

# JEWISH SOCIAL WORK BIOGRAPHIES BETWEEN GERMANY AND MANDATORY PALESTINE. | Women Professionals as Transnational Agents from the 1920s to the 1940s

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**Abstract** | When social work emerged as a profession, it played a crucial role in the establishment of national welfare systems. Social movements and transnational agents – mainly women – promoted these processes. This article examines the history of social work between Germany and the Jewish community in Palestine. The focus is on the biographies of 100 Jewish social workers who emigrated from Germany to Palestine from the 1920s to the 1940s and helped establish social work in the new state.

**Zusammenfassung** | Als Soziale Arbeit als Beruf entstand, wirkte sie entscheidend bei der Entstehung des Wohlfahrtsstaates. Soziale Bewegungen und transnationale Akteur:innen – vor allem Frauen – trugen dazu bei. Der Artikel untersucht die Geschichte Sozialer Arbeit zwischen Deutschland und der jüdischen Community in Palästina. Im Mittelpunkt stehen die Biographien von 100 jüdischen Sozialarbeiter:innen, die von den 1920er bis 1940er-Jahren von Deutschland nach Palästina emigrierten und die Sozialarbeit im neuen Staat aufbauen halfen.

**Schlüsselwörter** ► Historische Entwicklung ► Soziale Arbeit ► soziale Persönlichkeit ► Israel

[doi.org/10.5771/0490-1606-2023-1-2](https://doi.org/10.5771/0490-1606-2023-1-2)

**Introduction** | The translation of social work knowledge between Germany and Palestine in the 1920s and 1940s forms an intriguing case of transnational history in social work. At the centre of this process is a group of Jewish social workers, who left Nazi Germany, immigrated to Mandatory Palestine and contributed to the building of social work in the new country. These persons have contributed extensively on building the profession and its methods and theories, networks, and institutions in Germany, and translated

this unique and diverse knowledge into the new cultural environment. The present study asks what these translation processes look like, focusing on the professional biographies of these individuals.

The search in several archives in Germany and Israel brought to light a large number of immigrant Jewish social workers, most of whom were women. Their professional biographies reveal the complex early history of social work in its temporal and spatial dimensions, which was shaped by diverse social, cultural, and religious movements, academic disciplines, private charity and traditional philanthropy as well as processes of nation-state building. Hence, we<sup>1</sup> sought to map the transnational movement of social work on this basis.

In the following, our primary aim is to reflect this mapping, which culminated in a digital biographical map, and at the same time to present central results of our investigation. We argue that historical research on border crossing and transnational flow of knowledge in social work benefits from hybrid forms of knowledge production, which are becoming increasingly important in historical research (Koller 2016). The biographical map of Jewish-German social workers locates itself in this more recent tradition of historiographical research and raises various methodological problems. We will discuss these based on the specific case. To this end, we briefly outline the movement of Jewish social work between Germany and Palestine before we reflect on the digital map and present the results of this transnational study.

**The Transnational History of Social Work between Germany and Palestine** | Social movements supported the dissemination of ideas and concepts to solve social problems globally (An et al. 2016). In the case of Jewish-German social work, this process is deeply intertwined with forced migratory movements of Jewish social work experts. These

**1** The research presented here emerged from the project "The Transnational History of Social Work and Social Welfare between Germany and Israel in the 1930s and 1940s", which was conducted between 2017 and 2019 under the direction of *John Gal* (Jerusalem, Israel) and *Stefan Königeter* (St. Gallen, Switzerland) and funded by the German-Israeli Foundation (GIF). As a transnational research team, we, the authors of this article, focused on the biographies of migrant women social workers. We wish to thank both project leaders and *Yehudit Avnir* (Jerusalem, Israel) for their invaluable contribution to this research.

## Pionierin

„Wir stehen alle auf den Schultern unserer Vordere.“ – Das Zitat wird *Ludwig Börne* zugeschrieben. Die weise Erkenntnis aber, dass das eigene Schaffen, sei es im Privaten oder im Beruf, meist unter sehr viel bescheideneren Bedingungen begonnen hätte, wenn wir nicht auf dem aufbauen könnten, was unsere Vorgänger:innen erreicht haben, dürfte noch viel älter sein als der pointierte Aphorismus von *Ludwig Börne*.

