, and his mother compounds his anxieties by dwelling on her own voluptuous charms. Her favourite tactic involves picturing herself in sexual jeopardy, thus arousing in Joseph the need for heroic action to protect her virtue" (Bienstock 1979:187). The advances Joseph's mother makes toward him border on the sexual, but are not explicitly sexual, illustrating the ambiguous bond between mother and son. At the same time, it indicates how Jewish sons, including the authors themselves, look at their childhood and their Jewish Mothers with anger and resentment. What better way to seek revenge than to take the stereotypical characteristics of their Jewish Mothers to their utmost extreme, while playing on the mother's sexuality?

Portnoy's Complaint by Philip Roth is perhaps the most talked about novel dealing with images of the Jewish Mother. Schwartz and Wyden's (1969:2) comments echo many others when they say "Portnoy's Complaint escalated the institution of the Jewish Wife and Mother from the status of a neighbourhood speciality shop into a massive showbiz-industrial phenomenon... His grotesque view of the Jewish wife-mother is important only because of his literary style and his pre-occupation with the previously taboo subject of masturbation seduced comic strip fans and voyeurs in such vast numbers into gawking at the side-show in his tent." Roth's Jewish Mother, Sophie, is the culmination of everything that is wrong with Jews, women and immigrants—the complete stereotype. "The peak of negative generalisation occurs in Portnoy's Complaint, where Roth's depiction... makes that stereotype the model for Jewish motherhood. As an adult, Alexander

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Portnoy suffers acutely from the cleanliness and scrubbing qualities of his mother. But he knows why: ‘...to this filth to this heresy booming through corridors of the apartment building where she is vying with twenty other Jewish women to be the patron saint of self-sacrifice, my mother has no choice but to throw the double lock on our door.’” (Booker 1991:23). To ensure the reader understands that Alexander Portnoy’s problems stem from his Jewish Mother Roth formally defines Portnoy’s Complaint as an actual disorder. He states that the symptoms of this Complaint “can be traced to the bonds obtained in the mother-child relationship.”

This then is the cumulative image of the Jewish Mother (and by default, Jewish women in general) offered in the Jewish American literature. This image acts as a barrier leaving the real lives, experiences and history of Jewish women confined to the boundaries of the stereotype, if not ignored altogether. The tendency, as established through traditional historical narratives and stereotypes, is to evaluate the experience of Jewish women on the basis of the way others see them, reflecting external attitudes, rather than the women’s own self-understanding (Heschel 1991:32). Like the traditional historical accounts discussed in the previous chapter, in the stereotype too, Jewish women are left at the mercy of male perception, and it is the Jewish men who are evaluating and interpreting the actions of the Jewish Mother. Again, Jewish women are left without a voice to express and define themselves in their own words or justify their actions. Instead, they are left as inactive characters. The creation of Jewish women’s history would shift the focus and perspective on to women. The images of Jewish women developed over time, and are closely tied to the actions and dominant ideologies of Jewish culture and society. What makes the Jewish Mother stereotype stand apart is the fact that the representation is created largely by the Mothers’ own sons.

More than this, however, the development of such an abhorrent stereotype channels anti-Semitism away from Jewish men, onto Jewish women. The perpetuation of the stereotype by Jewish men/sons indicates that it is they who have engineered this system. In the past, Jews have

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been singled out by non-Jews through anti-Semitism to produce a collaboration among other groups of non-Jews against a common Jewish enemy. Similarly, Jewish men use the misogyny of the Jewish Mother image “to promote interethnic male bonding, fingering Jewish women as the common enemy of all men and thereby deflecting attacks by non-Jewish men against themselves” (Cantor 1995: 251).

Yet for all of its negativity, the Mother stereotype is still the yardstick against which most Jewish women’s accomplishments are measured. Rachel Weber (1997:181) illustrates this position beautifully through an anecdote from her own life:

At a recent family event, my aunt asked, ‘When will we be able to call you Doctor Rachel?’ Before I could open my mouth to answer, my uncle burst in, ‘More important, when can we call you ‘Mrs. Doctor Rachel?’’ This is not such an out of the ordinary exchange; when I return to the congregation in which I was raised, I feel that my professional achievements are regarded as secondary to my social life.

Jewish women are expected to fulfil their mother role, by their own families and by the larger Jewish community. I ask you the reader once again, are Rachel and Hannah recognisable as typical Jewish women? Do they live up to the standards set for them? Or do you find the images in the literature more typical, more familiar? Are you saying to yourself right now, ‘but there are women like the stereotype out there’? Do the life stories support or negate the stereotype that is so embedded in popular culture? The answer, as so often is the case, is both. Similarities can be drawn between the actual lives of Hannah and Rachel, and the stereotypical Jewish woman. But these women are individuals and when given the chance to express themselves, the differences present in the details emerge and challenge our preconceptions. It is these details that I turn to in the following chapters.

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**PART III**

**REPRESENTATIONS & REPRESENTING:**

**JEWISH WOMEN AS SELF**

*“There are undoubtedly other Jewish women we ought to know about and celebrate, but their lives have gone unrecorded. Certainly the social and economic roles women have played at different moments of Jewish history merit serious scholarly investigation as well as retelling for popular audiences. Until that scholarship becomes available and known, however, we are left with mere token women. For the anonymous Jewish woman has been portrayed in a form that only obscures her real history.”*

*Baum, Hyman & Michel—The Jewish Woman in America*

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By definition, a life history is centred on the individual speaking about his/her life and is thus a self-representation. Jewish women are in a cultural and religious situation where they are, and for centuries have been, represented by others. In traditional historical narratives and in representations of the Jewish Mother stereotype, others define Jewish women. In the case of traditional history, male historians sculpt Jewish women into the *Other* to the male norm through an androcentric culture and religion. As the *Other*, Jewish women are perceived as unable to fully represent the Jewish experience. In literature focusing on Jewish Mothers, Jewish children choose to denote them as comedic monsters. Here her characteristics, mannerisms, appearance and actions are interpreted, analysed, exaggerated and removed from their original contexts where the initial meanings and motivations are lost. In both of these representations others define Jewish women. Moreover, these are shallow representations where Jewish women are denied a voice to express and define themselves, and the reader is denied an understanding of Jewish women as they understand themselves. As Rita Gross (1977:10) notes, “women...are discussed as an object exterior to humankind having the same ontological and epistemological status as trees, unicorns, or deities.”

In the next two chapters I take Hannah and Rachel’s self-representations and compare them to the previous external representations. Chapter Five discusses the relationship between Rachel and Hannah’s life stories, the Jewish Mother stereotype and other Jewish women’s (oral) history. The advantage of the life story and other personal documents is they provide a different way of interpreting and explaining Jewish women’s actions, which move beyond that of the Jewish Mother stereotype. Chapter Six considers the reality of Rachel and Hannah’s life stories, where they place themselves in these narratives, and how they represent themselves and what is important in their lives. What one finds is that as both women represent themselves as strong, active characters at the centre of their narratives, they also emphasise the importance of other people in effecting their lives and identities.

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## CHAPTER 5—REPRESENTATIONS & STEREOTYPES

*Identity:  
the condition of being the same  
as a person or thing described or claimed.*

In this chapter, I will look at the different ways in which the themes which run through and define the Jewish Mother stereotype also emerge in Hannah and Rachel's life stories; at the same time I compare the characteristics of the Jewish Mother stereotype with Hannah and Rachel's self-representations. There are many ways in which Hannah and Rachel's lives are similar and dissimilar to the stereotype. What I find in utilising life stories and an oral history method, is they provide the necessary detail to holistically understand these women's lives, an element that is missing from the literature focusing on the Jewish Mother stereotype.

### **Intersections Between Stereotypes & Life Stories**

As the interview process ended, after Hannah and Rachel had an opportunity to read, contemplate, and alter their life stories, I questioned each about these external representations, and specifically about the Jewish Mother stereotype. Motherhood is a theme that runs throughout each of their lives from their own mother, to themselves, their daughters and now their granddaughters. Hannah commented that being a woman was "first of all being a mother... It is very important to have and raise children of your own. It's like a God-given gift." For Rachel, being a Jewish mother today meant one must be flexible, understanding and constantly learning. She notes that unlike the relationship she had with her parents, she learned to talk to her children about formally taboo subjects.

With our own kids, we sat down and talked to them about sex and stuff. You learn to talk about these things. Times change and you have to learn to change with them. We see that in our kids all the time.

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Motherhood is an accomplishment for Hannah and Rachel, a point of pride for both women. It is a role both feel they do well.

Our discussion of the Jewish Mother stereotype changed their attitudes toward Jewish mothering dramatically. As we began, I asked Hannah and Rachel about the images of Jewish women they have seen on television and in the movies, or read in books. I asked them to describe how Jewish women are portrayed in popular culture. What I found interesting is that neither woman could describe the Jewish Mother stereotype. We discussed how they themselves might represent Jewish women in the movies, both described women much like themselves. Later, I gave examples of the stereotype, describing it as other have (cf. Booker 1991; Medjuck 1988; Bienstock 1979). As discussed in the previous chapter, the Jewish Mother stereotype began as a hard working family heroine devoted to maintaining Jewish traditions in America and upholding her family's financial wellbeing. Today the Jewish Mother stereotype is the negative image of the controlling, domineering, materialistic, lazy, demanding woman. She is represented as a woman extremely devoted to her family, so much so that she smothers her children, controls their lives and feeds them to excess. The Jewish Mother wants her son to be a doctor or a lawyer, to marry a nice Jewish girl, although no woman is ever good enough. She wants her daughter to marry a Jewish doctor or lawyer. And from her husband she demands clothes, furniture, jewellery and money so she can live in the style she feels she deserves.

