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Jewish Social Work between Germany and Mandatory Palestine: The Story of Dr Mirjam Hoffert

This paper analyses the socio-historical context of a transnational dialogue on social work between Germany and Mandatory Palestine during the first half of the 20th century. Against the backdrop of the story of Dr Mirjam Hoffert, the article reveals the unique, complex, and contradictory translation of the Jewish-German approach toward work into the social context of Mandatory Palestine. Although Hoffert and other protagonists faced many challenges in Germany, the complex mission of establishing a new (female) profession in the Yishuv confronted them with new and different conflicts and struggles that they ultimately resolved.

In diesem Aufsatz wird der sozialhistorische Kontext des transnationalen Dialogs über Soziale Arbeit zwischen Deutschland und Palästina unter britischem Mandat in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts untersucht. Vor dem Hintergrund der Biographie von Dr. Mirjam Hoffert präsentiert dieser Beitrag die einzigartige, komplexe und auch widersprüchliche Übersetzung des deutsch-jüdischen Zugangs zu Sozialer Arbeit in Mandatspalästina. Für Hoffert und andere Protagonistinnen stellte die komplexe Mission der Etablierung einer neuen (weiblichen) Profession im Jishuv mit ihren verschiedenen Konflikten und Auseinandersetzungen eine neue Herausforderung dar, die sie letztendlich erfolgreich bewältigt haben.

Introduction

Social work is often described as a profession that is devoted to helping the most vulnerable and needy population, whose vulnerability is viewed as a consequence of social exclusion and oppression, and to promoting social justice in society. A critical historiography of social work analyses both its success and its failures in fulfilling such a mission and scrutinizes the socio-historical context of these terms, of the actors who used these terms and of those who write this history: Who is considered to be needy and vulnerable? What does social justice actually mean? Who is considered to be part of society? What kind of social ideas are related to the imagined society? Who makes these claims in the name of social work as a profession? These questions come up when we engage in a transnational dialogue on the history of social work and, in particular, when we seek to unveil forgotten histories of early social work protagonists, such as Dr. Mirjam Hoffert.

Social work in Germany was established as a distinct profession mainly by women, as a result of their emerging emancipation and the rise of the first women's movements.¹ Being a social worker enabled women to act in the public and political spheres. This agency, however, was often restricted by a bureaucracy which was mostly controlled by men. The prevailing argument that women had a supposedly natural maternal ability to care for families and children was an ambivalent vehicle intended to overcome the asymmetrical gender relations.² However, as a matter of fact, women were still seen as unable to make reasoned decisions on a policy level³, and thus as still inferior to men. This ambivalence pervades not only the history of women in social work, but also, particularly, the history of German-Jewish women, whose significant contribution to the development of social work in Weimar Germany was threatened by ongoing undercurrents of marginalization that ultimately became overwhelming.

An examination through a critical feminist prism reveals that, for a long time, the historiography on social work tended to ignore significant women in general⁴, and social workers in particular.⁵ This is particularly true for Jewish women in Germany, who were marginalized in their social position back then on two accounts – as women and as Jews.⁶ It is therefore interesting to better understand the social work and social welfare theories and concepts of those Jewish women who helped to create social work as a profession in Germany and later migrated to the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine. Although we know about some of these women, such as Siddy Wronsky⁷, with her contribution to the development of social work in Palestine at the time, we still lack historical research with an explicitly transnational lens.

One prominent actor who helped develop social work in Germany and in Palestine (later: Israel) is Dr Mirjam Hoffert, who was a central figure in the social welfare system in Israel. Mirjam Hoffert's biography demonstrates how Jewish social welfare was developed by taking up heterogeneous, sometimes contradicting theories and concepts that were available at the time. In her professional training, we can identify influences from Polish educationalists, such as J. Korczak, Austrian psychoanalysts, such as A. Freud and S. Bernfeld, and German social workers, such as A. Salomon. Her transnational biography, however, is neither recognized in Israel nor in Germany, though it offers important insights into the theoretical education of German Jews and their engagement for social work as a modern profession in pre-state Israel.

Jewish social work in Weimar Germany was highly developed, providing distinctive services for Jews (such as the *Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland*), and was also integrated into the general welfare system. Although our knowledge of Jewish welfare in Weimar Germany has expanded during the last three decades, the interpretation of

¹ Allen, Ann Taylor: *Feminism and Motherhood in Germany, 1800–1914*. New Brunswick, N.J. 1991.

² Maurer, Susanne: *Soziale Arbeit als Frauenberuf*, in: Otto, Hans-Uwe & Thiersch, Hans (eds.) *Handbuch Sozialarbeit/Sozialpädagogik*, Neuwied 2001.

³ Satka, Mirja & Johanna Moilanen: *The Roots of the Social Work Profession as a Resource in the Dialogical Teaching of Gender*, In: Leskošek, Vesna (Ed.): *Teaching Gender in Social Work*. Utrecht and Stockholm 2009, pp.35–51.

⁴ Rowbotham, Sheila: *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against it*. London 1977; Wallach Scott, Juan: *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York 1988.

⁵ Leskošek, Vesna: *Teaching Gender in Social Work*. Utrecht and Stockholm 2009.

⁶ This marginalization continued in historical accounts after World War II, and was only overcome later in the 1980s, see below.

⁷ Konrad, Franz-Michael: *Als Pionierin von Berlin nach Jerusalem – Siddy Wronsky (1883–1947)*, in: Hering, Sabine (ed.) *Jüdische Wohlfahrt im Spiegel von Biographien*, Frankfurt am Main 2007.