Wir im DZI entdecken zurzeit äußerst beeindruckt, was eine unserer Vorfahrinnen erlebt, geleistet und wie sie gedacht hat: *Siddy Wronsky*, 1882 in Berlin geboren und 1947 in Jerusalem gestorben, war seit 1914 Vorstandsmitglied, seit 1918 Vorsitzende und dann von 1923 bis 1933 die erste hauptamtliche Geschäftsführerin des „Archiv für Wohlfahrtspflege“, das 1964 in „Deutsches Zentralinstitut für soziale Fragen“ umbenannt wurde. Seit August 2022 läuft beim DZI ein Projekt zur Digitalisierung des von *Siddy Wronsky* vor rund 90 Jahren verfassten Romans „Sand und Sterne“. Das Besondere ist, dass es sich hierbei um ein noch unveröffentlichtes Werk handelt und dass es autobiografische Züge trägt, die die Lebensumstände von zunächst noch in Berlin und dann im Exil in Palästina lebenden Sozialarbeiter:innen und zionistischen Juden und Jüdinnen deutlich werden lässt.

Das Manuskript wurde 2017 von *Ayana Halpern* bei Forschungsaktivitäten in den Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem gefunden. Zusammen mit ihrer wissenschaftlichen Mentorin *Yehudit Avnir* und *Dayana Lau* vom Alice Salomon Archiv in Berlin wird jetzt die Veröffentlichung von „Sand und Sterne“ mit modernsten Techniken der Digitalisierung und der digitalen Transkription durch das DZI vorbereitet. Die Projektleitung liegt, neben der redaktionellen Verantwortung für unsere Fachzeitschrift, bei *Stephanie Pigorsch*. Weitere Informationen zu diesem spannenden und wichtigen Vorhaben finden Sie auf der DZI-Website. Und eine wissenschaftliche Analyse der Biografien von fünf Pionierinnen der jüdischen Sozialen Arbeit, darunter natürlich auch *Siddy Wronsky*, bietet der Beitrag von *Dayana Lau* und *Ayana Halpern* in dieser Januar-Ausgabe der *Sozialen Arbeit*.

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professionals, who were previously involved in the building of social work in Germany as part of their social and emancipatory engagement, now translated this knowledge into the Jewish state in the making (Gal; Königeter 2016, Halpern 2019, Halpern; Lau 2019, Mazursky; Lau 2021, Schmitz et al. 2019). Most of them were women, middle-class, academically educated and active in various social and religious movements. At the same time, they were strongly influenced by an advanced welfare system and professional education. These persons identified themselves as part of the national establishment (Gillerman 2009), but were also affiliated with feminist movements and fought for women's rights. As Jews, they were threatened and expelled from Germany from the 1930s. Due to this forced escape, they had a remarkable impact on the development of social work as a profession in North America and elsewhere (Wieler 2014). However, their contribution to the translation of knowledge in social work, in general and especially between Germany and Israel, is still under-examined.

With regard to the development of social work in Palestine, the role played by American educator *Henrietta Szold* (1860-1945) is emphasised (Gerber 2016). *Szold* was engaged with the Hadassah women's organization and the Hebrew Women's Movement, which later became part of the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO), and jointly established the Department of Social Work in 1931 and founded the public social welfare services of the Yishuv.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the contributions of *Szold* and the women's organizations, the establishment of quasi-state social work programs depended upon social workers trained in German-speaking countries to run and work in training and administrative institutions and the different welfare services. Among them are pioneers such as *Siddy Wronsky*, *Helena Thon*, *Siegfried Lehmann* and *Giora Lotan*, whose professional experiences have been considered exceptionally valuable by some leading figures in Mandatory Palestine. The few studies available often describe their contributions, which were particularly important in the early phase of social work, as the "German influence" on Israeli social work (Deutsch 1970, Golan 2002, Rosenfeld 1995). However, the countless other social workers, who together form a very heterogeneous group, usually do not come into view in these studies. Additionally,

<sup>2</sup> Yishuv is the Hebrew term for the Jewish community and local leadership in Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel.

an analysis of the broad and diverse base of professional biographies of Jewish-German social workers reveals an ambiguous, multi-faceted bundle of influences and undermines the notion of a definite “German influence”. By approaching these biographies with a transnational biographical analysis, we can expose these heterogeneous influences on social work, such as those coming from transnational social, religious and political movements and networks, several academic disciplines and diverse professional schools. They also provide us with a basis for exploring how their assumptions and attitudes have changed through the mostly forced migration process and how they have adapted to or been broken by the new requirements in the new country.

