

INTRODUCTION

BY Joyce Antler

Chair, Jewish Women's Archive Academic Advisory Council

IN HER BOOK, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, HISTORIAN GERDA LERNER, THE grand “mother of women’s history,” distinguishes between history as the unrecorded past – all the events of the past as recollected by human beings – and history-making, a historical creation usually left, until recent times, to a professional class of male historians. While women have always been actors and agents in history, they have been left out of most of the annals of recorded History. Yet they have not only participated in sharing the world and its work with men, they have had unique experiences and have developed their own oral traditions by which these experiences were preserved. Women’s scarce presence in the written record deprives all people of a fully rendered chronicle of past events and the opportunity to draw meanings from them. When one-half of the human population is excluded from history-making, history fails to serve as a source of both collective memory and personal identity.

Because women’s experiences have gone unrecorded and unrecognized, most narratives of American Jewish history offer only a partial account of our past. Marginalized or ignored, or absorbed into universalized categories of “Jews” or of “Americans,” Jewish women are not represented in the diverse roles they have played or as interpreters of events they have shaped. Only by enabling Jewish women to serve as witnesses to their own experience can we restore the full panorama of their lives – as wives, mothers, grandmothers, wage-earners, immigrants, community builders, organizational heads, political activists, intellectual innovators, and religious leaders – and create a more complete, balanced, and vital historical record.

Oral history provides a wonderful tool for capturing the diverse stories of Jewish women and preserving the unique voices and living memories of individuals whose histories had previously been forgotten. The testimony provided in oral histories adds new categories of historical significance by revealing the multifaceted dimensions of women's lives as they change over time. By placing an individual in the context of her family, her community, her workplace, and the political and historical framework of her time, oral histories can greatly expand the range of data that form the stuff of history and the frameworks that order its meanings.

Every oral history is unique. The narrator tells her story in her own terms, concentrating on those aspects of her life history that are the most important to her. The subjective, personal meanings of lived experience deepen historical knowledge, providing insights into how individuals interact with the historical forces that shape their lives. As the individual tells her story, she simultaneously reinterprets as well as remembers the past; through the process of oral history, she truly becomes an historian, helping to articulate and frame the memories that bear significance.

The Jewish Women's Archive's oral history guide, *In Our Own Voices*, moves women's experiences to the center of the historical process. Capturing the individuality and fullness of women's complex roles, it highlights a set of topics that form the distinctive arenas of women's lives. The ten frameworks of the Guide – Family, Education, Work, Community Service, Jewish Identities, Home and Place, Leisure and Culture, Health and Sexuality, Women's Identities, History and World Events – suggest the multiple worlds in which women lived, both public and private, as they traversed the life course. Together the frameworks provide an inclusive umbrella for collecting stories about the past that have particular, gender-specific relevance of a kind that is unusual even for the practice of oral history.

The Guide acknowledges, for example, that women's most significant relationships often take place within their families of origin and the families that they create. Families provide expectations, values and models which give shape to women's lives, yet family relationships and the complex roles of women within families also engender tensions and conflict. In similar fashion, the Guide emphasizes the many-sided considerations that have impacted women's participation in the world of work – both inside and outside the home – as they pioneered in the workplace but also suffered from the invisibility of their contributions, the painful experiences of occupational discrimination or anti-Semitism, and the continuing struggles of balancing family life with career. It probes women's participation in the world of education, inside and outside of schools and continuously through the life course, and in the many settings in which

education occurs – for example, elementary and secondary schools, colleges, universities, professional schools, Jewish supplementary and day schools, private lessons, women’s clubs, associations, study groups, and education-oriented travel. Voluntarism is also explored, in connection with civic or community-based groups, both in the Jewish community and the larger society, as are Jewish women’s leisure and cultural pursuits which in like fashion helped define women’s identities and reflected their connections to the Jewish community and the larger society.

The Guide provides sample questions and brief descriptive essays about other vital areas of women’s lives: transformations in the ways in which women have experienced illness and maintained health; changes in sexuality and marriage patterns; developments in both the public and private aspects of religious life – the home and the synagogue. It asks narrators to think about experiences of migration and settlement, their connections to region, community, and neighborhood; the place of their homes in their lives as a site for the expression of ritual, entertainment, family life, or work.

Finally, the Guide suggests a framework for exploring the associations, networks, institutions, and friendships which Jewish women have created throughout the course of their lives, particularly those with other women. Such relationships have often channeled the nature and direction of women’s participation in social, cultural, and political arenas. The Guide helps narrators bear witness in their own terms to the major social and cultural movements and the economic and political transformations that they have lived through.

Thus the Guide’s ten frameworks establish the important reality that women have been active agents and makers of history. In so doing, it helps frame the many connections between the experiences of gender and those of ethnicity, religion, and nationality, helping us to understand the diverse parameters of being American, female, and Jewish in different regions, in different epochs, and for women of vastly different backgrounds and personal histories. The Guide helps us understand that the personal lives of women have intersected with the historical events of their times in myriad ways.

Jewish women’s oral histories greatly enhance the mission of the Jewish Women’s Archive to “uncover, chronicle, and transmit” the rich history and legacy of Jewish women in North America. Through these inspiring testimonies, we become aware of how profoundly Jewish women have shaped the multifaceted worlds in which they live – and American Jewish experience as a whole.

We welcome you to this exciting endeavor of history-making!