

Katarzyna CZERWONOGÓRA<sup>1</sup>  
Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung

UDK  
305-055.2(430)"192/193"  
61:929 IIIрpаyс P.  
316.662-055.2(=411.16)(430)"192"

---

## JEWISH, FEMALE, EDUCATED AND POLITICAL: DR. RAHEL STRAUS ON ABORTION IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC<sup>2</sup>

**ABSTRACT** The article concerns reproductive rights debate in Weimar Germany and its Jewish community. It refers to the activity of Dr. Rahel Straus, a pioneering female gynecologist, Zionist woman and advocate of the recognition of women's needs. Born in 1885, Dr. Straus was involved in promoting women's health issues and the national Jewish agenda in the first half of the twentieth century and later was a devoted physician and peace activist in Israel. At the turn of the 1920s and 1930s she was involved in the struggle against penalization of abortion in the Weimar Republic. She wrote a guidebook for Jewish women concerning sexual education, and lectured for women participating in the Summer School organized by a middle-class Jewish women's organization Jüdischer Frauenbund. In her article published in Jüdischer Frauenbund's magazine she advocated women's freedom to decide on their bodies, and a need to provide them with legal access to termination of pregnancies, framing the issue in terms of social justice and class inequality. Her argument, which was part of the historical debate concerning reproductive behavior, provides an important point of reference for contemporary critique of body politics in Israel and also other nation states.

**Key words:** Rahel Straus, Jewish women, reproductive rights, abortion, Weimar Germany, German Jews, body politics, female doctors

---

1 E-mail: redhillka@gmail.com

2 Writing this article was made possible thanks to the fellowship of the Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center at the Hebrew University. I wish to thank the director of the Center, Prof. Yfaat Weiss and the Staff for creating an opportunity for me to work on this project. I also wish to thank dr. Rakefet Zalashik for reading the article and making inspiring comments.

## INTRODUCTION

“Dear Sir, I am writing this letter to confirm the authenticity of my cable. Mrs. Rahel Straus [...] and the family is known to me since many years as reliable and generally respected. There is no doubt that she will do her utmost to live up to any pledges she has given. I am willing to vouch for this and would be glad indeed if the visa would be granted to her. Yours very sincerely...”

This letter was written by Albert Einstein to the United States Consul in Haifa, Israel, on June 28, 1948 to help Dr. Rahel Strauss with her visa application for the U.S.. Dr. Strauss, a 68-year-old Israeli physician of German origin applied for a visa in order to visit her son, Ernst, who was assistant to Albert Einstein and who later became a professor of mathematics at UCLA.<sup>3</sup> I received this letter from Professor Daniel Straus, a grandson of Rahel Straus. I find it an interesting example of a document depicting social network of his grandmother and the German Jewish family she belonged to. This article, however, focuses on Dr. Straus’s contribution to the discourse concerning reproductive rights in Weimar Germany. It sets out to fill the gap in historiography and explore Rahel Straus’s public appearance in the context of feminist and Jewish discourse. It shares some outcomes of the broader research devoted to the women’s struggle for recognition in the Zionist movement that I have been involved with, and raises questions that I seek to explore in the following stages of my work.

Dr. Straus belonged to a small and select group of women who played an active political role and documented their thoughts and experiences.<sup>4</sup> Primary materials for this essay are newspaper articles, her memoirs, as well as sources from the Straus family archive. In her memoirs, published in 1961, Rahel Straus addressed her children, writing that they had been born in hard times, at the turning point of the epochs; as Jews, German Jews, they had been the first to find out what it means to be Jewish (cf. Straus 1961, 7). However, it is her biography, framed by German, and later Israeli politics, that reflected a critical period in the modern history of the Jewish people. Born in Karlsruhe in 1880 in a religious,

---

3 Straus’s family private archive, courtesy of Prof. Daniel Straus. Many thanks to him for providing me with these resources.

4 See, for example, Kark 2004; Shepherd 1998; Rakovska 2002.

but modern family, Straus represented the Jewish middle class, caught half way to assimilation by anti-Semitic backlash of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. She attended a German public school along with Protestant and Catholic children, also a Jewish Sunday school where she made friends and social life. Benefiting from the changes in the educational system in Germany that recognized secondary education for girls,<sup>5</sup> she became one of the first students of a pioneering Mädchengymnasium – and in 1901 she was the first female medicine student at the University of Heidelberg at a time when most German universities were not accepting women.<sup>6</sup> After graduating, she continued to blaze a trail as one of the first three women to practice gynecology in Munich.<sup>7</sup> Between 1900 and 1933 she participated in the discourse concerning women’s emancipation, the “Jewish problem” and the nation-state policy. Her main circles of activity were the Association of Jewish Women to Support Cultural Work in Palestine [Verband Jüdischer Frauen für Kulturarbeit in Palästina]; WIZO, the Women’s International Zionist Organization, and non-Zionist League of Jewish Women [Jüdischer Frauenbund, JFB]. She was also a member of the German Association for Woman Suffrage.<sup>8</sup> Immigrating to Palestine as a doctor and activist in 1933, she contributed to the health care system: she co-created The National Association for the Habilitation of Children and Adults with Intellectual

---

5 Preceded by a decades-long struggle of women for recognition of girls’ education, with groundbreaking publication of “Die höhere Mädchenschule und ihre Bestimmung” of Helene Lange in 1887 and establishment of Allgemeinen Deutschen Lehrerinnenverein in 1890. See Taylor Allen 1991, 124.