German Jewish social work is quite diverse and contradictory, and lacks transnational reflexivity. With this paper, we wish to contribute to a transnational dialogue on historical research on this social work tradition and raise awareness of this important period in the history of social work. The important, yet neglected, biography of Mirjam Hoffert can help us to understand the contradictions and conflicts in which social work was involved as an emerging profession and to see how German-Jewish social workers sought to overcome those tensions. The paper thus wishes to contribute to a better understanding of the German-Jewish notion of social work developed in the Weimar Republic and how female pioneers translated and applied this concept in the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine, which was influenced by large-scale immigration, cultural tension, colonialist aspects and the ideological national mission of Zionism.

Methodological reflections of historical research on Jewish social work – a plea for transnational reflexivity

It is only since the beginning of the 1980s that social work and social pedagogy in Germany have recognized the role of Jewish social work and (female) social worker as an important part in the establishment of social work both as an emerging profession at the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century and as a discipline in the Weimar Republic. Two major publications heralded the start of new involvement in historical research on Jewish social work. The first, in 1991, was Rolf Landwehr's call to recognize Alice Salomon's seminal influence upon the rapid development of social work in Germany.⁸ The second, in 1993, was Franz-Michael Konrad's findings on the interconnections of social work between Germany and Palestine, giving prominence to Siddy Wronsky's founding role in this transfer.⁹

Since then the picture has changed significantly. We can find important publications on the Jewish history of social work, e.g. on Jewish ethics and its meaning for modern social work¹⁰, on transfers of education theories from Germany into Palestine and Israel¹¹, on biographies of pioneers in Jewish social work¹², on Jewish organizations, clubs and welfare¹³, on the Central Welfare Board of German Jews¹⁴ etc. The recognition of Jewish traditions in social welfare in Germany was accompanied by a rising awareness of the role played by women and women's movements for social work as a female profession.¹⁵

This also explains the rising interest in Jewish women establishing social work at the end of the 19th century, such as Jeanette Schwerin and Lina Morgenstern, in addition to Alice Salomon, Bertha Pappenheim and Siddy Wronsky.

⁸ Landwehr, Rolf: Alice Salomon und ihre Bedeutung für die soziale Arbeit. Ein Beitrag zur Entwicklung der sozialen Berufsarbeit und Ausbildung anlässlich des 10-jährigen Bestehens der FHSS Berlin. Berlin 1981.

⁹ Konrad, Franz-Michael: Wurzeln jüdischer Sozialarbeit in Palästina: Einflüsse der Sozialarbeit in Deutschland auf die Entstehung moderner Hilfesysteme in Palästina 1890–1948. Weinheim 1993.

¹⁰ Lavaud, Simona: Gleichberechtigung und Gleichwertigkeit? jüdische Wohlfahrt in der Weimarer Republik zwischen privaten Initiativen und öffentlichem Engagement am Beispiel der Berliner Gemeinde. Frankfurt, Main 2015.

¹¹ Liegle, Ludwig & Konrad, Franz-Michael (eds.): Reformpädagogik in Palästina: Dokumente und Deutungen zu den Versuchen einer "neuen" Erziehung im jüdischen Gemeinwesen Palästinas (1918–1948). Frankfurt a.M. 1989.

¹² Lavaud, Gleichberechtigung, 2015.

¹³ Lavaud, Gleichberechtigung, 2015.

¹⁴ Heuberg, Georg (ed.): Zedaka jüdische Sozialarbeit im Wandel der Zeit. 75 Jahre Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland 1917–1992. Frankfurt am Main 1992.

¹⁵ Lavaud, Gleichberechtigung, 2015.

This rising awareness of Jewish traditions in German social work contrasts with a neglect of the impact which German traditions had on the development of social work in Israel.¹⁶ Thus, the existing literature emphasizes the role played by Henrietta Szold, an American educator, described as “the mother” of the profession in Israel. Szold established the Department of Social Work within the Jewish National Council and founded the public social welfare services of the pre-statehood Jewish community (Yishuv).¹⁷ Yet despite their significant role and contribution to the establishment of social work and social services in Palestine (and later in Israel), little scholarly attention has been devoted to the role of German social workers in the profession's history. Yoav Gelber and Tova Golan¹⁸ underscore the dominance of the German social work tradition over the American tradition at the time, and the influence of socialist attitudes from Eastern Europe on the social policy of the New Yishuv.¹⁹ While some studies have been published on social welfare organizations and policy in Mandatory Palestine²⁰, very few²¹ have critically examined the German and Zionist influences on local practices, let alone the cultural, ethnic, and gender tensions involved. Those that have argue that German-trained social workers in Palestine had more of a pedagogical, paternalistic approach and less of a social, universal one.²² Therefore, the social work profession and academia in Israel emphasized the influence of the Zionist, secular, modern Western world whereas the religious charity principles of the Old Yishuv were disregarded.²³

These contradictory developments in historical research and the scant attention paid to research findings indicate that there has been little academic dialogue on the history of social work in Germany and Israel. The obviously asynchronous development of historical research on the interconnections of German and Israel traditions in social work is a manifestation of the fact that historical research is embedded in specific social and historical contexts that direct academics' curiosity and interests. Transnationally reflexive historical research helps to overcome such blind spots. It calls not only for an awareness of the entanglements and interconnections of historical developments, but also for reflexivity among the researchers themselves. Taking up the ideas and methodological reflections of an *histoire croisée*²⁴, this article endeavours to contribute to a better understanding of the transnational history of social work between Germany and Palestine (Israel). We posit that the history of social work in particular lies at the

¹⁶ Lavaud, Gleichberechtigung, 2015.