**Building a digital map** | By focusing on the transnational history of social work found in (auto)-biographical documents of German-Jewish women social work pioneers in Mandatory Palestine/Israel, we present a range of biographies that represent typical variations of political-religious-professional experiences and motives as well as post-immigration processes. The diverse materials, such as autobiographies, professional writings, letters, testimonies and interviews, yield a suitable base to draw a highly differentiated and heterogeneous picture of transnational history.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first project which documents the transnational dissemination of social work along unknown migrant social workers’ biographies in a broad, systematic way. Our database, which is available online<sup>3</sup>, provides a useful tool for scholars to gather archival and biographical materials, and by this encourages and invites collaboration and further research in varied disciplines and to explore the rich and diverse history of social work as a transnational profession.

The purpose of the digital map is manifold. First, it should provide insight into the stages of the professional life of these social work pioneers, their education and study experiences, and their professional development prior and after their immigration. Second, it should map their different locations, and as such depict individual and collective movements

<sup>3</sup> www.jigsaw-navi.net. The database was developed in collaboration with *Julien Hofer*, University of Hildesheim. Him is to thank for the basic infrastructure of the digital knowledge maps on which the biographical database is based (*Hofer; Knackstedt 2020*).

in social work. Third, it should shed light on the initiatives, movements and institutions built and sustained by these individuals. Fourth, it aims to making visible their networks. And last but not least, it should also provide access to previously unpublished first hand material.

We started with a comprehensive archival research in various official and private archives in Germany and Israel.<sup>4</sup> We revealed around 250 German-Jewish social workers who immigrated to Mandatory Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s. Of these, 100 were found to be useful for our analysis thanks to comprehensive pertinent biographical information. In addition, we were able to build on various previous studies, which were conducted on diverse aspects of the history of German-Jewish welfare in the Weimar Republic.

**Drawing boundaries in history of social work** | Specifying inclusion and exclusion conditions for the sample is synonymous with the question of what social work is, which is even harder to answer for early social work as it is today. Social work emerged in Germany during the period of the German Empire and the Weimar Republic in a field of forces between the emerging welfare state, the churches, bourgeois and socialist as well as religious movements, and traditional poor relief (*Hering 2018, SachBe 1986*). Even the professional training was still in the making. First private schools of social work were founded in the early 20th century, while at the same time various academic degree programs emerged. However, the biographies examined here show that very diverse educational paths as well as private involvement could pave the way into social work.

In Mandatory Palestine, too, the emergence of social work is a heterogeneous process. There were philanthropic activities within the Jewish community by Western women within Zionist organizations such as WIZO and the Hadassah Women’s Zionist Organization of America (*Golan 2002, Deutsch 1970*). Under the leadership of *Henrietta Szold*, state centralization and professional training in social work were tackled at the beginning of the 1930s.

<sup>4</sup> Alice Salomon Archiv Berlin, Central Zionist Archives Jerusalem, Centrum Judaicum Berlin, Deutsches Zentralinstitut für soziale Fragen (DZI) Berlin, Landesarchiv (LAB) und Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten (LABO) Berlin, Jerusalem Municipality Archive, National Library Jerusalem, Tel Aviv Municipality Archive and others.