6 On the debate and changes concerning women students, see Taylor Allen 1991; Puckett [1930] 1967; Mazón 2000.

7 She had a particular respect for Dr. Hope Bridges Adams Lehmann, an American socialist, who was the first woman to obtain a medical diploma in 1880, and an author of a groundbreaking book concerning women’s health issues *Das Frauenbuch. Ein ärztlicher Ratgeber für die Frau in der Familie und bei Frauenkrankheiten* [The woman’s book. A doctor’s guide for women in the family and women’s health] published in 1896. See Krauss 2002; Usborne 2007.

8 Deutscher Verein für Frauenstimmrecht, established in 1902 and led by Anita Augspurg and Lydia Heymann, was considered a radical organization in the feminist spectrum in Germany. Rahel Straus was not very involved with its activity, although she records that both of its leaders were Jewish, and who, unfortunately, did not refer to their Jewish identity in public activity.

Disabilities (AKIM) in 1951, and a year later became one of the founders of the Israeli branch of the International League for Peace and Freedom.

Dr. Straus has been counted by scholars as a representative of “New Women” at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and her memoirs serve as a significant reference work for modern German Jewish history.<sup>9</sup> Still, her particular public appearances, press releases and political activities have not been reliably researched. With this article I want to make a contribution towards filling that gap.

### **DR. RAHEL STRAUS IN THE DISCOURSE ON ABORTION**

In 1930 Rahel Straus published an article „Aussprache zum Artikel 218 auf dem Durkheimer Sommerschule des Jüdischen Frauenbundes (JFB). Auszug aus dem Referat“ in Jüdischer Frauenbund’s magazine. The text, advocating the right to abortion and pointing out social consequences of the existing law, was a summary of the lecture Dr. Straus gave at the Bad Durkheim Summer School of JFB (Straus 1930c).

The matter of abortion was regulated in Weimar Republic by the Paragraphs 218 to 220 of the 1871 Criminal Code.<sup>10</sup> It called for jail sentence for women who underwent an abortion and for anyone assisting the procedure. Those who performed abortions without the consent of the pregnant woman or for “commercial gain” faced indefinite penitentiary sentences. Only those terminations of pregnancy medically certified as strictly necessary were considered legal. The law also prohibited advertising, publicizing, or displaying contraceptive methods and devices because they were seen as “objects intended for indecent use” (Grossman 1978, 121). Despite the penalization, between 500,000 and one million abortions were performed illegally every year.<sup>11</sup> Since

---

9 See Freidenreich 2002; Kaplan 1982, 2005; Grossmann 1993; Wobick Segev 2011; Rose 2008.

10 Slightly modified in 1926, without significant changes. The reformed single Paragraph 218 lessened the possible punishment for the aborting mother from penitentiary (Zuchthaus) to jail (Gefängnis) and allowed the judge more latitude with the sentences.

11 The doctors projecting local rates onto the national population estimated 100,000 to 300,000 abortions per year during the pre-war period, half a

the 1920s there were instances calling for renegotiation of this law, and the discourse gained momentum at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s.

JFB, which organized the discussion around this issue for Jewish women, was established in 1904 as a platform for education and charity work for middle-class German Jewish women. Deriving its agenda and structure from the 19th century German feminism, the organization was in constant tension between Judaism and feminism and had an ambivalent stance towards Zionism.<sup>12</sup> Framing JFB's agenda was strengthening community consciousness among Jews, furthering the ideals of the German middle-class women's movement, providing Jewish women with career training, fighting against women's trafficking and asserting the right of women to participate in the Jewish community on the basis of equality with men.<sup>13</sup> Its membership ranged between one-fifth and one-fourth of the Jewish female population in Germany (50,000 members in 1920s) and it was the largest organization in the Federation of German Women's Organizations.<sup>14</sup> According to Marion Kaplan, JFB's educational program was one of its most effective contributions to the cause of feminism, offering lectures and summer schools and demanding intellectual and spiritual equality for women (Kaplan 1979, 80).

---

million per year after the war, and up to one million abortions annually during the Depression. See Woycke 1988, 65.

12 JFB attitude towards Palestine was sympathetic, but distant. It reflected the leanings of most German Jews who maintained that they were German citizens of the Jewish faith and viewed Zionism as a threat to their painstakingly acquired status in Germany. At the first postwar national assembly of the JFB the topic of Palestine provoked a sharp debate between its leader Berta Pappenheim, who preferred to avoid it, and a small group of Zionist members (who later joined WIZO), who wanted JFB to divert some of its efforts toward building a Jewish homeland. A vote favored the recognition of the Palestine question, as one of importance and great interest as a Jewish women's and cultural question, but the JFB never accepted a Jewish-nationalistic interpretation of Palestine. See Kaplan 1979, 87.

13 See Kaplan 1979.

14 Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine was established in 1894 as an umbrella organization of bourgeois women's organizations in Germany. See Gerhard 1990.

Straus' involvement in the Jüdischer Frauenbund was an ambivalent case, since the organization both provided her with a platform for propaganda work, and at the same time, for a more than two decades, denied her recognition because of her Zionist views. However, gathering many more women, and with greater budget, non-Zionist JFB served as a more efficient tool of reaching masses of Jewish women than the two other, explicitly Zionist, organizations - WIZO and Kulturverband - that she had been involved in. Straus was therefore publishing in its magazine „Blättern des Jüdischen Frauenbund für Frauenarbeit und Frauenbewegung“, lecturing to its members and she even coordinated a project “Contemporary Women’s Issues“. Despite her activity and the respect she gained at the JFB, she was not accepted into the board for a long time because of her political views.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, she was trying to bring together women from WIZO and JFB, at least for her lectures, in order to break the ideological reluctance against Zionism among German Jewish middle-class women, along with explaining health issues and reproductive rights problems.