¹⁷ Gerber, Vardit: An American in Palestine: Henrietta Szold and the establishment of the social services during the British mandate period, 1920–1945. PhD thesis, Haifa University 2016 (Hebrew).

¹⁸ Gelber, Yoav: A new homeland: The immigration from central Europe and its absorption in Eretz Israel 1931–1948. Jerusalem 1990 (Hebrew); Golan, Tova: Social work in the Yishuv (1931–1936): From voluntarism to professionalism and from support system to ‘nation building’. MA Thesis, Bar Ilan University 2002 (Hebrew).

¹⁹ Rosenfeld, Jonah: Sixty years of social work in Israel. Lecture given in the 14th conference of Israel Social Work Union. Jerusalem 1995 (Hebrew).

²⁰ Deutsch, Akiva: The Development of social work as a profession in the Jewish community in Israel. PhD thesis, Hebrew University Jerusalem 1970 (Hebrew); Greenberg, Ofra & Herzog, Hannah: A voluntary women's organization in a society in the making: WIZO's contribution to Israeli society. Tel-Aviv 1978 (Hebrew); Zmora, Esther: Zionist Hebrew women: The story of Histadrut Nashim Ivriyot. Tel-Aviv 2002 (Hebrew).

²¹ Gal, John & Ajzenstadt, Mimi: Social work and the construction of poverty in Palestine in the 1930s, in: *Qualitative Social Work*, 14 (2) (2015), p. 154–169. □

²² Doron, Avraham: The system of personal social services in Israel: changes in leadership, in: *Social Security* 65 (2004), p. 11–32 (Hebrew).

²³ Gal, John & Ajzenstadt, Mimi: The long path from a soup kitchen to a welfare state in Israel, in: *Journal of Policy History*, 25 (2) (2013), p. 240–263. □

²⁴ Werner, Michael & Zimmermann, Bénédicte: Beyond Comparison: *Histoire croisée* and the challenge of Reflexivity, in: *History and Theory* 45 (2006), pp. 30–50.

intersection of social, cultural, and political conflicts, urging us to become reflexive about the discourses in which we are ourselves involved.²⁵ We are following this idea of reflexivity by starting a transnational dialogue on historical research and historical sources. Whereas the following part is based on the productive German discourse on Jewish welfare in Germany, the part on the biography of Mirjam Hoffert is grounded in previously unpublished archival sources in Israel.

Zedakah in Germany – contradictory histories

Jewish traditions in social work in Germany were neglected for a long time. Although the Christian roots of social work as a modern profession were always apparent, the impact of Jewish ethics only became recognized in the late 1990s. In her well-known paper on Jewish ethics, Suzanne Zeller shows that Juan Luis Vives, Lina Morgenstern, Emil Münsterberg, Albert Levy, Siddy Wronsky, Alice Salomon and others were seminal figures in the establishment of social work and social welfare and that the ethical principle of Zedakah was constitutive for a modern understanding of social welfare.²⁶ Leo Baeck, a liberal rabbi in Berlin and chairman of the Central Welfare Board of German Jews, particularly promoted the principle of Zedakah, which was also a statement against the interpretation of Jewry by the protestant theologian Adolf von Harnack.²⁷ Baeck thus connected the old welfare traditions of Jewish communities with modern principles of social work and contributed to the emancipation of Jewish welfare in the Weimar Republic. Zeller argues that the principle of Zedakah, with its emphasis on justice, contrasts with the Christian tradition of charity, which continues the asymmetrical relationship of the helpers and the helped. Therefore, social work as a modern profession inherits not so much the Christian principle of charity as the Jewish principle of Zedakah, which proposes the transformation of society. Zeller concludes that the Jewish ethic promotes principles which we also find in the statement of ethical principles of IFSW, prioritizing social change and social justice as well as human dignity and human rights.²⁸

The emphasis on Jewish ethics, however, conceals the conflicting developments of Jewish social work in the 1910s and 1920s. Konrad employs the example of Bertha Pappenheim, leader of the influential Jewish Women's Association (Jüdischer Frauenbund, JFB), to show the tensions within the Jewish communities with respect to the rampant professionalization of social work. The Jewish women's association was not a strong promoter of professionalization, but accepted this development, which was dominant in the Weimar Republic. As an important counterweight to bureaucratic social work, the JFB emphasized the importance of Jewish communities, of passion, of common sense, and of practical experience.²⁹ This emphasis puts the JFB closer to Leo Baeck's

²⁵ Maurer, Susanne: Soziale Arbeit als „offenes Archiv“ gesellschaftlicher Konflikte in: Mührel, Eric & Birgmeier, Bernd (eds.) Theoriebildung in der Sozialen Arbeit. Entwicklungen in der Sozialpädagogik und der Sozialarbeitswissenschaft, Wiesbaden 2011.

²⁶ Lavaud, Gleichberechtigung, 2015.

²⁷ Konrad, Wurzeln, 1993.

²⁸ Zeller, Susanne: Jüdische Ethik und ihr (unbeachteter) Zusammenhang mit dem Prozess der Professionalisierung der Sozialen Arbeit in Deutschland, in: Feustel, Adriane, Hansen-Schaberg, Inge & Knapp, Gabriele (eds.) Die Vertreibung des Sozialen, Munich 2009. This interpretation of Zedakah is dominant in Germany and obviously rooted in the interpretation of Zedakah by Leo Baeck.