Both Rachel and Hannah recognised the description immediately with comments of, "Oh, that type of woman."<sup>11</sup> As Rachel observes:

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<sup>11</sup> At the same time I am left wondering if and how the subconscious knowledge of the Jewish Mother stereotype has influenced the recounting of their life stories. Does their contempt for the stereotype mean they specifically constructed their stories as not to fall into this category, so they would not be readily identified as a typical Jewish Mother? While this may be true in many cases, I do not believe this is the situation with Hannah and Rachel's narratives. The Jewish Mother stereotype does not appear to be an image at the forefront of their thinking. Although both recognise the description, it does not appear to have been a large influence in their personal lives, and they feel little or no association with it. However, this does not mean both Hannah and Rachel did not use other tactics to construct their life narratives. As Freund and Quilici (1995) point out, individuals utilise elements such as myth to construct their narratives and make sense of their histories. "People recount their life stories using familiar narrative

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There are those types of women who need a lot of stuff, who have a lot of things around them all the time. I am not that type of woman. I just have what I think is necessary... There are women with no limit to what they want. There are Jewish women who feed their kids until its coming out of them, but I'm not that type of woman. When they come to my dinners I like to see them eat, but I would never push anything on them, it's not necessary. The children of these women, especially the girls, when they grow up to get married, they are going to have it tough because they can't have everything they see around the home... There are women who are like that, but I don't think I am one of them. I know lots of them that are and it must be tough for their kids.

In a similar vein, Hannah remarks:

I don't think that [the Jewish Mother stereotype] is from my era, but now it is more true. I never really knew mothers like that when I was young, where they would seat their children at the table before anyone else, before any adults she would feed her children. But now, when I think of it, I know, or did know, women who were like that, but I don't see myself in any of that. That isn't my thing. I don't even think of that even when I see it on television. That is not me. I always taught my children respect like my parents taught me. We were not brought up that way at all, and that attitude is something you get from home. My mother was much more modern in her thinking because she was from England rather than Eastern Europe.

An interesting commonality between these two responses is an overall acceptance of the Jewish Mother stereotype as a reflection of reality, coupled with an overwhelming aversion to being categorised and compared with "that type of woman." Similar to the conclusions made by Gilman (1986), Gold (1997), and Horowitz (1985), Hannah and Rachel recognise the stereotype as representing a degree of the truth, but neither mentions its anti-Semitic or sexist aspects. They know this image is unacceptable and reprehensible to a vast majority of individuals, including themselves. As such, they create distance between themselves and the stereotype, showing how they are not like those types of Jewish women. Hannah goes so far as to point out that this *other* type of Jewish Mother is from an old fashioned way of thinking, found in the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe and in an immigrant generation. Since her mother was from England and children get these attitudes from their parents, there is little chance she has developed these attitudes. As Jewish religion and history makes Jewish women the *Other*, so too do Rachel and Hannah with the Jewish

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forms such as anecdotes, jokes, gossip, and myths. These ways of retelling are clues to the meanings narrators ascribe to their experiences" (Freund & Quilic1 1995:160).

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Mother stereotype. They categorise the Jewish Mother stereotype as different from themselves and Jewish women like them, and thus not representative of Jewish women in general. It is clear then that this stereotype is not the norm for these women. At the same time, by accepting that there are stereotypical “Jewish Mothers” in the world, are Hannah and Rachel also perpetuating this image? Are they feeding the tendency to characterise negatively, ethnic mothers/women, versus British/non-ethnic mothers/women?

For all their insistence that they are not like the Jewish Mother stereotype (who would not insist they are the furthest thing from this image), clearly there are some connections between Hannah and Rachel’s lives and the stereotype. Stereotypes are not complete falsehoods. “The recognition that people actively produce the stereotypes of gender and class... does not mean that these stereotypes can readily be dismissed. They do express a real experience, albeit in a distorted form” (Hale 1990:375). The danger of the stereotype is that it lumps, simplifies and generalises individuals and their characteristics, emphasising the negative. Booker (1991:19) notes that “generalisation give us courage; they satisfy us. They talk to our need to put things into cubby-holes, to have the sense of ‘this is the way it is.’ We can then be complacent if we are either with the majority or against it.” The forward to Dan Greenberg’s How to be a Jewish Mother (1964) encourages this type of thinking. He begins with the sentence “I can tell you about Jewish mothers because I have one.” Thus, the stereotype is presented as fact, legitimated because he is basing his observations on his own Jewish mother, and, according to Greenberg’s way of thinking, if you have seen one, you have seen them all. However, ask yourself how many other (non-Jewish) women might relate to the common themes previously mentioned in Chapter Four? Does family not also play a central role in life of the Catholic Mother? Does the Black Mother not also encourage her children to strive for a better way of life? Do Anglo-Saxon, Hispanic, and Islamic Mothers not also have financial concerns in their lives? Many of the themes that characterise the Jewish Mother stereotype are readily applicable to other mothers. If stereotypes are rooted in some aspect of the

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truth, what threads join the lives of Hannah and Rachel as Jewish mothers and their stereotyped counterparts?

There are a number of themes that run through Hannah and Rachel's lives, which are also found in the stereotype. These include the women's role as keepers of tradition, work, both paid and unpaid, money, and a devotion to children and family. The ways in which these themes manifest themselves in their stories are both similar and different from how they emerge in the stereotype. The life stories provide a fuller picture of the themes in Hannah and Rachel's lives providing context, time depth and motivations for actions, all of which are unavailable when one reads of the stereotypical Jewish Mother. Further, one sees that the themes which are portrayed as so negative through the stereotype lens can also be seen as a positive when viewed through a life story lens.

### **Threads: Between Jewish Woman & Jewish Mother**

#### **Keeper of Tradition**

In the early years of Jewish immigration to North America (1880s to 1920s) the Jewish Mother is clearly associated with keeping Jewish traditions alive. During this time, this role was especially important since Jewish traditions, communities and infrastructures were not yet established in America. At this time Judaism was practised and centred in the home. Since the home was/is the responsibility of the Jewish woman, she was left upholding the future of Judaism. As Burman (1987:37) notes, "the role of Jewish women in religious life has changed in subtle but important ways. For most women, this change has occurred not at the level of formal religious laws, but rather in the content and significance of their actual domestic practices."

This role of 'keeper of tradition' is a theme that runs through Hannah's life story and is a role she fulfils through her connection with other women in her life.

The whole family, which was large at the time with all the sisters-in-law and brothers, always celebrated holidays like *Pesach* together. Everyone would come to my mother and dad's house. My mom did all the cooking for everyone. She made all the traditional foods

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for Passover: *kenadlech*, soup, chicken, and *tsimmis*. All the traditional foods she probably ate at home.

Hannah's mother kept Jewish traditions alive through family gatherings and passed this practice on to her children. Once her mother died, Hannah's in-laws, especially her mother-in-law, became predominant religious and cultural influences.

It was from them that I learned the traditions of being a Jewish woman. It was an education for me. Sol's mother worked in their store everyday, but she still kept the *kosher* home. She did her usual routine of cooking before she went to work so that everything was ready for that night's meal. I learned how to keep *kosher* so that when the war was over and Sol and I moved into our own home, we kept strictly *kosher* and my children went to Hebrew school and the boys had *Bar Mitzvahs*. It was completely different than how I was brought up, and I guess that's why I am a much stronger Jewish mother than most Jewish mothers.

Hannah sets the "traditions of being a Jewish woman" apart from other Jewish traditions. These are special and specific and cannot be confused with the Jewish traditions conducted by others.

With her own family Hannah made sure she maintained the traditions she was taught. "I kept all the Jewish holidays by having the children to my house even though they were married." Hannah maintains Jewish traditions in her own home in the hope that her children will also carry them on. She rarely mentions attending formal *synagogue* services, always stressing the necessity of having a traditional Jewish home in which to raise children as Jews. The home is largely the product of Jewish women who must know how to keep *kosher*, know when the holidays are and what traditional dishes to prepare for each holiday. She is responsible for insuring the family gathers to celebrate. These are roles Hannah takes seriously and sees it as essential to the continuation of the Jewish religion through generations.

This self-representation, the important role Hannah sees herself playing in Judaism as both a religion and culture, is very different from that offered by traditional Jewish history in Chapter Three. In this self-representation the Jewish woman is not an object, she is an active subject who is very important to the history of the Jewish people.

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As different as the self-representation and historic representation are, there is a connection between the self-representation and the stereotype created by food. The primary means of maintaining Jewish traditions for Hannah is through food, which stems from the focus on activities in the home, and the learning of traditions from other women in Hannah's life. Clearly Hannah sees the "traditions of being a Jewish woman" as associated with the making of specific foods for different holidays, and keeping a *kosher* home. This notion fuels the later idea of the stereotypic Jewish Mother feeding and over feeding her children, focusing solely on food as the means of keeping her family together. However, in her life story, food is much more than just a form of nutrition. Food is a symbol for Judaism, the Jewish holidays and a means of keeping family close. Preparing traditional meals is a way for Jewish women to express their Judaism (which is passed down through generation of women). Traditionally women were not allowed to study *Torah* or participate in public worship; therefore, they found other outlets that allowed them to be involved with Jewish traditions. Keeping Jewish traditions through the preparation of specific meals, maintaining a *kosher* home are ways for Jewish women to confirm their Judaism, and participate in Jewish traditions

### Work

When Jews began immigrating to North America, the literature surrounding the immigrant Jewish Mother glorified the work she took on and the sacrifices she made to support her family. This is evidenced in Hannah and Rachel's stories where they speak of the difficult work they and their mother did throughout their lives. As the decades progressed and Jews became increasingly entrenched and assimilated into American society the perception of work as it relates to the Jewish Mother changed dramatically. Instead of being revered as a hard worker, the Jewish Mother stereotype is represented as lazy, living off the work of her husband. In both time periods work remains a constant theme and in two very different ways comes to characterise the typical Jewish Mother.

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The early perspective is represented in Hannah and Rachel's life stories. Work is a theme frequently mentioned by both Hannah and Rachel. For Rachel especially, it is an essential aspect of her life history and is an element she uses to create her identity. As a child Rachel took on adult work roles to fill the void left by her mother's death. "This is when my life started," she states. "I had to do everything, I was the only one left on the farm. Hannah had left to go to the city... so I was left with dad and my one brother... I was home with dad and did everything a man and a woman would have to do. I was the type that liked the outdoor work and I worked very hard." Rachel's life situation led her to fulfil the gender roles with which she grew up as a child, sacrificing a childhood in order to help her family and live up to their expectations. These roles and activities were complementary to the roles of men and needed if the family was to survive farm life.