**Table 1: General Designations**

<b>Educational Activities</b>	<b>Professional Activities</b>	<b>Civic Engagement</b>	<b>Academic Activities</b>	<b>Other Activities</b>
Social worker (Germany)	Case work	Non-formal work/ volunteering in the field	lecturer in social work	School teacher
Social worker (Palestine/Israel)	Community work		researching social work	Nurse
Social worker (U.S.)	Kindergärtnerin (kindergarten teacher)	Board member of welfare/social institutions	authoring publications	Medicine
Social worker (other countries)	Hortnerin (day care provider)	Engagement in women's movements/organizations		Agricultural Work
Kindergärtnerin (kindergarten teacher)				Secretary
Hortnerin (day care provider)	Establishing welfare institutions	Engagement in Zionist movements /organizations		Artist
Degree from German Academy for social and pedagogical women's work	Heading welfare institutions	Engagement in other social movements		Private engagement in (own or other) family
Academic training and/or PhD in related fields (i.e. psychology, psychoanalysis, economy, law, pedagogy, philosophy, religion studies)	Administrative work in welfare/ social institutions	Member of political parties		
Non-formal education from working/volunteering in the field	Supervision of social workers in field work	Involvement in promoting legislation		
Guest student in a social work course	Involvement in politics and policy change			
School teacher	Internship as part of training for social work			
Heilpädagogin/Mental Hygiene (special educator)				
Nurse				
Medicine				

Facing this multifarious starting position, this study combines historical-archival research and meta-professional discourse (Shaw 2015), adding a micro-historical viewpoint that examines social workers and their professional identity. Focusing on subjective texts such as autobiographies enables tracing processes of professional self-construction under the unique conditions of flight and migration. The concept of "transnational biography" (Apitzsch; Siouti 2014) that has emerged in recent years seems particularly appropriate for this perspective as it deals critically with the problem of "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer; Glick-Schiller 2003 associated with biographical approaches in migration research.

The Jewish social workers had professional training or practical experience in the emerging fields of social work or social pedagogy in German-speaking countries. They immigrated to Palestine between 1910 and 1945 and were subsequently engaged in social work

practice, administration, education or academia. Their biographies document unique histories of Jewish social workers from German origin, both geographically and professionally, and provide a complex picture of women's history and Jewish social work in Germany and Mandatory Palestine.

**Translation of complex data into a database structure** | The biographies examined reflect a broad spectrum of disciplinary influences, practical activities, and political or civic engagement, which a categorial ordering can hardly do justice to. In order to approximate the complexity of experiences and achievements, we created a structure that collects the data at several levels. The first level is structured in roughly five categories: educational activities, professional activities, civic engagement, academic activities, and other. At an intermediate level is a series of general designations, which was worked out from all biographies (table 1).

**Table 2: Origins of the social workers included in this study in numbers** (Total: 100).

Germany (Berlin)	Eastern Europe	Neighbouring Countries	Unknown
65 (20)	20	5	10

**Table 3: Social work education in numbers** (Total: 100).

SW Schools in Germany (Berlin)	SW School in Jerusalem	SW Schools elsewhere	Other disciplines	Unknown
41 (30)	7	6	25	21

**Table 4: Social work fields in numbers** (Total: 100, several social work fields may apply per person).

Child Protection	Migration/settlement	Daycare	SW Education	Disabilities	Community work	Family work	War veterans
34	26	17	11	10	10	10	7

These general designations capture individual descriptions of the activities that are uniquely assigned to each person. Behind this structure is the goal of enabling comparative access without destroying the complexity of the influences, experiences, and accomplishments that shape early social work in transnational translation.

**Results of the biographical study** | As a first step, we describe the professional socialisation of these pioneers, focusing on their professional education, their experiences in the fields of practice, and ideological influences. Next, we highlight post-migration continuities and transformations and their influence on professional reconstruction. Our goal is to analyse social work at a crucial moment of transformation, when it was reshaping itself in a nascent, conflicted national society made up largely of immigrants and refugees. Therefore, the present study also touches upon issues relevant to contemporary reality: one where social work is still formulating its positioning within gender relations, national boundaries are being redrawn, and refugees and immigrants are significant service users as well as practitioners.

**Statistics** | While the majority of the social workers included in this study were born within the then Germany's borders, more than 20 came from Eastern European countries (Poland, Russia, Romania, and Lithuania) (table 2). This demonstrates the diversity in their background and leads us to wonder whether their origins shaped their professional

perspective: as we know, Eastern European Jews experienced negative stereotyping and were discriminated against by German Christians and Jews alike (Weiss 2000).

More than half of the social workers studied here were educated at one of the schools of social work founded shortly after the turn of the century in Germany (Reinicke 2012). At the same time, more than a quarter completed university studies and graduated with a doctoral degree – suggesting that social work was one of the rare fields that offered job opportunities to academically educated women. This also speaks to a pronounced interest in building scientific knowledge in social work. Others were active in the field without formal training, many volunteering in private initiatives and advocating a balance of public and private welfare (table 3).