²⁹ Weissberg, Yvonne: Ein ethnisches Netzwerk. Der Jüdische Frauenbund in Köln 1933–1939, in: Ariadne 61 (2012), pp. 40–47.

interpretation of Zedakah, emphasizing the communities' responsibility to do social justice.

Jewish social work in Germany is closely interconnected with the women's movements at the time. The life of Bertha Pappenheim epitomizes the contradictions of women's emancipation and religious traditions, of modern welfare and Jewish community work.³⁰ Her publications show that she promoted the establishment of Jewish welfare in a modern sense, but at the same time opposing professional developments in the 1920s whereby more and more women embraced the opportunity to become social workers – not only because they felt the call, but also because they were looking for a job.³¹ It is important to note that these tensions are common not only in biographies of Jewish women, but in those of many women at the time. Social welfare was a vehicle for women to enter the realm of the professions and academia. The claim that social work was female profession (“Geistige Mütterlichkeit”), however, turned out also to be a trap.³² Women were defined by their role as passionate human beings and, therefore, excluded from other professions and from playing a decisive role as leaders in the emerging welfare state.³³ Despite a tremendous change in gender relations, the ongoing male hegemony led Alice Salomon to establish the German Academy for Social and Pedagogical Women's Work, aimed at offering an educational pathway for experienced women to enter leading positions in the welfare system.³⁴

Jewish welfare in the Weimar Republic developed both collaboratively and in tension with the establishment of public welfare services and denominational social services during the first decades of the 20th century. The establishment of the Central Welfare Board of German Jews (ZWST) in 1917, initiated by Bertha Pappenheim, was one of the major achievements at the time: it became a recognized and autonomous Jewish pillar of the Weimar welfare system. This Jewish organization was on an equal footing with the Christian and Socialist welfare associations. Since the Weimar welfare system was based on the principle of subsidiarity, the five large welfare organizations (“Caritas”, “Diakonie”, German Red Cross, Worker's Welfare Association (“Arbeiterwohlfahrt”), “Der Paritätische”, and ZWST) were pivotal in the provision of social services, particularly for services to children, youth and families. The full legal emancipation of Jews in Weimar Germany was therefore mirrored in the recognition of Jewish welfare.

Although Jewish social workers played a role in the public German welfare system, they also sought to promote Jewish autonomy against the rise of intermarriage and the assimilation of Jews.³⁵ The Zionist movement emerged as an important force calling for national revival on a secular basis, and social work partly adopted the new “type” of Jews, who took greater responsibility for their own fate: “It was this concept of combining nationalist and social elements in their approach to Jewish affairs, which induced a number of young Zionists to make social work within the Jewish community their life's

³⁰ Konz, Pappenheim, 2005.

³¹ Konrad, Wurzeln, 1993.

³² Maurer, Zum Verhältnis..., 2004.

³³ Hansen-Schaberg, Inge: Die Vertreibung des Sozialen und der emanzipatorischen Ansätze in der Pädagogik, in: Feustel, Adriane, Hansen-Schaberg, Inge & Knapp, Gabriele (eds.) Die Vertreibung des Sozialen. München 2009.

³⁴ Hansen-Schaberg, Die Vertreibung..., 2009.

³⁵ Gillerman, Sharon: Germans into Jews. Redwood 2009.

vocation”.³⁶ This type of Zionist welfare aimed at increasing a national pathos among Jews, and in some cases to encourage immigration to Palestine.

This shows that the emancipation process was contradictory in several ways and came with setbacks, as can be seen in the ongoing discrimination and exclusion in the everyday life of Jews in Germany in the 1920s. As shown by Simona Lavaud³⁷, Jewish welfare in Germany has to be seen against the background of the tense situation Jews were facing. The part played by Jews in both public welfare organizations and in Jewish organizations, such as Siddy Wronsky and Friedrich Ollendorf³⁸, shows that Jewish and public welfare were closely interwoven. These contributions in the profession and academia of social work were instrumental in promoting the emancipation and recognition of the Jews and their role in the modernization of German society. The establishment of modern welfare in Weimar Germany was therefore another example of the rising involvement of German Jews in academia, the arts and literature.³⁹ Although important figures such as Leo Baeck and Herman Cohen managed to connect Jewish philosophy and religion with modern principles of welfare and were supported by leading social workers such as Siddy Wronsky, the focus of leading Jewish academics was on the general professionalization and academization of social work and social welfare.

The tension between emancipation and antisemitism in Weimar Germany, however, led Jewish communities to become heavily engaged in helping forcibly migrated Jews from Eastern parts of Europe, so-called “Ostjuden” (Eastern Jews). The situation of Eastern European Jews was precarious for Jewry in Germany in several ways. As these migrants were foreigners and, therefore, excluded from public welfare benefits, German Jews' engagement in helping them was motivated both by ethical considerations and by a strategy of avoiding further anti-Semitic resentment among the non-Jewish population.⁴⁰ Therefore, the active involvement of Jewish communities and clubs should not be considered an outcome of a pre-established Jewish identity, but more as a desire to become a recognized and productive part of Weimar Germany. This tense situation was also exacerbated by cultural differences between the migrating Jews from Eastern Europe and the dismissive attitude of German Jewry towards this group. Jews from Eastern Europe were considered to be outsiders, less civilized and, with their often socialist and Zionist mindset, a threat to the strategy of assimilation pursued by many Jews in Germany.⁴¹

This cursory overview of historical research shows the contradictions and tensions of “Jewish” social work and social welfare during the first decades of the 20th century in Germany. These contradictions and tensions, however, are conveyed by research that focuses on the “Jewish” input or “Jewish” welfare institutions. Instead we propose to turn around these questions on the Jewishness of social work and ask how Jews made use of, and promoted, developments in social work and social welfare against the background of their specific, tense and vulnerable social situation. This suggestion is designed to

³⁶ Lotan, Giora: The Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle, in: Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook, 4 (1959), p. 185–208 (p.192).