Much of the early immigrant literature states that Jewish women were forced into working because their husbands, sons, fathers and/or brothers were incapable and unfit for the type of labour demanded of them in North America. Thus struggle is a constant theme during this period. Rachel indicates the struggles she and her family faced stating, "there was lots of hardship, that's for sure, lots of hardship... the fact that my dad didn't know anything about farming didn't help... And he brought these three brothers with him who didn't know anything about farming." What this early literature does not take into account is the fact that everyone who immigrates to a different country, men, women, Jews and non-Jews, undergoes a period of adjustment. Instead of discussing this process of change and adjustment individuals underwent, the literature takes social roles as an indication of ability, rather than recognising that they may be indications of gender expectations, past experiences, or how a family or individual adjusts to North American life.

The later representation of the Jewish mother as the lazy woman who avoids working forms little connection to Rachel or Hannah's life stories. Both women undertook wage earning labour for most of their lives. The exception is with Hannah after she had her children. She notes,

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“During that time I stayed at home and worked in the store only during holiday times. I didn’t work on a full time basis because I couldn’t leave the two children.” Once Rachel had her children, she had someone at home helping her so she could continue to work outside the home, supporting her family. As Rachel spoke, work became a vital aspect of how she defined herself and traced the course of her life. She states,

I’ve always worked and have somehow brought things out in myself that I never knew I had. I was a warranty clerk in a dealership, and I just learnt that myself and became very good at it...I really pushed myself to be able to learn whatever I needed to. I could go from job to job and do whatever, with no problems.

As was the case with her mother, Rachel worked out of necessity. Her family could not have survived if she did not bring in an income, and/or help with the family businesses. Playing this role is also a way for Rachel to prove herself and her abilities.

The theme of work catches Jewish women in a number of conflicting ideologies.

Traditional social roles (from Europe) indicate they are to work as a means of supporting their families so their husbands can devote time to study. While this is an idealistic situation and cannot be considered completely universal, I do maintain that it did prepare women for much of the work they faced in North America. In America however, popular ideology maintains that it is the men who are expected to work and the women are expected to remain in a private sphere to take care of their children and home. As Rachel and Hannah’s life stories show, their economic situations did not always provide them with this opportunity, thus the image of Gold’s (1930), Weidman’s (1937), Odet’s (1935), Greenburg’s (1964), Freidman’s (1964) and Roth’s (1969) typical, lazy, overbearing, nouveau riche Jewish Mother is not present in their representations of themselves. Instead, Hannah and Rachel’s stories reflect how participating in the workforce has altered their life courses and caused them to grow as individuals. Rather than showing how the work Jewish women do has impacted the lives of others, these stories illustrate the impact of work on the women telling the stories.

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## Money

Through the Jewish Mother's associations with work and consequent production of money, another aspect of the Jewish Mother stereotype is the association with money. The changing representation of the Jewish Mother stereotype as it relates to work is directly connected with the stereotypes changing relationship with money. In the literature of the early twentieth century the Jewish Mother is a hard working woman in charge of the family finances, stretching dollars to their utmost breaking point so her family could have adequate food and shelter. In later representations, the Jewish Mother stereotype is increasingly characterised as a lazy demanding individual. Instead of being the family accountant, she becomes a greedy monster who demands money to satisfy her personal (frivolous) material needs.<sup>12</sup> What is never revealed in these characterisations is why the stereotypic Jewish Mother focuses on money. The stereotype silences the individual voices of Jewish women so they are unable to justify their actions. By contrast, the telling of a life story offers the detail and free exchange of ideas necessary to fully understand an individual's actions. Both Rachel and Hannah focus on money in different parts of their lives—never having enough, living off what one has, making their dollars stretch—but in each case, they reveal their motivation is to make a better life for their families, rather than being able to amass personal wealth.

While Rachel only makes general references to her financial situation, Hannah speaks specifically about her relationship with money at different points in her life. Money is an indicator of Hannah's independence and ingenuity signalled by her ability to survive on very little. For instance, once she left the farm where she had very little, and began working in the city as a shoe-lady, Hannah had to budget her money in order to cover all her expenses.

I went and applied for a job in a department store, Lerhes, and got six dollars a week. And I lived with one of my brothers Nathan and his wife in Saskatoon. I paid them four dollars a week, board and room, and I managed to clothe myself with the rest.

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<sup>12</sup> The association between Jewish mothers and money is not one that is isolated to Jewish women. This is a stereotype that is applied to Jewish as a whole—Jews as rich, as business owners, as cheap and as crooked in their business dealings.

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Here Hannah expresses her satisfaction with being able to make her own money, and live off very little. She mentions money as an accomplishment associated with living independently in the city.

When Hannah is older and has a family of her own, she again speaks of her financial situation. This situation turned into an urgent concern after her first husband died.

I was left with no money and three kids. Sheila was already in school in Winnipeg and I had to pay \$100 a month for her board and room. Martin was growing up and a few years later he was ready for university. So I decided to move out of the country into the city so Sean could have his *Bar Mitzvah* and Martin could go to university.

Here, Hannah's financial concerns directly relate to her concern for her children's well being. Knowing the necessity of making a good living, she took steps to improve her own financial situation by moving to the city where she was able to find a substantial job. Here, her immediate motivation is to maintain her children's present lifestyle, to provide them with what she feels they deserve: higher education and a *Bar Mitzvah*.

Are these issues out of the ordinary? Is there something specific about Hannah's financial concerns which make it particularly Jewish? Would a Catholic or Muslim mother not also have the same concerns for her family's financial future? Hannah and Rachel's quest for, and achievement of, financial stability is not a sign of success in and of itself, neither is the accumulation of material things a symbol of that financial stability. What is a sign of success is their ability to live off very little and provide for their children. This is one way in which they are able to improve their children's lives in the present and prepare them for the future.

By allowing women the opportunity to express and explain themselves, the readers understand the mindset of each individual woman. The important thing about these stories is that the reader is able to understand Hannah's motivations, see why she is concerned about money. The Jewish Mother stereotype is a characterisation created by others. As a representation created by others, what one understands of the Jewish Mother is the characteristics given to her by others, what other people see in her, rather than what she sees in herself.

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## Relationship with Children

The Jewish Mother's relationship with her children is a topic authors have expounded upon at great length. In the decades since the beginnings of immigration, the Jewish Mother's devotion to her children has gone from being a noble characteristic to being a problematic one represented by a hyper-bond that causes problems with the psychological development of her children, especially her sons. These same sons, writing during the 1960s and 1970s, go so far as to represent the relationship with their Jewish Mothers as controlling, demanding, and even erotic. Again, this aspect of the Jewish Mother stereotype is one that is given to these women by their own children. The majority of the literature that focuses on the relationship between Mother and son is written from the perspective of the Jewish son as a young boy. Therefore, one sees the Jewish Mother through his eyes, and it is the son who has control of defining their relationship. By contrast, in Hannah and Rachel's stories they have control over expressing their devotion to and relationship with their children. In their life stories one sees the important role Hannah and Rachel's children play in their lives from their point of view.

For both Hannah and Rachel, having a close, tight knit family is extremely important, and is a value they have tried to instil in their children. Rachel states, "We're happy in Medicine Hat with all our three kids around...having my kids around all the time is great, and the kids are close to one another. Family is very important, that much we instilled in them." Hannah echoes this, "I have always had a very close relationship with my children. It was a much closer relationship than I had with my mother." These sentiments are similar to, albeit an unexaggerated, form of the sentiments of the Jewish Mother stereotype who wants her children close to her home.

This close relationship means that as mothers, Hannah and Rachel were/are very involved in their children's lives, often providing advice in an attempt to ensure their children made choices that would lead them to success. For example, Hannah insisted that her children get an education. "I told Sheila that it didn't matter what she took, but she had to have an education because you

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never know when tragedy is going to strike you. For me, I had no education so it was very difficult...Martin went to school for the same reasons.” Is Hannah forcing her children to do something? Is she the controlling woman we are exposed to in the stereotype? To a certain extent, this statement feeds the notion of the Jewish Mother as controlling and demanding of her children. However, in this account Hannah expresses the driving force behind her actions. One sees that she is attempting to save her children from potential difficulties later in life. As a young woman, Hannah learned the value of a good education and the limitations of a poor one and passed this knowledge and experience onto her children.

Hannah and Rachel’s children take some advice and direction, but not all. Both of their children made choices with which their mothers were not always happy. In particular the choice to marry outside their religion. Hannah explains,

There is a lot of intermarriage now in the world and you have to learn to accept a lot of things that you don’t really want to...both Sheila and Sean married people who converted to Judaism. I think they knew how strongly I felt about being Jewish and how I wanted them to marry Jews. At first, I was not that excited about the fact that they were not going with Jewish men and women, but you get accustomed to it because that’s the way the world is today.

Rachel provides a similar sentiment in her story.

Our kids also know they are Jewish, but now that they are intermarried I often wonder what will happen with their children...It was difficult at first when the kids decided to intermarry, but its been so many years now in my family that its not even an issue anymore...It would be nice to say they married into their own religion, but as long as they’re happy.

The power many authors give to the Jewish Mother is not necessarily an expression of reality. In the literature, she is presented as someone with the ultimate control over her children. She makes any and all decisions that affect her children’s futures. As Hannah and Rachel’s stories show, however, these Jewish Mothers do not have total control over their children. Moreover, they understand that their children are individuals and will make their own choices, even if their mothers are not always happy with those choices.

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Are Hannah and Rachel's expressions of the relationship they have with their children any different from the relationships other mothers have with their children? Is there something about the relationship that makes it specifically Jewish, specific to the Jewish Mother-Jewish child bond? I do not think there is anything especially Jewish about the relationship between Hannah and Rachel and their children. What is characterised as a Jewish mother-child/son bond is an exaggerated representation by authors looking back to their childhoods, blaming their mothers for all that has gone wrong in their lives (cf. Roth 1969; Caplan 1986). In Hannah and Rachel's life stories it is the Jewish Mothers who defines the relationships with their children, expressing their feelings toward their children's life paths. Through this process it is the Jewish Mother (and not her children) who define their motherhood and give themselves structure and characteristics.