Not surprisingly, one of the central endeavours of German-Jewish social workers in Palestine was to establish and expand welfare institutions and specific fields of social work, an endeavour in which they had already gained experience in Germany, and which they now had to translate into this new nation-building context. Residential care for children or child protection were particularly concrete examples: some German-Jewish children's homes were transferred directly to Palestine, such as the Berlin-based Ahawah (Scheer 1992) and Siegfried Lehmann's youth village Ben Shemen, while others were founded in Palestine, such as Neve Hanna or Maya Rosenberg's children's home (table 4).

In addition to the social workers' migration stories and contributions to different fields of practice, we want to highlight their involvement in social or religious movements and membership in specific networks. For some, the Berlin-based Jewish Volkshaus founded by *Siegfried Lehmann* in 1916 was an important hub, as it was for intellectuals such as *Martin Buber* and *Gustav Landauer*. *Lehmann* founded this Zionist settlement house in 1916 in order to work with East-European Jews to preserve their Jewish culture and to promote the establishment of a Jewish state through educational measures (*Haustein; Waller* 2009).

In general, the Jews who immigrated to Palestine were secular, middle class, and educated, but the variety of political movements and religious tendencies of Jewish immigrants to Palestine enabled a wide range of ideological affiliations (*Herzog* 2002). Some were affiliated with the religious-national Mizrahi movement, whereas others, mostly Jews from Eastern Europe, identified with the Zionist Labour movement. A few were affiliated with the marginal Brit Shalom, a dovish left movement of intellectuals that declared its support for Jewish-Arab co-existence. Finally, as noted, WIZO strongly supported the establishment of social welfare institutions in Mandatory Palestine.

These different networks and movements provided normative orientations for their own professional work and suggested specific interpretations and strategies in order to solve social problems. For example, social work acted to integrate members of the Yishuv and encourage them to cooperate in building the state. At the same time, borderlines were drawn, for example, between "productive" members of society with "progressive" Western values and "non-productive" members of society, such as so-called "Oriental" Jews, who diverged from these values. This idea led to the categorisation of "Oriental" Jews as a target group of social work, one of the aims of which is building an integrated society (*Schmitz et al.* 2019).

### Reconstructing the Professional Self in

**Light of Immigration to Palestine** | Our protagonists' personal identity as European Jews, as Jewish women in Germany, and as pioneering social workers shaped their "professional selves" deeply. These were influenced by their education and training, engagement or disengagement in Judaism, affiliation with

various social movements and experiences such as anti-Semitism and gender discrimination, which were often intertwined and played a crucial role in their life stories and their retrospective interpretations of their careers. Since we are interested in the transition of social work from Germany to Palestine, we sought contradictions and tensions in the self-interpretation of our protagonists' professional selves. Firstly, we can reconstruct how personal identities were modified. If in Germany they were distinguished by their Jewishness, within the Jewish community in Palestine they were distinguished by their Germanness and mocked for the stereotypical punctiliousness and strictness so out of keeping with the lax and informal attitudes of the Yishuv (*Siegemund* 2016).

Still, many managed to reach leading positions within the Zionist establishment and to found new institutions. But others, who formed a more "local" identity as kibbutz members working in agriculture, or who were unable to integrate into the German social workers' clique, chose to leave social work. In Palestine (and later Israel) new challenges emerged, which forced a change of professional perceptions. One challenge was the encounter with new cultures, unfamiliar in Europe, such as Mizrahi Jews from Muslim countries who, as we noted above, were perceived as inferior, and the need to socialize them into the new melting pot of the Jewish state in the making. Another challenge, as noted, was the gender paradox of the Zionist movement, which declared that women were men's equals, but in fact discriminated against women and bound them to maternal and domestic roles (*Kaplan* 1994). In the following section, we illustrate these themes through specific figures, some of the most prominent social workers in the database, whose life stories demonstrate how the transformation process expressed itself. These specific figures were chosen due to their central role in the provision of social services and because they depict a range of migration patterns and different ways of reshaping social work, such as reinforcement or opposition to traditional welfare.