³⁷ Lavaud, Gleichberechtigung, 2015.

³⁸ Konrad, Franz-Michael: Zedakah – Jüdische Wohlfahrtspflege in der Weimarer Republik, in: Stascheit, Ulrich, Konrad, Franz-Michael & Heuer, Renate (eds.) ZEDAKAH Zeitschrift der jüdischen Wohlfahrtspflege; Reprint der Ausgaben von 1925–1928, Frankfurt am Main 1997.

³⁹ Elon, Amos: The pity of it all a history of the Jews in Germany, 1743–1933. New York, NY 2002.

⁴⁰ Konrad, Zedakah, 1997.

⁴¹ Lavaud, Gleichberechtigung und Gleichwertigkeit? 2015.

perceive social work and social welfare as both a strategy in gaining influence and recognition in a specific social environment and a professional and ethical practice to change society. Biographies such as the one on Mirjam Hoffert which we present in the following paragraph capture these social tensions and contradictions, but also people's personal commitment to cope with and to influence these specific social situations.⁴² Particularly, Jewish biographies can capture the accelerating trans- and internationalization of the professions and academia as well as of whole societies.

Crossing Boundaries – The biography of Mirjam Hoffert



Figure 1: Mirjam Hoffert
(courtesy of Medaon
Journal, May 1989)

Mirjam Hoffert was born on 13 October 1897 in Jasło, Poland, and died in 1980 in Tel-Aviv, Israel.⁴³ Very little is known of her childhood and youth, besides the fact that she was a member of the Warsaw branch of “Hashomer Hatzair”, a Socialist-Zionist, secular Jewish youth movement founded in 1913 in Galicia, which encouraged immigration to Palestine. It is interesting to note that Mirjam Hoffert was not the only Jewish female at the time to migrate from Eastern Europe to Germany to follow her passion

for social work. Similar routes can be traced in the stories of Ziporah Bloch (1901–1979), Dr Bella Schlesinger (1898–1977) and Jenya Twersky (1904–1964), all of whom assisted Jews in Eastern Europe and Palestine and moved to Berlin to study social work.⁴⁴ One may assume that it was almost an inevitable route for women in Eastern Europe, with their personal experience as part of a persecuted Jewish population, to study social work at one of the most renowned schools of social work of that time in order to help their fellow Jews.

In her youth, Hoffert was already drawn to helping the needy.⁴⁵ She recounts that this experience later led her to study psychology and pedagogy at the University of Vienna. She describes those years as experimental and exciting, having to work as a nanny and a tutor for a living, and sleeping on a couch at the university dormitories. She was inspired by the ideas prevalent in social pedagogy at the time, which aimed to empower and increase the independence of youth and populations in need, and she chose to write her PhD dissertation on the psychological principles in the work of the Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. Her studies took her in two directions with both differences and similarities. First, she attended the Jewish pedagogical seminar held by Zvi Peretz Chajes, who was one of the first rabbis to support Zionism and – between 1921 and 1925 – the first president of the “Zionist General Council”, the executive department of the general Zionist movement. Chajes was born in Galicia but lived and worked as a pedagogue in

⁴² We find similarities to historical research on early female Zionists who experienced these tensions of contradicting expectations and ambivalences in their own biographies: see Prestel, Claudia: From Berlin to Jerusalem: Elfriede Bambus – German Jew, Feminist, Zionist, in: *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 4 (2001), pp. 233–255.

⁴³ This biography relies on Hoffert, Mirjam: First steps in social work: The monologue of Dr. Mirjam Hoffert of blessed memory, in: *Medaon*, May (1989), p. 11 (Hebrew); Hoffert, Mirjam: Memories, CZA, file J1/7761/2 06.12.1940 (Hebrew); And data that was found at the Alice Salomon Archive (files C1.99, C1.100, C2.10.).

⁴⁴ Halpern, Ayana: Social work pioneers in Mandatory Palestine: Exposing forgotten traditions by forgotten women. PhD thesis, Hebrew University Jerusalem (In submission) (Hebrew).

⁴⁵ Lipschitz, Aryeh: To benefit the person: One year to the death of Dr. Mirjam Hoffert, in: *Davar* 01.01.1981, p. 11 (Hebrew).

Austria for most of his life, supporting peace among nations while promoting Jewish educational concepts.⁴⁶ Secondly, Hoffert studied psychotherapy at the Freud institute under the instruction of Sigmund Freud's daughter, Anna Freud, and Siegfried Bernfeld, a Jewish psychoanalyst and educator who was born in eastern Europe but lived in Vienna for most of his life, and greatly influenced the "Hashomer Hatzair" movement.⁴⁷ But Hoffert was restless and wished to expand her knowledge even more in a third direction, this time by returning to Warsaw and studying the unique methods of working with orphan children developed by Janusz Korczak, the well-known Jewish-Polish pedagogue.