I ask again, are Hannah and Rachel typical Jewish Mothers? There are many threads which connect Hannah and Rachel's lives with the typical Jewish Mother stereotype, not the least of which is that they are both Jewish and are both mothers. Being keepers of Jewish traditions, work, money and children are all topics found in both the life stories and the stories about the stereotypic Jewish Mother. While I have drawn these connecting lines, this is not the definitive point, for the life histories show that there are as many ways to draw differences, as there are to draw similarities. Moreover, as I have shown, many of the similarities need not be viewed in the degrading light of the stereotype. Life history testimonies and other personal documents<sup>13</sup> provide the details necessary for assessing the themes that join the actual lives of Jewish women and the Jewish Mother stereotype. The evidence given in life histories places the actions, life choices and pursuits of each woman in their original contexts. The reader/observer sees these more holistically

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<sup>13</sup> Personal documents "as a generic category include any expressive production of the individual that can be used to throw light on his [*sic*] view of himself [*sic*], his [*sic*] life situation, or the state of the world as he [*sic*] understands it, at some particular point in time or over the passage of time" (Watson & Watson-Franke 1985:2).

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(compared to the stereotype literature) and understands them in terms of how the women present their lives and see themselves, rather than how others see them. Further, one understands what influences an individual's life, why certain choices are made and not others. Life stories take on an active selfhood, where the narratives are woven around the individuals telling the story— like Geertz's (1973) webs of significance—the story teller is in the middle. As they begin to define themselves on their own terms, Rachel and Hannah are creating their own history and their own self-representations. The Jewish Mother stereotype, like all cultural stereotypes, is a perspective that skims along the surface selectively picking elements to create an exaggerated, homogeneous picture of a group of people, without looking at the individuality of their lives. Over the past few decades, an ever-increasing amount of research has focused on the issue of women's history, Jewish women's history, oral history and self-representations. Like the life story of Hannah and Rachel, this literature has done a great deal in creating history centred on and created by Jewish women. The remainder of this chapter discusses the present research.

### **Women, Jewish Women, & Oral History**

Woman (and Jewish woman) centred history takes on a variety of forms. Initial research on women's history took the form of "compensatory history," the history of "women worthies," and/or "contribution history" (Lerner 1979:145). The women in these histories live up to male-centred definitions of what is historically significant and relevant. Thus, a great deal of Jewish women's history began with a record of the Jewish Heroine, the extraordinary woman who lived a life above and beyond her traditional duties of house and family. Henry and Taitz's (1990) volume Written out of History: Our Jewish Foremothers reflects this vision. "Who are all the women in these pages? Many were outstanding in their achievements. Others made memorable contributions to Judaism... Others were chosen because by some quirk of fate, they were preserved through their writings and letters" (Henry & Taitz 1990:11). The vast majority of these women are considered

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outstanding and notable because their actions fall into categories usually reserved for men. But what Henery and Taitz (1990) and others such as Shepherd (1993), Kuzmack (1990) and Antler (1997) show is that the lives and actions of Jewish women are worthy of historical mention. These narratives point to the fact that Jewish women are important historical actors. Shepherd (1993) offers biographies of Jewish women from Russia, Western and Eastern Europe, Israel and the United States, who were involved with radicalism, including the Jewish socialist movement, the Bund, Zionism, anarchist movements, and unionism. Kuzmack (1990) reviews the development of Jewish feminism as it began in England and carried over into the United States with the process of immigration. She highlights the actions of specific Jewish women and Jewish women's groups, showing the effect of those actions on the development of Jewish culture and society in the United States. Antler (1997) focuses her exploration exclusively on Jewish women in America. She interweaves portraits of Jewish women leaders with social history to show "Jewish women's considerable influence on a century in which the United States became a dominant cultural as well as political force" (Antler 1997:xiii).

These books highlight the fact that for these Jewish women worthies, their lives revolve around major public issues such as immigration, social reform, political radicalism, Zionism, the emergence of popular culture, professionalism, internationalism, Cold War culture and politics and feminism (Antler 1997:xiii). More importantly however, these books highlight a theme that reoccurs in Jewish women's history. As Antler (1997:xi) states,

For most Jewish women, identity has been a blend of opportunities and traditions, an intersection that could reconcile their multiple loyalties—as Jews, women, and Americans—but often only in a manner that was painful, inconsistent, and equivocal. Jewish women have lived 'braided lives,' ... Sometimes these braids had many strands flying loose; at others, they held strong and firm.

The multiple loyalties facing Jewish women are not always at the forefront of their lives or their thinking, but these loyalties do exist. What one finds when reading (and writing) Jewish women's histories is that in them Jewish women are building a comfortable space to express these multiple

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loyalties and identities, and sharing the mechanisms they have developed to cope and express them (such as participation in philanthropic organisations, the feminist movement, Zionism, etc.).

What one must remember is these histories are the histories of women worthies. They are histories of particular women who stand out because their achievements were extraordinary, and not what one might expect from Jewish women in general (read stereotypically). While creating a history of women worthies is a necessary step in creating (Jewish) women's history, it only recognises this limited number of Jewish women. "The true history of women is the history of their ongoing functioning in that male-defined world on their own terms" (Lerner 1979:148), and should thus include all women, women like Rachel and Hannah. What would history look like if it is seen exclusively through the eyes of the women and ordered through the values they define? (Lerner 1979:162). The histories written by authors such as Glanz (1976), Baum, Hyman and Michel (1975), Glenn (1990) and Frager (1992) provide such a picture. These are the histories of Jewish women as a distinct immigrant group. Unlike the representations offered in Chapters Three and Four, these authors show how Jewish women were influenced by their new experience in North America, and how Jewish women in turn influenced the face of American life for both Jews and non-Jews alike.

Glanz (1976) highlights the fact that women, both married and unmarried, and children comprised a greater proportion of Jewish immigrants who came to the United States (1880-1924) than they did among other Central and Eastern European nationality groups. Glanz (1976) specifically recounts the history of Jewish women as they immigrated and made their lives in North America. Baum, Hyman and Michel's (1975) volume is similar in that it looks at the changes Jewish women have gone through as they have come to live and build communities in North America. Beginning with the position of Jewish women in Jewish culture and religion, Baum, Hyman and Michel explore how Jewish women from Germany and Eastern Europe adapted differently to life in North America, how they responded to and formed a culture that surrounded

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them, and finally how popular literature has moulded the general population's preconceptions of the Jewish woman, and concurrently masked her true history. Glenn (1990) and Frager (1992) discuss the roles of Jewish women in the garment industries and union movements in the United States and Canada respectively. Glenn "seeks to illustrate the significance of gender and culture in the lives of industrial workers and to illuminate the diversity of working class experience in America" (Glenn (1990:7). Frager (1992) looks at the intersection of class, ethnicity and gender in the Jewish labour movement in Toronto. In both books the authors look at the position of Jewish women in their families, communities and culture, and show how traditional Jewish ideologies influence Jewish women's position and activities in the labour movements. All of these volumes illustrate the histories of Jewish women as they find a place for themselves in North America. They highlight the conflicting ideologies Jewish women faced, the many roles they played and the importance of family and culture in their lives; moreover, histories such as these illustrate the incredible influence Jewish women had on the formation of North America society. Like Hannah and Rachel's life stories, these histories are formed by what Jewish women favour as being historically significant. Further, they provide an additional perspective on larger global historical events, such as immigration.

Jewish women's history and women's history takes on many other forms and is largely influenced by the feminist desire to produce women's history that reflects the uniqueness of women's lives, as separate from men. Increasingly, those interested in women's history and Jewish women's history turn to personal documents collected through an oral history method. There is certain immediacy to using an oral history approach for women. As Gluck (1996:216) articulates:

By virtue of acculturation and socialisation in a sexist society, women's lives were and are different from most men's. Whether women have played out public roles or adopted the traditional female role in the private realm, their lives have been governed by what Gerda Lerner has called a special rhythm. In tracing this rhythm, it is important to document the lives and experiences of all these women...for only then can we see the whole picture of women's lives, and how their rhythm has affected our lives.

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Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and historians have been at the forefront of collecting women's life histories, but their motivations for doing so are varied. Langness (1965:12) points out that some female life histories are collected to present the women's point of view as different from the male norm. Other records of women's lives (cf. Alorese [Dubois 1944]; Mountain Wolf Woman [Lurie 1961]; and Menomini [Spindler 1962] in Watson & Watson-Franke 1985) act as supplements to the male life history, reflecting doubt that the female experience could adequately represent the central aspects of a culture as well as a male life history could (Watson & Watson-Franke 1985:164). The collection of still other women's life stories is motivated by the lack of information on women's lives, which is the case in the present research (cf. Colson, 1974 and Kelly 1978, both in Watson & Wason-Franke 1985). While a full review of all women's life history research produced by the variety of disciplines is beyond the scope of this research, Watson and Watson-Franke (1985), and Geiger (1986) provide excellent discussions of this material.

Jewish women looking to establish Jewish women's history have been much slower to make use of the life story approach. Instead, Jewish women make use of a variety of other personal documents and methods to create a female history. These include memoirs, stories, autobiographies, diaries, biographies and essays. These approaches offer further contrasts to the portrayals of women in traditional Jewish history and popular culture stereotypes by presenting themes that are important to explore in order to understand the reality of Jewish women's lives as they understand themselves. The themes are numerous and varied, and include: relationships with husbands, children and other family members, activism, their participation in the labour market, daily activities, the holocaust, immigration, housing, having multiple identities and loyalties, survival in the face of great adversity, living up to the notion of the ideal Jewish woman and the feelings of difference toward non-Jews. Many of these same themes are also present in Rachel and Hannah's narratives, and are constants they utilize to construct their identities.

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What makes these personal document histories different compared to the general Jewish women's histories mentioned above, is their individuality. In these personal documents the reader is exposed to Jewish women as individuals, thus their lives and actions are separated out from a general Jewish women's history. These documents often take the form of stories, memoirs and autobiographies, and include, for example, Shulamis Yelin's Shulamis: Stories from a Montreal Childhood (1983), Fredelle Bruser Maynard's Raisins and Almonds (1972) and The Tree of Life (1988) and Leah Rosenberg's The Errand Runner: Reflections of a Rabbi's Daughter (1981). Each of these books is a personal (and partial), retrospective account of the author's life. The authors write their memories in the form of short stories where the reader sees how larger world issues and events fit into and emerged in their lives, and conversely how each woman dealt with and position their lives in these world events. For instance one sees how each woman individually adjusted to life in Canada, and how different their survival techniques were. As well, these women illustrate the difficulties Jewish immigrants had in balancing their Jewish heritage and lifestyle with a new Canadian lifestyle. It is important to note that these memoirs are not all-encompassing tales of the women's lives, but are selective, impressionistic accounts of the important themes and events in the author's life development (cf. Moskowitz 1991).