The JFB Summer School took place in Bad Durkheim between 7 and 9 September 1930 under the title “Organization of Women’s Life in Work and Marriage” (Die Lebensgestaltung der Frau in Beruf und Ehe). Maternity, Jewish regulations concerning divorce and birth control as well as the economic conditions of the life of single women were among the issues framing the meeting.<sup>16</sup>

JFB’s official stance on reproductive rights was rather conservative. As a bourgeois feminist organization it exhorted Jewish women to raise larger families, objected to birth control and opposed abortion. Despite its standpoint, JFB recognized the use of birth control among its members and invited them to discuss the issue during 1930s summer sessions.<sup>17</sup>

---

15 Only in 1932 Berta Pappenheim openly expressed hope that Straus would take over the leadership after she retired. However, Straus had already lost interest and emigrated to Palestine the following year.

16 For more information about the seminar, see the doctoral dissertation of Jeanett Rapp *Von Jüdin für Jüdin. Die soziale Arbeit der Leipziger Ortsgruppe des Jüdischen Frauenbundes und ihrer Mitgliedsorganisationen bis zum Ende der Weimarer Republik* (Rapp 2011).

17 Jews, who experienced rapid urbanization and emancipation in the 19th century, were the first religious group to use contraception in Germany. See Kaplan 1979, 10. Not only in Germany were the Jews the avant-garde

In the panel concerning reproductive rights three women held speeches: Dr. Straus' was preceded by the appearance of an attorney, Margarete Berendt-Berlin, and her counter-speaker was Berta Pappenheim, JFB's charismatic leader. The event was attended by about 50 women, but the article Straus published in the aftermath reached a much wider audience.<sup>18</sup>

“The law must reflect the ethical will of the people. Is that what makes the Article 218?” – asked Straus in the invocation of her speech. The state is interested in regulating abortion because it needs soldiers and to serve the religious establishment – she noted and developed her inference against article 218 in two main arguments: efficiency of the actual law and social results of its implication as well as biological definitions.

The argument that legalizing abortion legitimizes murder had been often used from religious and/or moral standpoint. Straus was convinced that, since there is no social consensus in terms of moral dimension of abortion, it should not be a point of reference in writing the law. She highlighted that the actual situation and women's needs should be addressed by the law, and that women's rights should not be held hostage in any moral debate. As for religion, she made a clear distinction between state's obligation to provide its citizens with equal rights and people's free will to practice and promote their religious beliefs. Just as the state should not punish people for not celebrating Shabbat, the Jewish holiday, it ought not to regulate reproductive rights according to religious beliefs – she concluded.

As a physician, she used her professional authority to claim that for the first 8 to 10 weeks of pregnancy a fetus is part of women's body and not a separate being. “As a living creature we can perceive a person – both from biological, as well as from commonsense perspective – only as one who can get someone's

---

of the birth control movement; see, for example, about Aletta Jacobs in the Netherlands in Rupp 1997, or Feinberg 2005. About Herman Rubinaut in Poland see Kuźma-Markowska 2010.

18 JFB organized summer schools for the first time in 1930, in various cities in Germany, and they were planned for about 50 participants each to provide women with informal atmosphere and conditions for comfortable discussions, see *Blätter des Jüdischen Frauenbundes* 1930. At that time, the magazine had circulation of approximately 5000 copies.

attention independently” (Straus 1930, 2). Only after a woman feels/can feel the movement of the fetus, it is legitimate to speak about a separate creature inside her – Straus wrote. Therefore, from her point of view, punishing for abortion at a certain moment during the pregnancy might be perceived as the same as punishing for self-injury or a suicide attempt and is a violation of women’s personal autonomy.

Her second argument was that penalization of abortion does not by any means restrain women from performing it. Since women were undergoing abortion despite penalization, it was relevant for them to discuss the issue and recognize their interests. She referred to the estimated number of 500,000 illegal abortions and considered it underestimated. The reason for such a high number of these procedures, despite the risk of being punished, lied in women’s misery – she argued. In her opinion, the fact that most of the abortions were performed by married women proved that unwanted pregnancies were not a result of “recklessness, adventure seeking and immorality”, but rather opposite. If women decide to terminate pregnancies “even while married”, their situation must be truly miserable – either for economic, or psychological reasons – she continued. What was then the factual result of the existing law? Penalization of abortion was, according to Straus, only a tool to enhance class inequalities and strike the poorest parts of society. Wealthy women could afford a safe and professional illegal abortion, whereas those without enough money, were often treated under unhygienic conditions, by amateurish doctors and without dignity – she alerted. Some tried to deal with unwanted pregnancy on their own, using a knitting needle and posing threat for their own health and life. A law that was against social equality and that enhanced injustice between citizens should not be implemented, Straus stressed. She also commented that the existing law was not precise enough to avoid dilemmas. Conditions under which a pregnancy could be terminated and indications for legal abortion left too much space for doctor’s interpretation, and therefore did not provide women with equal treatment. Liberal doctors considered various health and mental challenges during pregnancy as reasons for abortion, while others tended to see women only as “vessels for breeding future children” and did not recognize even serious threats for women’s condition, trying to sustain pregnancy at all cost – she noted.