Hoffert's first practical experience was as a pedagogical coordinator at the Jewish orphan house for girls in Vienna, mostly housing orphans from Eastern Europe who were victims of persecution in Poland and Russia during World War I. From the very beginning of her professional career, she emphasized the application of innovative practices, which she absorbed eagerly. In her biographical notes, she underlined the contrast with the old-fashioned, paternalistic methods of traditional Jewish welfare of the time, and criticized this form of welfare as "old and authoritative, and the children suffered greatly from strict and meticulous regime".⁴⁸ This made her realize that her goal was to help the low socio-economic and excluded population, the ones who suffered most from the old-fashioned welfare interventions that she criticized so much, and that to do so she had to be trained in the recently constituted profession of social work. Since the Alice Salomon School in Berlin was well-known and highly regarded at the time, unlike institutions in Vienna where "the field has only begun"⁴⁹, she moved once again, now as a more formulated and established professional following her passion and designation. After registering at the school in 1926, under the name Maria Hoffert-Fassbender, she undertook her internship with drug and alcohol addicts, based on her former training in psychotherapy. In this type of work, she adopted a different approach, one that might have been influenced by the liberal and humanitarian perspective of Alice Salomon, and which took into account social and economic conditions causing individual distress and suffering. Mirjam Hoffert described the class differences between drug users, who belonged to the upper classes, and alcoholics, more of whom were poor. She continued with a typical argument of individual psychology (as developed by Alfred Adler and Siegfried Bernfeld in Berlin) emphasizing the social and economic aspects that cause deviant behaviour.⁵⁰ In both cases, however, she adopted a family-oriented intervention that took into account the multiple factors influencing the person's situation. After her graduation in 1928, she ran a social club for children with behavioural problems, the Kinderbeobachtungsstation, at the Charité hospital in Berlin. This field was also known as welfare for psychopathic children – *Psychopathenfürsorge* – and denoted a separate branch of social therapy which attributed these children's condition to their difficult living circumstances⁵¹. Her educational pathway displays the influence of different

⁴⁶ Gottfried, Mordechai: Prof. Zwi Peretz Chajot of blessed memory. Vienna 1929 (Hebrew).

⁴⁷ Rolnik, Eran: Freud auf Hebräisch. Geschichte der Psychoanalyse im jüdischen Palästina. Göttingen 2013.

⁴⁸ Hoffert, Mirjam: First steps in social work: The monologue of Dr. Mirjam Hoffert of blessed memory, in: Medaos, May (1989), p. 11 (Hebrew).

⁴⁹ Hoffert, First steps, p.11.

⁵⁰ Böhnisch, Lothar, Schröer, Wolfgang & Thiersch, Hans: Sozialpädagogisches Denken: Wege zu einer Neubestimmung. Weinheim 2005, p. 68ff.

⁵¹ Fuchs, Petra & Rose, Wolfgang: Die Breite des Normalen: Exklusion und Inklusion in historischer Perspektive, 2012. Available at: www.hsozkult.de/event/id/termine-20446 (accessed 1 November 2014).

prominent figures as well as different schools of thought at the time: A. Freud and her psychoanalytic approach of working with children, Bernfeld's socialistic interpretation of psychoanalysis, Korczak's reform pedagogy, and Salomon's justice-oriented approach to social work.

In 1933, soon after the rise of the Nazis and her dismissal, Hoffert emigrated to Palestine, beginning the next chapter of her life, which also enabled the continuation of her previous work. She was sent by Dr Mordechai Brachyahu, a psychiatrist from the Hadassah Zionist women organization, to treat and diagnose children with behavioural problems in a family clinic, where she applied psychoanalytic ideas. Then, she was invited by Henrietta Szold, the leader of the Hadassah movement and the initiator of social services in the Jewish community in Palestine, to work at the welfare department for German Jews in Tel-Aviv. Later, the department also began to treat immigrants from other non-European countries, such as Yemenite Jews, and was renamed "the social services for the Jewish immigrant" (the Oleh). After the establishment of Israel in 1948, Hoffert was asked to run the department, and was in charge of social work in the Ma'abarot, the refugee absorption camps established in Israel in the 1950s that were intended to provide initial accommodation for the large influx of Jewish immigrants. In 1954 she was one of the founders of the "Aluma Center", which provided affordable subsidized family therapy for all classes.

Mirjam Hoffert continued to support an international perspective, one that sought to exchange knowledge with other countries, even after her settlement in Palestine. In 1947 she took part in missions travelling to aid Holocaust survivors in refugee camps in Cyprus, and in 1952 she was sent by the Ministry of Welfare to the United States to expand her knowledge on the practice of community social work. Again, she was following her curiosity and professional commitment in learning new and innovative methods and ideas, this time absorbing the American influence which gained more influence on Israeli welfare after 1945.⁵² Between 1953 and 1962 she founded and headed the community social work department in the Ministry of Welfare, and in doing so, introduced new social work approaches within the ministry, while again exchanging knowledge with peers from various countries, such as India.⁵³ In 1961 she headed the Israeli social work school, established in Kenya – "the Kenya-Israel school for rural social workers at Machakos" – a diplomatic project that aimed to strengthen the local population and promote Kenyan independence. An indication of the impact of her work there was the presence of her former students from Kenya at her funeral almost 20 years later in Israel.⁵⁴

After her retirement, Hoffert continued to work on a voluntary basis, consulting the public housing organization "Amidar", the official worker's union, and elderly care services. Additionally, she established a community theatre project for endangered youth, and in 1978 she was part of the committee which organized the international summit for social work held in Israel. She was recognized as an outstanding person, as described by

⁵² Rosenfeld, *Sixty years of social work in Israel*, 1995.