Many other Jewish women's histories take the form of diaries. The diary is a contemporary account of an individual's daily life, written at the time, and is therefore very different from other histories, which are reflections on the past and rely on memory. Many Jewish women's diaries come out of the Holocaust when ties to the wider world were severed and the only person to express experiences to is yourself. Other diaries emerged out of immigrant experiences (cf. Bytensky 1980) when women were encountering a different world and different way of life. In both cases, these experiences were often so unbelievable and impossible as to require recording in order to be sure that they really happened. The most famous Jewish woman diarist is Anne Frank, who began writing her diary while she, her family and another family hid in an attic hoping to

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avoid discovery by Nazis. Frank (1989), along with other Holocaust diarists such as Etty Hillesum (1983) and Hannah Levy-Hass (1982) offer personal testimonies of the struggle for survival and the search for humanity and normalcy during World War II. These diaries provide first-hand accounts of the changing emotions and perspectives of the individual authors as the Final Solution is carried out, and how the authors view and deal with the changing world around them. The diary illustrates the full understanding the authors have of the world event(s) in progress, and brings those events down to the level of the individual (Brenner 1997:4 & 132).

Among the few books on Jewish women, which utilise an oral history method are Kramer and Masur's book Jewish Grandmothers (1976) and Krause's Grandmother's Mothers and Daughters (1991). Kramer and Masur (1976:2) state that their major goal is the recovery of their grandmothers' stories to create a picture of elderly Jewish women that differs from the stereotype. A common theme which emerges in almost every story is the difficulty in making the transition from the Old World to the new, and the conflicting loyalties that result. Krause's (1991) book devotes two chapters to Jewish women of two families, offering a look at the varying effects of immigration, on successive generations of women. Two things are very revealing about these stories. First, one discovers that the lives of Jewish women do not necessarily revolve around Jewish practices. In fact, although a woman may be Jewish, it may have very little to do with her life and is certainly not a pivotal point. Second, one sees that while each of these women is leading an extraordinary life, their lives are not out of the ordinary or different from the stories your own grandmother might tell you.

Kim Chernin's (1983) In My Mother's House, is an account of her mother's life as a Russian immigrant, political activist, communist organiser, and victim of the McCarthy era. An interesting parallel to the mother's story is Kim Chernin's commentary on her emotional struggle in recording these stories, knowing that as her mother speaks, she is passing these stories onto her daughter. Other authors such as Marks (1996), Bletter (1989) and Heifetz (1989) have focused

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their research on Jewish women and their history on a specific, common event and/or topic. For Heiftz (1989) that event is experiencing the Holocaust as a child. For Bletter, it is exploring women's relationships with their Judaism. And for Marks, it is considering what it means to be "a nice Jewish girl." This type of topical oral history illustrates the variety of experience among Jewish women. For instance, the essays/stories in Marks' volume cover everything from wedding days, learning a first prayer, leaving home, Hebrew School to living in the suburbs. The essays and representations offered here are very different from traditional notions of what being a "nice Jewish girl" means. As Marks (1996:7) remarks in her introduction:

When the first wave of submissions came in, I expected an overwhelming number to be about food, or Jewish men, or the Jewish American Princess and the notorious Jewish mother. Nothing doing...Gone for the young writer is the smothering, shrewish Jewish mother—not one submission on chicken soup!—with her complaints that her children never call. The cast of characters of Jewish life is changing.

The essays and stories in Marks' book offer a contemporary glimpse into the meaning Jewish women are giving to their lives.

Bletter's book reveals the many relationships Jewish women have with their Judaism. While some are proud of their orthodoxy, others are attempting to integrate feminism into their lives and still others associate Judaism in their lives with the Diaspora, philanthropy, being labelled a JAP, keeping *kosher* or creating art. Other women are connected to their Judaism by the uneasiness and shame they feel about being a Jew. Finally, Heiftz shows the multiple experiences that define someone as a Holocaust survivor. In each of the six life stories, young girls were exposed to what we have come to see as the core holocaust experience (that is the concentration camps, the ghettos, the suffering) to varying degrees. One woman was hidden in a false ceiling, two others were unknowingly raised as Catholics until their adolescence, another was sent to England before the Final Solution was put in place and two others survived concentration camps. The focus of many Jewish women's topical oral history then is the range of experience among a

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seemingly homogeneous group. Topical oral history allows a variety of Jewish women to voice their opinions and experiences on an issue, while enabling the reader to understand that Jewish women experience in many different ways.

Each piece of research, each piece of Jewish women's history, no matter what form it takes, adds to our understanding of what it means to be a Jewish woman. These histories provide information and direction for future research and offer a different way of conceptualising the historically significant. Hannah and Rachel's stories lend to this effort, but theirs is unique in that much of their stories focus on life in rural Canada. There is a conspicuous absence of histories of Canadian Jewish women. This depression is even more apparent when one looks at the literature on Jewish women in other parts of the world, such as the United States and Europe. Further, what little Canadian information does exist focuses on urban life and offers little idea of what life was like for Jewish women in rural farming situations. Thus the life history approach used with Hannah and Rachel's lives not only adds to the literature on Jewish women's oral history in Canada, it also provides much needed information on rural life.

By focusing specifically on Jewish women's history one sees how their private life—home, family, children—are tied to larger public events and changes in the world around them; and more importantly these histories show how Jewish women are, and have been, active agents influencing the world around them. Jewish women's histories and oral histories reveal the many themes found in Jewish women's lives. These themes include, but are not restricted to, the ones found in the stereotype image. The full mosaic of Jewish women's lives truly come to the forefront when of history when Jewish women are allowed an authoritative voice to express themselves. Each piece of history builds on another, showing both the similarities and the differences among Jewish women's experiences. Hannah and Rachel's life stories reveal much more than the common

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threads that join them to the Jewish Mother stereotype. These additional themes are explored in the following chapter.

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## CHAPTER SIX—REPRESENTING THEMSELVES

*Identity:  
the condition or fact of being  
a specific person or thing*

In the previous chapter I looked at what the life story can tell one about the Jewish Mother stereotype and how life stories are creating representations that move beyond these negative representations to create a new history created by and focused on Jewish women. Life stories provide an opportunity and an active voice for Jewish women to represent and define themselves on their own terms. Hannah and Rachel take advantage of this opportunity, constructing themselves as active subjects, rather than passive objects in their stories. Each woman talks about the events and the people they see as important to their lives and to their personal development and identity. These include their children, husbands, other family members, work, their accomplishments and being Jewish. Focusing specifically on those events they had the most control and influence over, Hannah and Rachel show that they prefer to construct themselves using their own actions, thus placing themselves at the centre of their life narratives. The reader in turn comes to know Rachel and Hannah from their personal perspectives, and the actions and events they speak of remain in the original context of the life history

At the same time, Hannah and Rachel also bring other people to the forefront of their narratives, especially their children. As they highlight the importance of their children (and other family members) in their lives, Rachel and Hannah show how their families, much like their personal accomplishments, are an integral part of their identities. Their life stories cannot be separated from stories and actions involving their families, but this does not mean Rachel and Hannah consistently represent themselves through the actions and achievements of other people. When discussing their children and other family members they invariably bring the discussion around to themselves and their lives, refocusing the narrative so they again stand in the middle.

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Thus, Hannah and Rachel construct themselves as active individuals, while still stressing the importance of other people in their lives.

### **Expectations & The Typical**

Let us first consider what one might expect from the life history of the typical Jewish woman? What events should take priority in a Jewish woman's life? The two images discussed in Chapters Three and Four show the Jewish woman as primarily a mother, focused on and devoted to her husband and children. A primary event that is expected in a Jewish woman's story is, for example, the birth of her children, and as discussed in the previous chapter, both women have a close bond with their children. Hannah has the following to say about the birth of her children: "When Seth came back from overseas we lived with his parents. Sheila was born ten months later and then we built our own home." And in reference to the birth of her second child she states, "I had Sheila and seventeen months later I had Martin." She does not even mention the birth of her last son, although she speaks of him as a young boy. Similarly Rachel comments, "after we were married we bought a farm near Gronlid Saskatchewan and that's where we settled and worked very hard...Shelly was born in '46 and after that Betty and then Evan." Hannah and Rachel discuss their children's births only briefly, if at all. There is no mention of the emotion involved in giving birth, the feeling of becoming a mother for the first time, only a brief mention of their children's birth. This "omission" appears especially suspect in light of the Jewish Mother stereotype. In this representation, as stated previously, the Jewish Mother is extremely attached and devoted to her children, and they are central to the Jewish Mother's life. Thus society expects Jewish (and non-Jewish) women to emphasise this as a central event in their life stories.

Did Hannah and Rachel forget to speak at length about these central events? Other social scientists looking at this situation in other women's life histories determine that not only is the birth of a child a central event in any woman's life, but its omission is surely a mistake on the part of the woman telling her life story. The translator of Lady Sarashina's life narrative, As I Crossed a

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Bridge of Dreams: Recollections of a Woman in Eleventh Century Japan (1971) notes, “she has deliberately illuminated certain facets of this life, such as travels and deaths and dreams, while leaving in complete darkness such *central events* as her marriage and the birth of her children, which could hardly be omitted from a journal” (Sarashina 1971:23 italics mine). Through stereotypes and historic representations women, both Jewish and non-Jewish, are characterised as being focused solely on their children who are their *raison d’être*. However, I do not believe the lack of abundant information on the birth of their children is a mistaken oversight on Rachel and Hannah’s part. Watson and Watson-Franke’s comments about Lady Sarashina’s narrative are equally applicable to Hannah and Rachel’s narratives. They state, “she directs her attention instead to experiences, thought, and places that were of obvious interest and fascination *to her*. In a male autobiography, short mention of marriage and children would suffice, but in a woman’s life they become ‘central events’ and society expects a woman to remember and emphasise them” (Watson & Watson-Franke 1985:162). Thus Hannah and Rachel speak of their children’s births as a change in their lives where they take on new roles and responsibilities. The focus is on them, not on the child. This mode of thinking extends beyond traditional notions of women as nurturer to a point where one can see women, both Jewish and non-Jewish, as individuals (rather than seeing them as existing under an all-encompassing category like mother). This instance shows how we have to change our way of thinking to accept the many possibilities that exist in Jewish women’s lives. In constructing and defining themselves in their life stories, Hannah and Rachel discuss those things that they had the most control and influence over and are the most proud of, such as their accomplishments.