Standing for legal abortion, Strauss emphasized that she was far from supporting and promoting the termination of pregnancies. Her stance was motivated by the awareness of social consequences of actual situation and by her support for social justice. In her opinion, women should be given the right to legal and safe abortion for medical reasons without limitations and for social and psychological reasons until the 8<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy. Decision to terminate pregnancy should be taken by the woman together with a doctor. Such legislation would allow women to give birth to wanted and healthy children in what they would consider the most appropriate time. On this occasion she referred to the open letter of 365 Berlin doctors published in July 1930 (she was among the signatories), calling for providing women with legal and equal access to abortion. Their arguments were concluded as follows:

“We do believe that the will for motherhood cannot be coerced through legal paragraphs and threats of punishments, but is rather a natural female instinct which can be temporarily repressed by worry and despair, but which will naturally reassert itself once the conditions improve” (*Die Frau* 1930, 600).<sup>19</sup>

Straus' stand on abortion legislation was radically different from the one represented by JFB. In “Der Morgen”, a monthly published by Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith (Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens), Dora Edinger, a journalist and feminist, commenting on the Bad Durkheim session on abortion, said that the problem discussed was a complex one, with no one proper solution. Nevertheless, even though particular stances of women differed, and the discussions following each speech were intense, all the spokeswomen took women's need into

---

19 Most doctors publicly criticized abortion as a method of birth control and preferred to prescribe preventive contraception. (Diaphragm was one of the most popular means among women doctors. Not only was it less invasive for women's bodies than non-mechanical means, but it also forced women to break down the Victorian disgust of touching one's body and therefore had an emancipatory benefit.) At the same time, they admitted that most of their patients had at least one abortion in their lifetime and that delegalization of abortion resulted only in the fact that it was more expensive, more dangerous for women's health and that women were not provided with equal access to abortion because of their economic situation. See Grossmann 1993.

consideration.<sup>20</sup> According to Straus, however, only she [Straus] was really putting women's dignity first (Straus 1961).

Interestingly, none of the speakers made explicit references to Judaism. As presented by Pappenheim, JFB's position echoed mostly the puritanical strain in German Protestantism and in German feminism, not so much the Jewish tradition. Although a person with strong Jewish identity, in her speech Straus merely mentioned Judaism's liberal approach to birth control as a positive inclination, building her argumentation around more general terms like social justice and women's dignity.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, she also did not refer to the issue of fertility that was, at that moment, of great concern to the Jewish community.<sup>22</sup>

---

20 Both the doctor (Straus) – who was also a Jewish mother, as the author notes, as well as social activist Bertha Pappenheim, were concerned with “the same mystery of life”, but having different life experiences and professional background, framed it in distinct ways. The fact that two such different people met together and spoke out their arguments in one line with each other, even without reaching consensus, proves that the Frauenbund's initiative was successful – Edinger summed up. See Edinger 1930.

21 Sexual abstinence has never been a Jewish virtue. Although the first commandment of Judaism - “be fruitful and multiply” - played an important role in the Jewish family culture, it applied primarily to men, not allowing them the use of any contraception or spilling their sperm – while women were traditionally permitted to use birth control when there was a reason considered important by a rabbi – whether medical or social. Accordingly, population expansion was neither a religious priority nor an economic necessity in the history of Jews. Together with Talmudic recognition of women's sexual needs, Judaism had a potential to create a more liberal approach to birth control. For example, coitus interruptus (withdrawal) was condemned in Talmud, but the potion called the Cup of Roots (made of Alexandrian gum, liquid alum, and garden crocus) and a vaginal sponge were permitted in some cases. Since the responsibility for reproduction was laid on men, ironically, under the male supremacist law, women, because of their insignificance, became free to practice birth control. See Gordon 1976, 5-6.

22 As an effect of modern assimilation project, Jewish communities were absorbing particular ideas developed in the Western discourses on sexuality and were induced to take a stand in population policy. Their stand was often rationalized by the decline in Jewish fertility, which became an issue in face of the Weimar Republic's minority politics. The Jewish birth rate was equivalent to half of the German one, which was also in decline at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before 1907 the majority of married Jews limited their families to one or two children, whereas the two-child system made few inroads into German society (See Kaplan 1979, 70). Declining birth rate was

The speech and the article, along with signing the doctors' letter calling for depenalization of abortion were, to my knowledge, the only public instances of Straus referring directly to reproductive rights. In her memoirs, she also highlights that despite supporting women's right to abortion, she herself did not do the procedure on her patients, because she had promised her husband not to perform anything deemed illegal for her medical practice. She did perceive reproductive rights within a wider perspective, though. Not only did she call for legal abortion, but she also contributed to sexual pedagogic. In that same year, 1930, she published a 32-page brochure *Wege zur Sexuellen Aufklärung: Zwei Vorträge einer Mutter und Ärztin*, a guidebook for parents confronting with the need of sexual education of their offspring and young girls entering adulthood (Straus 1930a). She wrote she was motivated by the participants of her courses at JFB's "Women's School for Economics" (Wirtschaftliche Frauenschule auf dem Land), established in 1926 in Wolfratshausen by the Munich's branch of the organization to provide high school graduates with home economics education. Students of the school had been, according to Straus, raised up in ignorance, in terms of social and religious issues. She mentioned that one day they conspired to embarrass one of the teachers with questions concerning sexual life. The lady agreed to prepare a special lesson about it, but soon she realized that she was not competent enough – not only because of her lack of knowledge, but also, as Straus highlights, because she had been childless and so had no personal experience of raising a child. Particularly the last thing determined the fact, that she was not perceived as reliable and trustworthy to give this talk. Straus, as a physician and mother of five, was therefore asked to give a lecture and later write a short book which would refer to both biological as well as social and moral questions concerning sexuality (cf. Straus 1961, 255).<sup>23</sup>

---

depicted by social scientists, Zionist demographers and politicians against this background as the main pathology plaguing the Jewish community, next to intermarriage and conversion (cf. Hart 2001, 74-95).