*Siddy Wronsky* (1883-1947) was one of the leading figures in social work, both in Germany and Palestine. She administered the German Central Welfare Archive, was a member of the Welfare Board for German Jews and was the chief editor of the leading welfare journal "Deutsche Zeitschrift für Wohlfahrtspflege".<sup>5</sup> *Wronsky*

Siddy Wronsky  
(Courtesy of Central  
Zionist Archives,  
Jerusalem)



was a central figure in *Salomon's* school for social work, chaired the WIZO branch in Germany and was active on behalf of Eastern-European Jewish refugees (*Heitz-Rami* 1998). When the Nazis took power in 1933, *Wronsky* was dismissed from her positions and immigrated to Palestine. In Jerusalem, she founded the first local social work school and chaired the Social Work Department of the Jewish National Council (*Konrad* 1993). She was also active in literature and wrote a trilingual novel "Sand and Stars", which is about the emigration of young Zionists to Palestine.<sup>6</sup>

*Wronsky's* dual identity is a leitmotif in her life story. Prior to emigration, *Wronsky* identified as a German and contributed greatly to the German state, but in response to anti-Semitism in Germany, also became an enthusiastic Zionist. In Palestine, however, her German identity was dominant, and she was considered a German foreigner among the Jewish community in Palestine. *Wronsky* was dismissed due to her Jewishness in Germany, but later, in 1946 Palestine, was perceived by the Zionist administrators, mostly men, as an irrelevant representative of an "old-fashioned" German heritage of social work outpaced by new American methods. In the meantime, she transformed her professional view: from co-writing "Social Therapy" (1932), which avoided national affi-

<sup>5</sup> The "Deutsche Zeitschrift für Wohlfahrtspflege" is available as open access at <https://www.dzi.de/soziale-literatur/soziale-arbeit/open-access/>.

<sup>6</sup> The novel has not been published to date. The manuscript, which is available in German, English, and Hebrew, is located in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. Finally, it is being digitised and published as part of a project by the Deutsches Zentralinstitut für soziale Fragen (DZI) (8/2022-12/2023). The project contributes to the research on exiled social workers in Palestine and their historical significance for the development of social work in Israel today. More information at <https://www.dzi.de/ueber-uns/geschichte/digitalisierungsprojekt-sand-und-sterne/>.

nity (*Rosenfeld* 1995), to declaring in 1936 that "social work must be evaluated as part of the work for the revival of the Jewish nation" (*Wronsky* 1936).

*Zessi Rosenblüth* (1889-1991) immigrated to Palestine in 1923. An active Zionist, she worked in the social work office in Jerusalem, helping Jewish refugees left homeless during the severe conflicts between Jews and Arabs in 1936 to 39. After statehood in 1948, *Rosenblüth* was elected to represent Israel in the social work training program of the United Nations. During the 1960s, she established the first rehabilitation and social work centres in the kibbutzim.



Zessi Rosenblüth  
(Courtesy of Gabi and  
Rina Rosenblüth)

*Rosenblüth* chose her own professional path. She affiliated herself neither with the German social workers she perceived as too strict and patronizing, nor with the Zionist leadership in Palestine which she criticized for its Eurocentric attitudes. In fact, she perceived social criticism as the core of the social work profession: "The European Jews smiled and wrinkled their noses, for in their eyes the Kurdish Jew was stupid, but my wise friend was not stupid at all. I learned to appreciate my clients, I learned more from them than I could at the university, and I got more from them than I could give them back" (*Rosenblüth* 1977, p. 52). Unsurprisingly, she was a member of the leftist Brit Shalom movement, which opposed a separate Jewish state in Palestine. In the 1950s she led the first social work course for Palestinian citizens of Israel. In addition, in contrast to society's norms and the ideal of a woman who must devote herself either to social work or to family life, *Rosenblüth* struggled to combine the two. While in *Wronsky's* story we see sharp turns affected by historical events, *Rosenblüth's* life was characterized by continuity. She was always a Zionist, not simply a refugee from National Socialism. Similarly, the events of 1948 did not change her longtime commitment to peace.