⁵³ Sivstava, S.: A letter from India to Dr. Mirjam Hoffert, in: *On Social Work*, 1, p. 14 (Hebrew).

⁵⁴ Ben-Haym, Shaul: Twenty-four girls of Kenya study social work, *Maariv* 21.12.1963 (Hebrew).

one of her students: "Some people carried within themselves all human beings. Such a person was Mirjam Hoffert"⁵⁵.

Little is known on her private life, besides that she was married to Yaacov Horani, a Zionist pioneer, and that the couple did not have children. Every year, the Mirjam Hoffert Award is given to pioneering and innovative projects by the Israeli Social Work Union.

Discussion

Mirjam Hoffert's biography is shaped by the many national, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries that she crossed during her life. She moved between different places, including Warsaw, Vienna, Berlin, Palestine (later Israel), the United States and Kenya. She also crossed different disciplines, starting her professional education as a pedagogue, continuing with social pedagogy, psychoanalysis and later social work, and eventually promoting and adopting the perceptions and methods of family therapy and community social work. This demonstrates her enormous curiosity and passion for the foundations of the helping professions and her thirst for the best available knowledge in helping people in need – beyond any particular discipline. In her biography, we can trace the multiplicity of academic sources that finally coalesce in the emergence of social work as a modern profession and to which German Jewish social workers contributed tremendously. Nevertheless, Mirjam Hoffert's story also demonstrates how separate the profession of social work was from those related disciplines. In actual fact, it was her ambitions for wider social change and innovative approaches that led Mirjam Hoffert to attend the Alice Salomon School in Berlin. This social activism approach, which enabled women to criticize and modify society, was at the forefront of social work in Germany according to the Salomon school. Mirjam Hoffert seems to have connected all these different academic and professional sources without any difficulties.

Her personal finesse and adroitness, however, cannot entirely conceal the tensions and contradictions that she was apparently coping with so well. The international and universal orientation of many Jewish social workers led Mirjam Hoffert to study in the most prominent places of European social work and pedagogy. Expertise in social work and social welfare was an important strategy for Jewish women seeking emancipation in a double sense – as women and as Jews. This dual marginality caused many to develop high hopes regarding Zionism and life in Palestine, where they expected to be equal as women and as Jews.⁵⁶ Mirjam Hoffert's biography is an example of the dynamic emancipation of women at the beginning of the 20th century. Although she did not play an active role in the women's movement, her self-confident journey through Europe's higher education institutions and her visits to prominent educational projects (such as that led by Janusz Korczak) shows that she followed the path of many women seeking to make a career in the social welfare sector. In Israel, her passionate engagement for the needy proved to be particularly successful and received the recognition that was due. She finally became a prominent protagonist in Israel's emerging welfare system.

⁵⁵ Lipschitz, To benefit the person, 1981.

⁵⁶ Brettell, Caroline & Simon, Rita J.: Immigrant Women: An Introduction, in: Brettell, Caroline & Simon, Rita J. (Eds.) International migration: The female experience, Totowa 1986.

Mirjam Hoffert's biography equally mirrors Jewish emancipation: she participated in the Zionist project to create a national home for the Jews. Against the background of the ongoing persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe during World War I, their marginalization in Weimar Republic and, finally, the Shoah during the time of Nazi Germany, for her the Zionist movement was an important means of promoting social solidarity through the Zionist "integration of exiles"⁵⁷; the forging of cultural homogeneity in the form of the New Jew prototype. The Palestine Jewish community (later to become Israel) was inspired by Theodor Herzl's⁵⁸ utopian vision of a new, cohesive and efficient society, which aspired to turn the community into one of rural, productive pioneers. Thus, productivity, enterprise and self-reliance became central cultural values and were combined with a notion of European cultural superiority.⁵⁹

Together with other eminent female figures of the time, such as Siddy Wronsky, Frieda Weinreich and many others, Mirjam Hoffert attempted to translate this new social feminist profession into the Palestinian context, where it was still unacceptable. As a matter of fact, she pioneered two radical concepts for the local population in Mandatory Palestine: women who acted in the public sphere and developed a career, and professional constructive intervention within the family and the private sphere. This was very different from both the Zedakah concept of the old Jewish community, which also encouraged social justice and organized aid, but mostly in the form of charity related to religious duties, and also different from the local Zionist leadership, who initially rejected social work as a legitimate way of helping.⁶⁰

Moreover, it is interesting to note that this biography adds a different facet to the interpretation of the German-Jewish tradition of social work in the Israeli literature. Only recently, scholars have criticised the patronizing attitudes of the German-Jewish social workers towards their clients⁶¹, and attributed these attitudes to the rigid German tradition combined with the Zionist ideology, which preferred collective education and emphasized physical health and productiveness. Accordingly, social workers were occupied less with social change and more with individual education. This argument dovetails with a more general criticism of social work's control function and its loyalty to the nation state.⁶² Yet Mirjam Hoffert's story also contrasts with an interpretation of the German Jewish traditions in social work in Germany that emphasizes the focus on justice by the Jewish approach to social work and social welfare in the Weimar Republic.⁶³ And her biography runs contrary to the finding that the German Jewish tradition emphasizes an educational perception of social work, using pedagogical techniques to teach the individual to adjust into society, which fits well with the nascent Jewish society trying to evolve into a cohesive Hebrew nation state in Palestine.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ David, L.: Community social work as a new method to integrate emigration. Davar 01.06.1960, p. 3 (Hebrew).