23 Such talks and publications were not rare at that time in Weimar Republic. Against the background of other European countries, Germany was a center of sex reform movements; many liberal thinkers and worker's parties advocated for sexual freedom and the interest in contraception and sexual activity was reflected in the popularity of books and public lectures (cf. Smith 1989, 429-434).

The publication however was divided into two parts: for mothers and for girls. In the first part she referred to the following issues: why should parents be concerned with sexual education of their offspring, when and where should it take place, who should take responsibility for raising their sexual awareness and what exactly should be passed on to children and youth. She highlighted, that it is the parent's, particularly the mother's, responsibility to make them aware of the changes in their bodies during adolescence and that sexual pedagogics should be included, together with cultural and social upbringing. According to Dr. Straus, it should be taught with honesty and tact, prompted by children's interest, rather than provoked by parents. According to the physician, starting with the example of plants and animals, the difference between feminine and masculine should be explained and various gender roles in people's social life presented. Dr. Straus gave also practical tips on how to respond to children's questions, referring to her personal experience. For example, she recalled the one time her child was confused by the common belief that it is God who gives life and her explanation about pregnancy and birth of a new person, and she had used this opportunity to elaborate on the spiritual and physical sense of human's life. Considering older offspring, she suggested completing these talks with teenagers by recommending them to read certain books– for example a trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter* by the 1928 Nobel Prize winner Sigrid Undset, which spoke about a life of women living in Norway in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and referred among others to protagonist's experiences of adolescence (Undset 2005), or *Resurrection* by a classic Russian writer, Christian-anarchist Leo Tolstoy, that deals with the questions of responsibility for one's past behavior, guilt and the functioning of institutionalized church (Tolstoy 1966). In the second part of the guidebook she addressed girls and young women with explanations about the physical development of infants and nutrition of babies, and specifically elaborated on the biological development of girls. Step by step, she explained menstruation process and put attention to abnormalities that should be further consulted with a physician, so that future mothers would be able to pass it on to their daughters and make them more aware of their bodies. She recommended particular concern about hygiene and physical activity, and suggested that women should learn how to deal with difficulties of period, in order not to be annoying to others, since “there is nothing more awful for men and children, for those who depend on her or whom she serves, than

a woman who has not learned how to control herself during her hard time” (Straus 1930, 24).<sup>24</sup>

On the following pages Dr. Straus elaborated on biological aspects of pregnancy, including the functioning of uterus, lengths of particular periods of fetus’s development and its weight. She strongly encouraged women to trust “the nature”, and rather than feeling anxiety concerning the changes in the way they feel during pregnancy and delivery, observe them and respond to the needs of the body. She highlighted that even if the husband was willing to support her in overcoming difficulties, he would never understand her experience and therefore she has to count on herself and her instincts in first instance. However, in the process of child rearing, both women and men should take part, appropriate to their “natural” capacities, Straus noted. Parents should pay attention to cultural and social upbringing of their offspring and it is particularly important to teach the young how to be self-confident and thoughtful, in order to enjoy entering relations with people – she recommended. It is, however, a special women’s responsibility to take care of the various problems concerning both childcare and marriage and happiness of the family – she concluded and called “the daughters of Israel” not to evoke their love and striving for marriage before the time for it comes.

The general message of this publication was to make women aware of the functioning of their bodies and make them feel responsible for educating the children, particularly daughters in terms of their biological development. Despite the title which referred to sexual enlightenment, it is self-awareness, individual health care and communication between parents and children that are strong fundamentals for entering safe sexual contacts. So far, I have not found sources that would tell what was the outcome of the meeting that Straus organized for her Jewish students and of the brochure which resulted from this assembly.

---

24 This sentence, which reflects pre-second wave of feminism assumptions concerning gender roles in nuclear bourgeois family, as well as separation of private and public, deserves a distinct elaboration, which is not possible in this article.

Dr. Straus's other articles referred to questions of motherhood, reproduction, challenges of modernity for women and the Jewish tradition of marriage (Straus 1930a, 1933, 1943). It is significant, that only her first article from 1906, dealing with the problems of women in the colonies in Palestine, appeared in a general magazine not profiled as a women's publication.<sup>25</sup> Also, her appearances – the one concerning abortion is the most radical – took place in front of women's, and not generally Jewish audience.<sup>26</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Why is Dr. Straus's appearance important to remember today? First, it is a part of the history of human rights discourse and history of women's struggle for recognition, which in turn is a part of the general history of social movements. The opportunity to control the number of children and the time of becoming a mother, or whether to becoming one at all, has been defined as a crucial question of economic independence of women by the feminist movement in the struggle for recognition in the nation state. Western feminism also framed access to contraception as one of the conditions for a satisfying sexual life, free from the risk of unwanted pregnancy, which is perceived as a condition for women's emancipation. Therefore, the struggle for reproductive rights has been at the heart of some streams of the feminist movement from its

---

25 She elaborated there on the situation of women who immigrate to Palestine and suffer from the changing conditions of living in a different way than men. She calls on women to understand that their value as human beings does not come from the social position which they had left behind in Germany, but in their work and activity. Particularly a need of establishing educational institution for girls, sending charismatic leaders and teachers as well as building health care centers for women had she recognized as a particular women's question in Palestine. See Straus 1908.