### **Accomplishments**

Both Hannah and Rachel consider the work they have done throughout their lives their biggest accomplishment. It is something they have achieved and at which they had been successful

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on their own, in spite of a lack of formal education. Accordingly, work is a major theme that runs throughout Hannah and Rachel narratives.

When asked about her greatest accomplishment, Rachel states,

I have always worked and have somehow brought things out in myself that I never knew I had. I was a warranty clerk in a dealership, and I just learned that myself and became very good at it. I think being successful is what you make of yourself. I really pushed myself to be able to learn whatever I needed to. I could go from job to job and do whatever, with no problems...I've always felt good about that.

Hannah has this response to the same question:

I ran a very successful lady's-wear business in Winnipeg, which allowed Irving and I to retire... That made me feel I had accomplished something in my life. Up to that point, I felt I never really accomplished anything. I didn't have any education so I felt I had really accomplished something big by running this successful business... So I feel that was my greatest accomplishment. I've been successful in that respect. It was all hard work but after a while it came very naturally to me... I'm truly proud of what I did. I had to struggle for such a great part of my life and never had anything so it was great to be able to do all that.

An interesting parallel in both statements is that they achieved these things without any sort of formal education, training or prior experience. These are things Hannah and Rachel did because they pushed themselves and proved their self-sufficiency. The fact that Hannah and Rachel were able to learn on their own is an additional accomplishment. Rachel notes, "a lot of times I think I should have kept going to school until I had finished, but I never did. I got an education of sorts. I am a self-educated person. I just learn as I go." Further, "I suppose the fact that you can learn all these things is just in your genes... You figure out what you're supposed to do and that's the way it is." Hannah claims that "in spite of it all, being self-educated is sometimes a very good teacher... as time passed I became more and more confident in what I could do." This confidence gave her the ability to deal with other people and run her business the way she wanted to. "I had to deal with men travellers all the time and they can be very bossy and pushy, thinking they know more than you do... they think they know what you can sell in their business, but they don't wear the clothes."

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Hannah and Rachel's biggest accomplishments are not what one might consider typical of women or typical of Jewish women. These achievements do not deal with traditional female roles or domains. Hannah and Rachel's greatest accomplishments are not their children or their homes, or anything else they had to live through someone else to achieve. Instead their achievements are things they accomplished on their own, without the assistance of others. Unlike how Jewish Mothers are represented in the stereotype, Hannah and Rachel demonstrate that they are not dependent on their husbands for financial support, nor are they the typical wives of Jewish nouveau riche as Gold (1930) depicts them. On the other hand, their predominant role in financially supporting their families does give credit to the early notion that Jewish women had control over the family finances and thus were the *de facto* heads of household (Bienstock 1979). But unlike this representation, one must remember that both Hannah and Rachel's husbands also worked and contributed to their family's finances.

Hannah and Rachel's lack of formal education compounds their sense of pride in themselves, for this is something each woman had to struggle through and conquer in order to gain success. This point is even more significant when one considers that Hannah and Rachel's children and grandchildren have all completed their secondary education, and some have completed their post secondary education. Hannah and Rachel's life situations—growing up in a rural farming settlement with little money to spend on anything by the bare necessities of food, clothing and shelter—could not offer them the advantages of formal education, thus their accomplishments, while relatively modest in comparison to some of their children's successes, mean more to them because they faced great adversity in acquiring their successes. Hannah and Rachel's successes are based on knowledge and experiences they gained by themselves. Thus, Hannah and Rachel tell their life stories, they emphasise and prioritise those things which belong to them exclusively and those things which do not have to take into account the actions or presence of others. It is these events which Hannah and Rachel have the most control and are central figures. In this manner,

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Hannah and Rachel are placing themselves in the centre of their narrative, constructing themselves as strong, active individuals.

### **Importance of Others**

While they focus on the importance of those things in their lives they were able to accomplish on their own, Rachel and Hannah do not ignore the fact that a great many people have been integral in their lives, and have influenced the people Rachel and Hannah are today. Throughout their narrative they bring those people, their children in particular, into the centre of their stories. However, neither woman loses sight of their own individuality and the important roles they play with respect to the other people in their lives. Hannah comments that, “watching my children and grandchildren grow up and become successful and bring up their children in a nice way is really important. I guess it’s just my love for my children. It’s something no one else can take away from me. It’s mine.” Further she notes, “I’ve been blessed because I’ve had my kids for so long and I’ve been alive to interact with them which I didn’t with my parents.” Here one sees the pride Hannah has in her children, and the important role they play in her life. She places them at the centre of her narrative because they are essential in her life. However, Hannah does not allow them to remain at the centre. She quickly brings the focus back around to herself, stating that the pride and love she has for her children belongs to her. Hannah is proud of the people her children have become, but does not credit herself with those successes—those successes belong to her children. Hannah’s narrative might spotlight her children, but Hannah is in control of defining their relationship (unlike the case with the Jewish Mother stereotype where others define that relationship) so that it revolves around her. In this manner, the reader is able to understand Hannah’s role and perspective.

When Rachel begins highlighting her children in her life story, she states, “my children are really my accomplishment. Having children makes you feel good and we have a good life with them... We are all very close.” This comment is curious in light of what she states previously

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concerning her ability to conquer many jobs being her greatest accomplishment. This statement is even more curious because Rachel does not talk a great deal about her children and their birth. Those curiosities aside, one sees that like Hannah's narrative, Rachel also brings her children into the centre of her narrative, but again she brings this focus around to her. Rachel talks about her children because having a family is something that gives her pleasure and pride in herself. Rachel highlights her own emotions in defining her relationship to her children, rather than removing herself from the narrative.

The importance of family in Hannah and Rachel's lives cannot be underestimated. For both women the major turning points in their lives occur when each woman faces the death of someone close to them. For Rachel it is her mother, and for Hannah it is her first husband, Seth. Rachel's mother died when she was very young and still living on the farm. Rachel remembers,

This is when my life started. I had to do everything, I was the only one left on the farm. Hannah had left to go to the city, she was not a farm girl, so I was left with my dad and one brother... I did everything a man and a woman would have to do. I was the type that liked the outdoor work, and I worked very hard... I never thought that staying there wasn't the best thing for me. I should have but I didn't... My mom's death had a huge impact on my life. The thing I remember is thinking well, I guess I'm here to do whatever there is to do now. Like my young life was gone because now I had to become an adult and do all these things and with the boys away overseas it wasn't easy.

The death of Rachel's mother had a tremendous impact on her life. It was at this point where she realised that, unlike Hannah, her life was not going to move beyond Edenbridge and their family farm for a while. Rachel felt it necessary to remain on the farm and take over her mother's duties there. This is a role she fell into. Rachel feels that this was a point in her life when she should have been experiencing the world outside of Edenbridge. She illustrates this when she speaks of Hannah's life during the same time. "My sister Hannah went away when she was very young, and I was even younger, and for her of course it was a different life altogether. For me life was just out on the farm working." Thus the death of her mother created a turning point in Rachel's life over

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which she had little control. Here again one sees the importance and influence other people in Rachel's life.

Hannah's life is not unique in this respect, for she too feels that the major turning point in her life occurred because of someone else. The death of Hannah's first husband occurred later in her life when she already had three children. Hannah describes the impact Seth's death had on her life:

After he died I realised that maybe keeping *kosher* didn't mean that much anymore. I felt that had there been any meaning behind being that Jewish, they wouldn't have let this happen. So I took my dishes and mixed them up. It took me a long time to eat non-*kosher* meat in my house. I guess I did it because I was so hurt. That was the end of my twenty-one years of keeping *kosher*. Life was hard after losing Seth. It took a long time to get over it.

Like Rachel, Hannah's life changed dramatically after the death of someone close. The meaning she gave to being religious and keeping *kosher* changed when she no longer had someone with whom to share it. Once she became a widow, she was forced to move her family to Winnipeg so she might have a better chance of supporting them. There she met her second husband and soon came to own her own store.

Both Hannah and Rachel's lives are deeply influenced by people close to them. These individuals are an inherent part of Hannah and Rachel's lives and thus become an aspect of each woman's self-representation. However, the individuals do not become their self-representations. The influences Rachel's mother and Hannah's first husband had on each woman's life have contributed in creating the women Hannah and Rachel are today. The roles of others do not negate Hannah and Rachel's position or importance in their stories. They consistently bring stories about other people around to the ways they influenced and/or are related to their own personal lives and emotions. While both women speak of the importance of their children and how the death of others were turning points for them, they do so in a manner that links those people to their lives, rather

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than linking themselves to the lives of others. Thus Hannah and Rachel remain the focus of their narratives, while emphasising the connections they feel to their families.

### **On Being Jewish**

In telling their life stories, Rachel and Hannah are constructing their identities for others (the readers and more specifically the interviewer). Children, deceased husbands and deceased mothers, brothers and sisters all add in constructing their identities. An additional aspect of any Jewish woman's identity is her association with Judaism. As illustrated by the personal documents of other Jewish women (cf. Marks 1996; Krause 1991; Bletter 1989) defining what being Jewish means has an infinite number of possible answers and identifying what specifically are the Jewish aspects of their lives is fraught with difficulty. The variety of answers can be pictured as a continuum with ultra-orthodox beliefs and lifestyle at one end and secular beliefs and lifestyle at the other end (Baker 1993:1). Or picture it as a tree with such a multitude of branches it is impossible to count them all, but they are all interconnected. For Hannah and Rachel, being Jewish is a part of their identity and has played both similar and different roles in their lives. Life narratives offer insight to the variety of traditions and practices Jewish women carry out. More importantly, these narratives allow and encourage Jewish women to give meaning to these actions as they relate to the Jewish aspect of their identity.