⁵⁸ Herzl, Theodor: *Altneuland: Utopischer Roman*. Leipzig 1902.

⁵⁹ Frenkel, Michal & Shenhav, Yehouda: From Americanization to colonization: The diffusion of productivity models revisited, in: *Organization Studies*, 24 (9) (2003), p. 1537–1562.

⁶⁰ See footnote 20 and 21.

⁶¹ Bernstein, Deborah: *Women on the margins: Gender and nationalism in mandate Tel-Aviv*. Jerusalem 2008 (Hebrew); Razi, Tami: *Forsaken children: The backyard of mandate Tel-Aviv*. Tel-Aviv 2009 (Hebrew).

⁶² Polsky, Andrew J.: *The Rise of the therapeutic state*. Princeton 1991.

⁶³ Zeller, Nicht Almosen, sondern Gerechtigkeit, 1998.

⁶⁴ Konrad, Wurzeln, 1993.

All these interpretations tend to identify a core German-Jewish tradition in social work. Instead, Mirjam Hoffert's biography reflects the different, heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting influences in social work in general, and, more specifically, in the Jewish tradition of social work. The various interpretations seeking to get to the heart of German-Jewish traditions run the risk of oversimplifying the multiple facets of social work developed by Jewish social workers in Germany and elsewhere. The story of Mirjam Hoffert sums up these controversies. She incorporated international cutting-edge developments in the social sciences and challenged the prevailing narrative of Jewish Zionism by showing true empathy for the difficulties people had in life and the social, economic and political circumstances leading to them.

Hoffert criticized the pioneer Zionists in Palestine greatly for “rejecting in principle any philanthropy... mental difficulties, family conflicts and general suffering... were not seen as distress but as weakness... Because not just **any** people mattered to them – only those certain types who were able to overcome difficulties by themselves”⁶⁵. Later, after Israel was established, she was troubled by the paternalistic attitude towards the residents of the Ma'abarot: “The social workers had trouble overcoming the guardianship of the state's authorities, who used to decide for the people instead of consulting with them and sharing the decision with them... We tried to explain that to the authorities, in light of the fact that there were many inhabitants who wished to leave the Ma'abara and take care of themselves, but we couldn't”⁶⁶.

But at the same time, Hoffert promoted educational work in the spirit of Zionism, noting that the main work required in the Yemenite immigrant camps involved education and hygiene⁶⁷ and that children's clubs had only one purpose: to “create the conditions of civilized life, and help the children integrate in the productive life in the Land of Israel”⁶⁸. Moreover, the same institutionalization of social work in which she played a great role contributed to the construction of the profession as a national tool of the state in the making, and, inevitably, strengthened the separation and the rivalry between the two competitive national groups: Palestinian Arabs and Jews.⁶⁹ One might excuse her institutional commitment as a sacrifice which was necessary to be accepted as a professional woman in the male-dominated Zionist realm. It might be more suitable and productive, however, to understand the ambiguous and contradictory situation of European Jewish women, whose biographies lie at the intersection of progressive, humanitarian, universal and feminist ideas and of national and ideological developments. This unique combination of international and modern Western values together with Zionist attitudes was confronted with a social context in which many different Western and Non-Western populations and cultures co-existed, especially in Mandatory Palestine, but also in Kenya. Hoffert's biography demonstrates the inherent pitfalls of social work, which can become imperialistic by enforcing its Western ideas on

⁶⁵ Hoffert, Mirjam: Issues and means in social work, in: *Journal of the Social Worker*, 1 (11) (1958), pp. 4–7 (Hebrew).

⁶⁶ Hoffert, *First steps in social work*, 1989.

⁶⁷ Hoffert, Mirjam: Report on interventions with immigrants, April 1944–1946. (May 26, 1946). Jewish Agency Collection (p. 9/169). Central Zionist Archive, Jerusalem (Hebrew).

⁶⁸ Hoffert, Mirjam: Clubs for children. *Davar* 18.04.1937, p. 3. (Hebrew).

⁶⁹ Simoni, Marcella: A dangerous legacy: Welfare in British Palestine, 1930–1939, in: *Jewish History*, 13 (2) (1999) pp. 81–109.

other social groups and societies, thereby violating its own values, such as self-determination and multi-culturalism.⁷⁰

Accordingly, it is important to raise the question: How aware was Mirjam Hoffert of the conflict between her role as an agent of nation building and Western colonization on the one hand and as the bearer of a universal and humanitarian message on the other hand? The different archive documents referenced in this paper demonstrate that although Mirjam Hoffert guarded and reproduced national and cultural boundaries by taking a central, representative role within the Jewish leadership and later the state of Israel, she also challenged and criticized the Israeli government as “not proficient in the affairs of the different ethnic groups. How is it possible to help human beings, when there is no understanding of their souls? Where there is no understanding, comes fear, aggression and prejudice”⁷¹. It is pivotal to understand and explain this ambivalence at the heart of Mirjam Hoffert's biography and those of other important protagonists of Western social work. We can see her biography as an articulation of prominent women's unique, complex and contradictory translation of Jewish-German welfare into the Zionist and local context of Mandatory Palestine and Israel.

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⁷⁰ Midgley, James: *Social welfare in global context*. California 1997.

⁷¹ Hoffert, *Issues and means in social work*, 1958.