26 Did she ever try to speak about it in the Zionist organizations? If not, was she afraid of being perceived as too radical feminist and rejected? (About the limitations of women's activity, lack of recognition of women Zionists and objectification of women's issues in the Zionist movement, see Or 2009; Prestel 1994a, 1994b.) Did she not consider reproductive rights important for the future Jewish state, since she was concerned about the issue in context of the Weimar Republic? Did she try to include it in the agenda of general Zionist organizations? Or did she quit on it in the name of the national interest? Those questions remain open for my further investigation.

inception, and has been seen by many feminists as the basic “touchstone” of feminist politics.<sup>27</sup> From 1968, reproductive rights, recognized as the right of individuals and couples to decide freely and responsibly about the number and time of having children, have been also proclaimed a part of human rights by the United Nations Organization.<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, her case contributes to our understanding of the body politics in the modern nation state, which is an important stream of contemporary critique of the post-Enlightenment society. Although birth control is an old phenomenon in most societies, the birth control movement is less than two centuries old (cf. Gordon 1976, 3). A discourse about reproductive rights is linked (among others) with the development of medicine and emergence of the modern political organization.<sup>29</sup> This debate resulted at the turn of the 19th century in developing three major theories on population: racial hygiene (or eugenics), neo-Malthusianism and pronatalism.<sup>30</sup> As noted by Foucault, the importance of politicization and medicalization of sexual desires has derived from the fact that sex links two main issues for power in the nation state: control over individual’s bodies and population size – but it also bears the third social phenomenon, which is the role of women. Any reliable history of democratization processes must take those issues into account.

Thirdly, it depicts an experience of Jews in Weimar Germany and belongs to the general history of Jewish people. The issue of reproduction remains an important part of contemporary Jewish and Israeli politics.<sup>31</sup> It is particularly

---

27 See Tong 2006.

28 See Knudsen 2006.

29 See Foucault 1990; Davidovitch and Zalashnik 2006.

30 According to some scholars, propounded by middle class and directed at lower class to serve economic growth, quality of the people and imperialism. See Osborne 2007.

31 Population increase has been considered an important issue in determining Israel’s political future, since the high birth rate among non-Jewish - mostly Arab – population is considered a threat for Jewish national state unity. Contemporary Israeli pro-natalist policy is just another pole of the same instrumentalization of people’s reproductive behavior. See Yishai 1993; Yuval-Davis 1997, 30; Yuval-Davis 1989, 99; Birenbaum-Carmeli and Dirnfeld 2008.

important for the Zionist history, because of the ambivalent relation between national and women's interests.<sup>32</sup> The fact that this issue remains under-researched and not properly recognized as a scientific problem in the Zionist historiography, is clearly political and it reflects the dynamics of power in the national movement.<sup>33</sup>

This article aimed at filling the gap in historiography by presenting Dr. Straus's public appearance concerning abortion law and women's health issues. I seek to contextualize her activity in the broad frame of Zionism and feminism as the next stage of my work. A further critical analysis of Rahel Straus's argumentation should be conducted both from feminist perspective as well as from the Jewish philosophical point of view.<sup>34</sup> I do recognize the need for such an analysis and hope that it can be a further step, taken not only by me, but also by other colleagues.

What about Einstein?

"[W]hen Mother visited us in Princeton we went together to the Einsteins' for tea" – recalls Dr. Straus' son Ernst in his memoirs.

"For most visitors, this was an occasion where they hoped to gather some pearls of wisdom from Einstein. Not so with Mother. Einstein had trouble getting a word in edgewise, while Mother and Miss Dukas [Einstein's housekeeper]

32 Despite the claims of its concern for women's issues, rather than truly questioning the gender hierarchy of power, Zionism developed a myth of equality; see Prestell 1994a. For ambivalent relation between women and nation, see Kaplan et. al. 1999; Yuval-Davis 1997.

33 The discourse on the principles of Zionism is still on. In a recent article in an American conservative magazine, the author refers to Hadassah's support for Obama's decision concerning subsidized contraception: "One wonders what in the world a group calling itself The Women's Zionist Organization of America is doing in the health care field. "Zionist" pertains to Jewry, Israel and the preservation of the Jewish people." He advises the organization to either change the name, or start dealing with the issues of Zionism. Cf. Bergstein 2012.