Thea Nathan  
(Courtesy of  
Noa Barhaim)



Thea Nathan (1908-1988) was highly regarded by her colleagues in her short stint as a student of social work and a social worker in Germany, due both to her progressive feminist and socialist positions and her professional work. As a youngster, Nathan joined the German-Jewish youth movement "Kameraden", which oscillated between assimilated bourgeois Judaism, liberalism on religious matters, socialism and anti-authoritarianism (Hetkamp 1994). There, she was attracted to socialist and feminist thinking (Schüler-Springorum 2005). After completing her social work studies, she worked with women sex workers and German-Jewish refugees (Ellger-Rüttgardt 1996). Soon after her immigration in 1935, Nathan continued to work with Jewish immigrants to Palestine from Islamic countries, and later, pioneered the fields of gerontology and work with people with disabilities. She was also instrumental in formulating the Welfare Law of the State of Israel.

Equality is a central motif in Nathan's professional biography. For her, this necessitated changing societal attitudes towards discrimination: not the people but the measures must be adapted. Indeed, certain key values acquired during her time with the youth movement, such as self-determination, equal rights, and anti-authoritarian attitudes, while they mixed with bourgeois values, remained influential throughout her work. Finally, her personal experiences with anti-Semitism, flight and expulsion made her recognize discrimination as a result of social constructions and highlight the integrative function of social work.

**7** The Hebrew term *aliyah* means "rise" and refers to the immigration of Jews to the holy land of Israel. The Children's and Youth Aliyah was an organisation founded by *Eva Michaelis-Stern* together with *Recha Freier* on the occasion of the National Socialist seizure of power and organised the emigration of children from Nazi Germany.

*Eva Michaelis-Stern* (1904-1992) was initially trained as a gymnastics teacher but became a leading figure in building Jewish social work in both Germany and Palestine. *Michaelis-Stern* was closely involved in Zionist circles in Germany. She was a member of the Zionist youth movement "Jung-Jüdischer Wanderbund" and was active in the Jewish Volksheim in Hamburg-Altona, closely related to the Berlin Volksheim. From 1933 to 1938, she established and headed the Berlin-based working group "Children and Youth Aliyah"<sup>7</sup>, and organised the exodus of Jewish children and adolescents from Nazi Germany to Mandatory Palestine. In 1938, after an interrogation by *Adolf Eichmann*, she emigrated to Palestine herself. There she continued her youth immigration work, became active with the mentally disabled, and established community work projects, especially for Jews from Islamic countries (*Michaelis-Stern* 1985).

A distinct motif in *Michaelis-Stern's* social work was organising self-help in the face of anti-Semitism and as a remedy for the absence of Jewish life and culture in Weimar Germany. Her activities were manifold: while mainly engaged in saving Jewish children, and subsequently in promoting the assimilation of Jews from Islamic countries in Israel and rehabilitating mentally disabled clients, her work can be understood in the broader framework of Zionism: she was working on building a new nation for the Jewish people.

Jenny Aloni  
(Courtesy of  
Universitätsarchiv  
Paderborn)



*Jenny Aloni* (1917-1993) dedicated most of her spare time to social work throughout her life as a famous author. At the same time, she represents a decidedly critical attitude towards the newly emerging social work rooted in the German tradition in Palestine. Aloni turned to Zionism as a consequence of a growing number of anti-Semitic incidents and made her way to Palestine with a youth Aliyah group

(Pazi 2001, Steinecke 2017). In Jerusalem, she studied literature at the Hebrew University and volunteered in social work with neglected children and adolescents. Following that, she studied in *Wronsky's* School of Social Work in Jerusalem, but was critical of its approach. To her, the principles conveyed in social work training did not meet the "true" needs of clients in Mandatory Palestine/Israel. Consequently, *Aloni* did not complete her studies, but continued her voluntary work (*Aloni* 2006). *Aloni* represents those social workers who did not become leaders, instead distancing themselves from social work discourses and practices as part of a socialist critique. Reflecting in 1946 on theoretical and practical social work training in Jerusalem, *Aloni* lamented the lack of "non-bourgeois" educational approaches

**Similar paths, Different Trajectories** | Above all, these selected biographies show how the social workers handled their forced displacement into the new context differently. Some were successful in creating a multifaceted identity, some failed, and others were marginalised or chose to inhabit the margins. The bourgeois conceptions of social work in Germany prompted opposition no less than the various ideologies of emancipation, which were closely connected with engagement in religious and social movements. These professional reconstructions show very clearly how this can lead to contradictory tendencies in social work "on the move."