From their perspective, Hannah and Rachel were not raised in a religious home. Both women define being a religious Jew with specific practices: keeping *kosher*, attending *synagogue*, eating *Shabbat* dinner on Friday nights. If a Jew does not follow these practices, Hannah and Rachel do not consider that person a religious Jew. As Rachel states, "we never really had a religious house though. I mean my parents were never religious, never kept *kosher* or anything...never had Friday night supper and never went to *synagogue* on a regular basis." Hannah echoes these sentiments commenting, "as far as keeping *kosher* and things, they [her parents] didn't once they came to Canada because they had no refrigeration for their food...it just

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wasn't possible." And further, "we never practised going to *synagogue* because it was many, many miles away from us, but we always went to *shul* on *Yontiv*...that was as far as our Jewish practice went." In measuring their level of religious practice, Hannah and Rachel are comparing their Jewish lifestyle with one that existed/exists in Eastern Europe, and to a lesser degree Western Europe, and in urban centres in North America where there are greater concentrations of Jewish people and communities, compared with rural areas. This is a commonly used technique where "commitment" to a Jewish identity has been measured by such indicators as *synagogue* membership, presence of Jewish ritual objects, books and posters in the home, and rates of inter marriage. This...is founded on the assumption of the assimilation paradigm. This paradigm takes the *shtetl* culture of the immigrant generation...as a baseline against which to measure contemporary Jewish American practice and identification" (Engelen-Eigles 1995:29). What the assimilation paradigm does not take into account is the different ways Judaism is changed by people in response to cultural and social contexts, and ignores the ways the *shtetl* culture itself was not homogeneous (Engelen-Eigles 1995:30).

In order to define their personal connection to Judaism, Hannah and Rachel look toward their knowledge of the religion and their family background. The comment "we always knew we were Jewish," arose numerous times in both Hannah and Rachel's life stories. I asked both women what exactly they meant by this statement, but neither could fully articulate a complete explanation. Instead they made references to the knowledge they hold about various Jewish holidays, Jewish traditions and the history of the Jewish people. For Rachel and Hannah knowing they are Jewish, without being involved in the many religious practices, is enough because that knowledge forms their link to the Jewish religion, history and culture. As Engelen-Eigles (1995:38) notes, "because the self is often seen to embody a history of experiences, interactions and responses, ethnic identity could be salient even where specific traditions and rituals are not part of an individual's current practice." Thus Hannah and Rachel are identifying with Judaism on an

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ethnic/cultural basis, rather than on an overtly Orthodox-religious basis. These two aspects of Judaism are not exclusive of one another, but they can be envisioned as a scale that ranges from the knowledge that one is Jewish, and connecting with Judaism on that level, to being a full practising *Hassidic Jew*.

When I asked Hannah and Rachel to define what they mean by always knowing they were Jewish the problem they experienced in answering stems from a difficulty in expressing meaning in words. What I asked of these women was for them to give a particular meaning attached to the Jewish aspect of themselves. However, that aspect of their identity is so “intertwined with other aspects of the self-concept, that grasping and isolating... [it] so as to be able to articulate... [it] in words (in a sense, scrutinising and objectifying [it]) becomes difficult” (Engelen-Eigles 1995:37). For Hannah and Rachel, their connection to Judaism is deeply emotional and thus difficult to put into words. Hannah attempted to explain this stating, “being Jewish is a birthright and that’s what you believe in and you want your kids to follow the Jewish traditions along with you.” And as she reflects on the absence of religious practice in her parents’ home she reaffirms the emotional bond to Judaism commenting, “they [her parents] always had that Jewish feeling about them, they just never carried out the acts. They knew they were Jewish.”

As stated previously, there are many ways of defining what being Jewish means, and as Rachel and Hannah’s life stories show, articulating this is not a simple process. Part of anyone’s Jewish identity, man or woman, deals with the Judaism to which they are exposed throughout their lifetime. Judaism as a religion is heterogeneous among numerous sects—orthodox, conservative, reform, reconstructionist, or secular—each with their own practices. The set of beliefs to which one is exposed, be it *Hasidic* orthodox or secular, influences how one sees the Jewish religion and culture, and one’s place in it. The Judaism to which Hannah and Rachel were initially exposed was not formally organised in the context of a large Jewish community centred on a synagogue or community centre. Jewish traditions and practices were/are focused on social interactions among

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family members, celebrating cultural heritage. These activities take place in the home where the women are most involved in preparing the house, cooking meals and organising the evening(s). Here Hannah and Rachel's mother made sure all the family was together to celebrate holidays. With the premature death of their mother, both Hannah and Rachel turned to their mothers-in-law to teach them how to carry on their Jewish life.

Rachel's early experiences with Judaism were different than Hannah's because Rachel had the opportunity to attend a formal Hebrew school with one of her nephews. "We went all the way through together. At the time I could read Hebrew as well as I could read English." When speaking of this point, Rachel immediately turns her focus inward to herself, her family, and their Jewish practices. She comments,

But even though we never kept *kosher*, never had Friday night supper, and never went to *synagogue* on a regular basis, we always knew we were Jewish, we always knew when the holidays were and we'd always have lots of people over. It's a lot like we do now. We had all the foods we were supposed to have. I mean we were Jews as we knew that on the holidays we ate this kind of food and that kind of food. I have the same food to this day and I'm not very religious.

Despite her formal Jewish education, for Rachel being Jewish is not about religious practices in *synagogue*. Being Jewish is tied to family gatherings and large family dinners during the Jewish holidays. Her mother died when Rachel was only seventeen, thus Rachel turned to her mother-in-law for guidance on being a Jewish woman and keeping a Jewish home. Rachel's mother-in-law came from a similar religious, socio-economic and geographic background as her own mother. Both women were immigrants, married to brothers. In Canada both lived in Edenbridge on a farm and celebrated many of the Jewish holidays together as a family. Thus the pattern of Rachel's mother's life and Rachel's mother-in-law's life were arguably very similar. While Rachel states, "my mom never taught me how to cook, you see, because she was gone when I was seventeen. I learned more from Larry's mom because she was alive after we were married", what she learned from Larry's mother was, in all likelihood, very similar to what her mother would have taught her

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because both women practised a similar pattern of Judaism (similar to which she was exposed as a child). Rachel does not make specific reference to a Jewish education provided by her mother-in-law, but being taught to cook also included being taught to cook traditional meals for the holidays.

Hannah's exposure to Jewish traditions moved beyond what her parents and siblings practised, and was very different from what Rachel learned from her mother-in-law. In Hannah's parents' home, she was exposed to a side of Jewish religion that was influenced and controlled by women and their knowledge. Once she was married and living with her mother-in-law and father-in-law Hannah was exposed to an additional side of Judaism that focused on religious ritual practices, and attending formal *synagogue* services. This is an aspect of Judaism that is dominated and focused on men. Seth, Hannah's first husband came from an urban centre in Canada. His parents were also immigrants, but having settled in a city where there was a formal Jewish community and infrastructure, they were able to retain much of their original Jewish practices, keeping *kosher*, attending *synagogue* regularly. Hannah lived with her in-laws for three years while Seth was overseas.

My in-laws were the biggest influence in my life as far as being Jewish is concerned. Before I lived with them I knew nothing about how to be a practising Jew, nothing about keeping *kosher* or about the holidays. Even though we went to synagogue when we were children, none of us understood any of it because we didn't practice any of it at home, but my in-laws did.

While living with them, Hannah learned about the holidays, how to keep *kosher*, and she attended synagogue services and watched her father-in-law *doven* [pray] at home. These practices carried over into her own home once Seth came back from the war.

When the war was over and Seth and I moved into our own home, we kept strictly *kosher* and my children went to Hebrew school and the boys had Bar Mitzvahs. It was completely different than how I was brought up, and I guess that's why I am a much stronger Jewish mother.

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Throughout their lifetimes, Hannah and Rachel were exposed to and carried out very different Jewish practices. These practices varied in their degree of religiousness (again picturing religious practice as a continuum from very religious orthodox practices, to non-religious secular practices). Rachel speaks of religion and being Jewish much less than Hannah does. This relates to what each woman is exposed, which in turn influences the Jewish aspect of their identity.

Hannah claims that because she was exposed to a more religious aspect of Judaism, she is a stronger Jewish mother than most others are, she is constructing herself as more Jewish because she is knowledgeable and participated/participates in more religious practices than she did as a child. The Jewish aspect of Hannah's identity is very important to her, and is inherent in her entire identity. Does this mean that because Rachel does not speak of Judaism in her life story as much, it does not mean as much to her? No it does not. As discussed previously, both women discuss their relationship to Judaism as an emotional bond that is not easy for them to express in words. Being Jewish is simply something they feel. Aside from preparing traditional meals and removing her children from an anti-Semitic situation, Rachel does not speak of any other ways in which she expresses her Judaism. Hannah, on the other hand, learned other ways to be Jewish, other ways to express Jewish identity—keeping *kosher*, attending synagogue, praying. Thus Hannah is able to speak of concrete actions that better enable her to express her (emotional) connection to Judaism. Despite Rachel's lack of religious practice and/or discussion about Judaism in her narrative, she has strong feelings toward intermarriage, similar to Hannah's sentiments. According to Hannah:

There is a lot of intermarriage now in the world and you have to learn to accept a lot of things you really don't want to... Now both Sheila and Sean married people who converted to Judaism. I think they both knew how strongly I felt about being Jewish and how I wanted them to marry Jews. At first I was not that excited about the fact that they were not dating Jewish men and women, but you get accustomed to it because that's the way the world is today.

Rachel has very similar feelings toward intermarriage:

Times change and you have to learn to change with them. We see that in our kids all the time. Our kids now are intermarried which is a big change since my day. I've never been

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a very religious person, so Judaism has never been a real big marker for me in that respect. But I've always known that I'm Jewish... Our kids know that they are Jewish, but now that they are intermarried, I often wonder what will happen with their children. You wonder if they will be Jewish or even realize that they are Jewish... I don't feel that people are any different than I am. I respect them for what they are. It would be nice to be able to say that they married in their own religion, but as long as they are happy.

By Rachel's own admission, Judaism has not played a large role in her life. It has not been a real marker, and she has never been a religious person, nor have her children ever been religious people. However, Rachel again stresses that simply knowing she is Jewish is enough to have a bond with Judaism. Both she and Hannah express strong feelings against intermarriage as intermarriage is often viewed as a threat to the future survival of Judaism, hence Rachel's concerns over whether her grandchildren will know they are Jewish and experience the same connection she feels toward that aspect of her identity.