34 For example, to what extent might the question of reproductive rights be negotiated in Judaism, assuming that Judaism is a political and social system based on covenant? See Levene 2004.

discussed the problems of cooking for him and reminisced about the time (early 1920's) when Miss Dukas had served as nursemaid to my uncle Raphael's children. Einstein was obviously delighted not to be the center of attention for once" (Straus 1975, 46).<sup>35</sup>

## LITERATURE

- Bergstein, Alan. 2012. "Hadassah's leftist reproductive rights push betrays its 'Zionist' name." *BIZPAC Review*, 15 February. Accessed 31/08/2012. <http://www.bizpacreview.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=news.details&ArticleId=131542&returnTo=alan-bergstein>.
- Birenbaum-Carmeli, Daphna and Martha Dirnfeld. 2008. "In vitro Fertilisation Policy in Israel and Women's Perspectives: The More the Better?" *Reproductive Health Matters* 16(31): 182–191.
- Blätter des Jüdischen Frauenbundes: Organ des Jüdischen Frauenbundes von Deutschland. 1930. *Blätter des Jüdischen Frauenbundes: Organ des Jüdischen Frauenbundes von Deutschland* 6(4).
- Davidovitch, Nadav and Rakefet Zalashnik. 2006. "Medical Borders: Historical, Political, and Cultural Analyses." *Science in Context* 19(3): 309–316.
- Die Frau. 1930. *Die Frau* July (37).
- Edinger, Dora. 1930. "Sommerschule des Jüdischen Frauenbundes in Bad Durkheim." *Der Morgen*, 6:395–396.
- Feinberg, Harriet. 2005. "Aletta Jacobs." *Jewish Women. A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, Jewish Women Archive. <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jacobs-aletta-henriette>
- Foucault, Michel. 1990. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Freidenreich, Harriet. 2002. *Female, Jewish and Educated: The Lives of Central European Jewish University Women*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gerhard, Ute. 1990. *Unerhört. Die Geschichte der deutschen Frauenbewegung*. Hamburg: Rowohlt.

---

35 Ernst Straus' memoirs, August 1975. This autobiography is not published, and I accessed it thanks to Daniel Straus' courtesy.

- Gordon, Linda. 1976. *Woman's Body, Woman's Right. A Social History of Birth Control in America*. New York: Grossman Publishers.
- Grossmann, Atina. 1978. "Abortion and Economic Crisis: The 1931 Campaign against §218 in Germany." *New German Critique* 14: 119–137.
- Grossmann, Atina. 1993. "German Women Doctors from Berlin to New York: Maternity and Modernity in Weimar and in Exile." *Feminist Studies* 19(1): 65–88.
- Hart, Mitchel. 2001. *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kaplan, Caren, Norma Alarcón, and Mino Moallem, eds. 1999. *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kaplan, Marion A. 1979. *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany. The Campaigns of the Jüdischer Frauenbund, 1904–1938*. Westport, Connecticut – London, England: Greenwood Press.
- Kaplan, Marion A. 1982. "Tradition and Transition. The Acculturation, Assimilation and Integration of Jews in Imperial Germany A Gender Analysis." *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 27(1): 3–35.
- Kaplan, Marion A. 2005. *Jewish Daily Life in Germany 1618–1945*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kark, Ruth. 2004. "Not a Suffragist? Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi on Women and Gender." *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 7:128–150.
- Knudsen, Lara M. 2006. *Reproductive Rights in a Global Context*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Krauss, Marita. 2002. *Die Frau der Zukunft. Dr. Hope Bridges Adams Lehmann (1855–1916), Ärztin und Reformerin*. München: Buchendorfer Verlag.
- Kuźma-Markowska, Sylwia. 2010. "'Zbudź się, Żydówko!' Genderowe ujęcie tematu kontroli urodzeń wśród Żydów w międzywojennej Polsce." In *Nieme dusze? Kobiety w kulturze jidysz*, ed. Joanna Lisek, 465–480. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.
- Levene, Nancy K. 2004. "Judaism's Body Politic." In *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuels, 234–262. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Mazón, Patricia M. 2000. "'Fräulein Doktor': Literary Images of the First Female University Students in Fin-de-Siècle Germany." *Women in German Yearbook* 16: 129–150.

- Or, Tamara. 2009. *Vorkämpferinnen und Mutter des Zionismus. Die deutsch-zionistischen Frauenorganisationen (1897–1938)*. Peter Lang Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften.
- Prestel, Claudia. 1994a. "Zionist Rhetoric and Women's Equality (1897–1933): Myth and Reality." *San José Studies* 20(3): 4–28.
- Prestel, Claudia. 1994b. "Frauen und die Zionistische Bewegung (1897–1933): Tradition oder Revolution?" *Historische Zeitschrift* 258: 29–71.
- Rakovska, Puah. 2002. *My life as a Radical Jewish Woman*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Rapp, Jeanett. 2011. *Von Jüdin für Jüdin. Die soziale Arbeit der Leipziger Ortsgruppe des Jüdischen Frauenbundes und ihrer Mitgliedsorganisationen bis zum Ende der Weimarer Republik*. PhD diss., (Fachbereich Erziehungswissenschaft und Psychologie der Freien Berlin). Universitäts Bibliothek – Dissertationens Online. <http://www.diss.fu-berlin.de/diss/content/below/index.xml>.
- Rose, Alison. 2008. *Jewish Women in Fin de Siècle Vienna*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Rupp, Leila. 1997. *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Shepherd, Naomi. 1998. *A Price Below the Rubies*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Smith, Bonnie G. 1989. *Changing Lives. Women in European History Since 1700*. Lexington, Massachusetts/Toronto: D.C. Heath and Company.
- Straus, Ernst. [unpublished manuscript]. *Memoirs*.
- Straus, Rahel. 1908. "Frauenarbeit in Palästina." *Palästina. Monatschrift für die wirtschaftliche Erschliessung Palästinas* 4.
- Straus, Rahel. 1930a. *Wege zur Sexuellen Aufklärung. Zwei Vorträge einer Mutter und Ärztin*. München: Verlag der Ärztlichen Kundschauf Otto Gmellin.
- Straus, Rahel. 1930b. "Moderne Frauenprobleme." *Blätter des Jüdischen Frauenbundes für Frauenarbeit und Frauenbewegung* 2.
- Straus, Rahel. 1930c. "Aussprache zum Artikel 218 auf dem Durkheimer Sommerschule des Jüdischen Frauenbundes. Auszug aus dem Referat." *Blätter des Jüdischen Frauenbundes für Frauenarbeit und Frauenbewegung* 11.
- Straus, Rahel. 1933. "Ehe und Mutterschaft in Judentum." *Blätter des Jüdischen Frauenbundes für Frauenarbeit und Frauenbewegung* 7.