There is one major commonality across the different biographies: the influence of diverse social movements, Jewish youth movements and women's movements – both deeply rooted in Zionism – in particular. Secondly, while training in social work already formed an independent branch of the vocational training landscape in Germany, the group examined here was exposed to diverse forms of training. These women were highly educated, and this was a central part of their emancipation process as women and as Jews. They easily crossed disciplinary boundaries and drew upon insights from psychology, pedagogy, sociology, social welfare, and national economics. Additionally, this study traces how they reshaped their professional selves in light both of changes in their careers and lives, and their involvement in the social and religious movements that provided different frameworks for the interpretation of social work tasks and approaches. What were the frictions or continuities in their multi-

disciplinary knowledge and in their ideologies? And what new professional insights emerged during their personal and national journeys?

**Conclusion** | Immigrating to Palestine prompted an active translation of ideas and approaches. Not all immigrant social workers could identify with the bourgeois approach of social work that was transferred from Germany to Mandatory Palestine. Many committed to, or became more committed to, a socialist point of view and criticised what they saw as paternalistic attitudes that were inconsistent with their ideal of an egalitarian community. Some were engaged in developing alternative approaches that could match the specific challenges of the new country. Others broke with the field altogether and opted for life on the kibbutz or in other professions.

Importantly, their own experience with cultural differences and migration prompted them to work with Jews from Islamic countries, whose mass immigration – mainly after 1948 – created a very heterogeneous and conflictual set of challenges, which social workers had to face and craft appropriate strategies to deal with. The archival materials indicate that these social workers' encounter with non-European clients aroused their empathy in sharing their own Jewishness and migration experience. At the same time, as social workers they embodied the Zionist attitude of a new and robust national identity in the *Western* tradition.

While *Wronsky* reshaped her professional knowledge and methods into a Jewish national approach in Palestine that aimed to forge cultural unity out of the different ethnic groups, *Rosenblüth* and *Aloni* objected to packaging nationality and Zionism together with social work and called for cultural sensitivity and diversity. Their specific ideologies and attitudes notwithstanding, debate over the goals of social work was very much alive: most social workers questioned the profession's close relations with the state and discussed the problem in their writings. This relates to the dynamic between criticising the establishment and identifying with it – a dynamic that characterises many of our figures. These women, who took part in the Zionist project of creating a national home for Jews, also acted as a vehicle for social work's transnational influence, which offered a broad environmental and social perspective, and more particularly

promoted the principles of the collective good and community preservation (Rosenfeld 1995). To this, we may add Alice Salomon's heritage and her positioning of women as social change agents through the provision of psychosocial individual care (Hong 1998).

Nevertheless, while some believed in the superiority of their moral beliefs and did not hesitate to force them on their clients (Doron 2004), others were professionally and normatively ambivalent when it came to using power, clinging to the core professional principle of intervening in the interrelations between individuals and the state rather than necessarily adjusting the former to the latter. Some also challenged the prevailing narrative by showing true empathy for the difficulties of migration. Seeing new Jewish migrants forced to forsake their diasporic identity, with apparent resonance to the social workers' own traumatic experiences and migration, seems to have encouraged their engagement with this group.

Additionally, many if not all these women were involved in Jewish or Zionist emancipation movements, which can be understood in the context of anti-Semitism and increasing persecution of Jews in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. The Jewish movements varied between emphasis on religious Judaism and traditional Jewish welfare; more culturally oriented, "post-assimilatory" Zionism that aimed at the revival of Jewish traditions and values; and political-nationalist Zionism, which sought the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. These movements were deeply intertwined with the Jewish feminist movements in Germany and Palestine that also appeared in these variations, such as the Jewish Women's Union (Jüdischer Frauenbund) or the religious Mizrahi movement, which linked their stated objectives with feminist concerns. Together, they formed a complex ideological framework that influenced the professional reconstruction of social work in Mandatory Palestine/Israel, based on religious or nationalist Zionist motives and concepts of women's emancipation.

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