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## SOME FINAL REMARKS

What has become incredibly clear to me as I have researched and written these pages is that there is no one simple answer to the question 'who is the Jewish woman?' The possibilities are truly endless. However, there is the possibility of getting closer and closer to understanding to what these women identify when they describe and define themselves as Jewish women. This can be accomplished by focusing specifically on Jewish women's oral histories and personal documents as valid accounts of the past and present. Acceptance of these truths means it is necessary to change the way we think about Jewish women, and about historical documents.

To come to a full understanding of the reality of Jewish women's lives, to move beyond what is presented to us in traditional history and stereotypic representations, it is essential to open our minds to the many ways someone might define herself as a Jewish woman. Jewish women are more than just the historical objects whose lives exist only in relation to men; more than an image found in traditional historical accounts. For thousands of years Jewish women have been full active subjects in the history of the Jews, influencing the world around them; however, their position as the *Other* to the male norm in Jewish culture and religion, places Jewish women in a position that masks this fact. Another factor masking the specific history and roles of Jewish women is the Jewish Mother stereotype, an image created by their sons and daughters. Jewish women are more than just the nagging, over-feeding, demanding Mother of so many books and movies. This image is so prolific in popular culture, it jumps to the mind immediately when one mentions older Jewish women. If one is to recognise and accept the reality of Jewish women's lives, our entire way of thinking needs to change. Our thinking must first accept women's voices and experiences as valid and authoritative, although partial, records of the past. In the case of

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women's history, acceptance of this partial perspective means accepting alternate categories through which we conceptualise history. As Magnus (1990:28) notes:

It is essential, first, to uncover the historical experience of Jewish women, about which remarkably little is known. Yet it would not be enough merely to create another subspecialty in Judaic studies, 'Jewish woman's history.' Traditional conceptions of Jewish history must be thoroughly reshaped to include the historical reality of women. What has been said for historical writing as a whole applies equally to Jewish historiography: 'Women's history asks for a paradigm shift'... It is a fundamental revamping of the categories with which we conceptualise the past.

These new historic categories come out of the stories women tell, thus it is they who are also shaping history.

This paradigm shift requires us first to rethink our definition of objectivity and the authority that comes with it. History is traditionally thought to be an objective, all knowing, all seeing, all encompassing, value-free, unmarked account of the past. Its authority rests on the fact that individuals believe historical accounts are free from personal bias and hence accurate accounts of the 'way it really was.' However, history is not all encompassing narrative. It is partial and specific and influenced by cultural norms. Instead of throwing out accounts because they are not objective, consider a different way of conceptualising objectivity.

Donna Haraway (1988) proposes objectivity as we traditionally think of it be redefined.

She states,

I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere. This is the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation... Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*... [It is a] particular and specific embodiment and definitely not... the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision (Haraway 1988:581-583).

Under these terms objectivity is not about the omniscient account; rather, objectivity, or as Haraway terms it feminist objectivity, is about recognising and accepting that all accounts have an embodied perspective, and are thus marked and specific to the individual. Historic categories thus

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must change to adapt to the individual situation. This definition reveals the truly partial nature of historic accounts. As Haraway (1988:586) notes.

The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another.

Each time one tries to define and identify the Jewish woman, the partial answers must build upon one another, like a child's building blocks, in a fashion that accepts the individuality of life experience and does not take the commonalities between lives as an indication of overreaching homogeneity. Feminist objectivity is the type of perspective that recognises, admits, and takes responsibility for where it originates. Under these terms, individuals and their experiences do not become essentialised or generalised, as difference is a primary concern.

Traditional historical representations of Jewish women as the *Other* and the Jewish Mother stereotype must be seen as only as pieces of a whole representation of Jewish women. These cannot be completely dismissed as false, but they also cannot be taken as the final word in defining Jewish women. As Rachel and Hannah's life stories show, there is an entire mosaic of themes that run through Jewish women's lives. These themes are interrelated in a variety of ways; therefore it is vital to consider these themes as parts of a dynamic system that is influencing, and is influenced by, one another. When this is accomplished, these themes, and the categories they create can then be incorporated into the history of the Jewish people as a whole.

By allowing women the opportunity to have a voice in history where there was none before reveals an entirely new aspect of Jewish culture, religion, society, and history. Here their voices are valued as they define their space in history. Recently, Jewish feminists, looking specifically at Jewish women's issues and identity have begun exploring issues such as patriarchy, equality in religion and ritual, feminist liturgy, ritual, god language, women's Jewish education, the body and sexuality (cf. Greenburg 1981; Gottlieb 1995; Siegel 1995; Heschel 1991; Heschel 1993). When comparing this list to what is found in Hannah and Rachel's life stories, and those of other Jewish

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women, one sees that their concerns, the issues that consume their lives are much more ontological and immediate: family, motherhood, work, accomplishments, being Jewish, children, and education. Jewish feminists tend to direct their discussions to a different audience of women, one which has a high level of formal education, who are, perhaps, younger, and very involved with the feminist movement(s). It would be beneficial if Jewish feminists took their direction from Jewish women's oral history and began exploring these additional issues, including what motherhood means to Jewish women, and how does motherhood become defined as specifically Jewish? By opening up their focus the Jewish feminist movement would speak to a wider audience of people. As Henery and Taitz (1990:265) note, the ultimate challenge for many Jewish women and feminists is Jewish women's equality. Since "Jewish women's history, because it encompasses women's biographies, historical and sociological analyses and trends, and a variety of legal interpretations and precedents, remains the most effective weapon in meeting that challenge." (Henery & Taitz 1990:265). As such it is my hope that this research will spark interest in others to collect stories from a variety of women of many generations, their spouses and children so that we can continue building the mosaic which moves closer to answering the question 'who is the Jewish woman?' and who is the Jewish person. As Jewish women we must understand who we were in the past, to make sense of who we are today in order to move toward who we wish to become.

*My Baba phoned me a few weeks ago. She asked how school was coming, was I very busy, did I have time to enjoy myself? What had she been up to? I asked. This and that, she replied, but not a great deal. She had gone to a dinner party, and met some new people. She spoke of one of the women she had met, a lovely woman,, divorced for over a decade with a number of children. She told me how nice this woman was, very smart and caring, loves her children very much, but stated, as if it were a problem, "she is such a Jewish Mother." I got comfortable on the couch, switched the phone to the other ear, and asked my Baba what she meant...*

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## APPENDIX I

### GLOSSARY

**BAT MITZVAH (male)/BAR MITZVAH (female)** —a ceremony that commemorates a young person's entry into adulthood at the age of thirteen. It is at this point that an individual is able to fully participate in religious life.

**BOBBE-MYSEHS** —Grandmother's tales; a falsehood or lie.

**DOVEN(ED)** —to pray.

**EREV**—the night before.

**HALAKHAH**—Jewish biblical laws.

**HASSIDIC/HASSIDIM**—an orthodox Jewish sect which began in eighteenth century Poland.

**HATKIVAH**—the Israeli national anthem.

**HUPPA**—a wedding canopy.

**KENADLECH**—dumplings.

**KOSHER**—Jewish dietary laws.

**MAFTER**—the portion of the Torah read every week on the Sabbath.

**MATZAH**—unleavened cracker.

**MINYAN**—a quorum of ten needed for public worship.

**ONEG SHABBAT**—the meal following Sabbath services.

**PESACH/PASSOVER**—the Jewish holiday commemorating the exodus from Egypt.

**ROSH HASHANNAH**—the Jewish New Year.

**SEDAR**—the ritualised Passover meal.

**SHABBAT**—the Jewish Sabbath

**SHTETL**—Jewish ghetto communities of Eastern Europe; also used to indicate a lifestyle.

**SHUL/SYNAGOGUE**—Jewish place of worship.

**TALMUD/TALMUDIC**—commentary on the Torah.

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**TORAH**—the Five Books of Moses.

**TSIMMIS**—carrot pudding.

**YOM KIPPUR**—the Day of Attonment.

**YONTIV**—a collective term for the Jewish High Holidays, which include Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashannah

**ZAHOR**—to remember.

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## APPENDIX II

### METHOD

The life stories in Chapters One and Two were collected using an oral history method where another elicits a retrospective account of an individual's life. My initial meeting with Hannah and Rachel explained the project and their potential involvement in it. Both were encouraged to ask questions about the research to ensure they fully understood it before they agreed to participate. After signing a consent form, initial interview dates were established.

The goal of any life history research is to allow and encourage people to tell their stories as they see fit, in their own words; as such, there was no set interview schedule. Instead, I created a set of topics I wished to cover in the interviews. These topics reflect general themes in any individual's life. Under each topic, questions were designed to stimulate conversation and memory, rather than guide the course of the interview (Gluck 1996). Throughout each interview I used the same set of topics as an interview guide to ensure consistency between the interviews. I began the initial interviews with asking each woman about the three events in their lives they believe to have been the most important. This question acted like a springboard stimulating conversations about subsequent topics.

A total of three, one hour interviews were conducted with each woman. Rachel's interviews took place over a two week period, and Hannah's interviews took place over a three week period. With Hannah and Rachel's permission each interview was recorded. The interviews were kept as informal as possible to encourage conversations between myself and these women, rather than a formal structured interview. While I took notes in the first interview, I found that this made both women uncomfortable and distracted from our discussions. In the subsequent interviews no notes were taken.

Once the interviews were completed the tapes were transcribed and the transcriptions coded to ensure anonymity. From the interview transcriptions I began writing the life stories in the form of an autobiography. The questions were removed, and the answers arranged in chronological and topical order to give the stories a sense of flow. I did as little as possible to alter the stories, wanting to ensure that their original integrity was maintained in the final product. All edits were limited to minor changes in sentence structure for increased readability.

Once the life stories were completed, they were given to Hannah and Rachel to review. I wanted to ensure that both women felt they were a part of this research project and in fact own

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their stories. Hannah and Rachel made the changes they saw necessary and added parts they had only thought about once they began to read their life stories. Once the stories were completed and the women were happy, they were each given copies for their personal use.

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Sara Marcie Geirholm  
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