- Straus, Rahel. 1943. *Mutter und werdendes Kind, Mutter und Säugling*. Jerusalem: Edition Dr. Peter Freund.
- Straus, Rahel. 1961. *Wir lebten in Deutschland. Erinnerungen einer deutschen Jüdin*. Stuttgart.
- Taylor Allen, Ann. 1991. *Feminism and Motherhood in Germany, 1800–1915*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Tolstoy, Leo. 1996. *Resurrection*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Tong, Rosemarie Putnam. 2006. *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Undset, Sigrid. 2005. *Kristin Lavransdatter*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Usborne, Cornelia. 2007. *The Cultures of Abortion in Weimar Germany*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.
- Wiley Puckett, Hugh. [1930] 1967. *Germany's Women Go Forward*. New York: Columbia University Press. New York: AMS Press.
- Wobick Segev, Sarah E. 2011. *Make Yourself at Home: Jewish Belonging and Sociability in Berlin, Paris and St. Petersburg, 1890–1950s*. ProQuest, UMI Dissertation Publishing.
- Woycke, James. 1988. *Birth Control in Germany 1871–1933*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Yishai, Yael. 1993. "Abortion in Israel: Social Demand and Political Responses." In *Women in Israel. Studies of Israeli Society*, Vol. VI, ed. Yael Azmon and Dafna N. Izraeli, 287–307. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1997. *Gender & Nation*. London: Sage Publications.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1989. "National Reproduction and the 'Demographic Race in Israel.'" In *Woman-Nation-State*, eds. Nira Yuval-Davis and Flora Anthias. 92–109. London: Macmillan.

Primljeno: 31.10.2012.

Prihvaćeno: 16.11.2012.

## Jevrejka, žena, obrazovana i politički angažovana: dr Rahela Štraus o abortusu u Vajmarskoj republici

---

Kataržina ČERVONOGORA

Istraživački centar za društvene nauke, Berlin

**Sažetak:** Fokus ovoga članka je doprinos lekarkinje Rahele Štraus razvoju diskursa o reproduktivnim pravima u Vajmarskoj Nemačkoj. Osnovna ideja je da se popuni praznina u historiografiji preko istraživanja pojavljivanja Rahele Štraus u javnosti u kontekstu feminističkog pokreta i cionizma. Članak, između ostalog, govori i o rezultatima mog obuhvatnijeg istraživanja o borbi žena za priznanje unutar cionističkog pokreta. Iako je pitanje reproduktivnih prava nedovoljno istraženo u jevrejskoj nacionalnoj historiografiji, ono je ključno mesto jevrejske i izraelske politike. Od osnivanja države Izraela 1948. godine, njena pronatalna politika je u sukobu sa seksualnim ponašanjima pojedinki i pojedinaca. Pošto je danas Izrael vodeća zemlja u svetu kada je reč o *in vitro* fertilizaciji, važno je povezati savremenu instrumentalizaciju reproduktivnog ponašanja populacije u Izraelu sa debatama iz prošlosti u jevrejskim zajednicama koje čine referentnu tačku za savremene politike tela i telesnosti u nacionalnim državama.

Dr Rahela Štraus je lekarka čiji su život i politička aktivnost oblikovani nemačkom, a zatim i izraelskom politikom. Pionirka među ginekološkinjama u Nemačkoj, Rahela Štraus se angažovala u brojnim debatama i borbi protiv penalizacije abortusa. Ona 1930. godine drži predavanja ženama učesnicama Letnje škole koje organizuje Jevrejska ženska federacija, da bi zatim objavila i članak u časopisu Federacije. Imajući u vidu veliki broj nelegalnih abortusa, Rahela Štraus zastupa radikalni stav zalaganjem za slobodu i pravo žena da same odlučuju o svojim telima i smatra da je neophodno da se ženama omogući zakonsko pravo da prekinu trudnoću. Ovaj problem, dr Štraus postavlja u okvirima društvene (ne) pravde i klasne (ne)jednakosti. Iste, 1930. godine, napisala je i vodič za seksualno ponašanje namenjen Jevrejicama, odnosno priručnik za seksualno obrazovanje žena sa ciljem da one postanu svesne svojih tela. U tom smislu, pojavu Rahele Štraus možemo videti kao važan momenat u jevrejskoj društvenoj istoriji i društvenoj istoriji jevrejskih žena. Njeni tekstovi i aktivna borba za reproduktivna prava žena pomaže našem razumevanju dinamike borbe Jevrejki za priznanje u Vajmarskoj Nemačkoj.

**Ključne reči:** Rahela Štraus, Jevrejke, reproduktivna prava, abortus, Vajmarska Nemačka, nemački Jevreji, politike tela, lekarka