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**Their Plea for Freedom – Their Flight from Home:
Jewish Women’s Quest for Education, Love, and Anarchism**

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative analysis of how Jewish American writers Rosa Sonneschein and Wilhelmina Wittigsschlager, the American writer Kendrick Belle Abbot, and the Polish Jewish writer Aniela Kallas portray young Jewish women who escape their homes. The study delves into both the literal acts of escape and the deeper, internal struggles for spiritual and personal freedom experienced by these women. Unlike most existing research that examines the “runaway daughters” phenomenon through a historiographical approach, our study innovatively revives the voices of both fictional characters and the real female Jewish writers behind them. By focusing on these narratives, this article reveals a significant shift in how young Jewish women are represented. Historically objectified, these figures are increasingly depicted as self-assertive and autonomous individuals. The analysis not only highlights this evolution in representation but also contributes to our understanding of the broader cultural and ideological changes at play. The novels in question illustrate a transformative shift from viewing young Jewish women as mere subjects of their circumstances to recognizing them as proactive agents in their own stories. This change is indicative of a deeper cultural rethinking, where women reclaim their agency and redefine their roles within their communities, challenging traditional norms and expectations.

Keywords: Young Jewish women; female emancipation; escape from home; reclamation of agency

Introduction: Exploring the Literary Depiction of Jewish Women's "Escape"

The last two decades saw the publication of important historical and sociological accounts of the lives of Jewish women living within the Pale of Settlement or in Galicia between 1870 and 1920.¹ Most studies deal with the hardships these women faced regarding the changing political, societal, and educational climate within East-European Jewish communities, mainly basing the research on archival materials, newspapers, and legal accounts. One of the issues that has preoccupied historians is the large number of Jewish young women who escaped from home and found their way to convents or big cities, or who emigrated to America. Notably, during the period from 1873 to 1914, a considerable number of Jewish young women vanished from their residences, sought refuge within the Felician Sisters' convent in Krakow, and underwent a conversion to Roman Catholicism (Manekin, *The Rebellion* 2).

The article centers on the works of American, including Jewish American, female writers, Belle Kendrick Abbott's *Leah Mordechai* (1875), Wilhelmina Wittigslager's *Minna: Wife of the Young Rabbi* (1905), and Rosa Sonneschein's "Jew and Magnate" (1897) respectively, and a novel, *Prodigal Daughters* (1913), penned by Aniela Kallas, a Polish Jewish writer. Even though when they wrote, these writers enjoyed ample popularity, they have been mostly overlooked in literary criticism, despite their important contribution to the proto-feminist discourse. When discussing "escape," we relate both to women's physical flight from home, as in the case of Aniela Kallas and Wilhelmina Wittigslager, and to their internal quest to leave the hearth and move to less restrictive environments, as discussed by Abbott and Sonneschein. In our analysis, we compare how Jewish women's experiences of flight are depicted in different linguistic and cultural contexts. Furthermore, while most studies examine this trend through a historiographical and sociological lens, this article aims at investigating the fictional, autobiographical, and semi-autobiographical depictions of such women by Jewish and non-Jewish writers.² Through this comparative study, the article sheds light on the

broad social and cultural forces that contributed to Jewish women's desire or need to escape, and the challenges they faced in doing so.

The theme of escape allows the authors to explore the complexities of identity construction, especially in the context of Jewish women who are often caught between tradition and modernity. By depicting characters who seek freedom from restrictive environments, the authors can delve into questions of personal autonomy, self-discovery, and the quest for a more fulfilling life. Moreover, by focusing on women's experiences of escape, the authors criticize traditional gender roles and the limitations imposed on women within patriarchal societies. These narratives often serve as a means to challenge and question the societal norms that restrict women's opportunities and freedoms, portraying the act of escape as a form of resistance against oppression. Beyond specific cultural or historical contexts, the theme of escape resonates as a universal human experience. It speaks to the broader desire for change, growth, and the pursuit of a better life, which is a fundamental aspect of the human condition. The theme of escape inherently creates narrative tension and drama, which are crucial for compelling storytelling. The conflicts, obstacles, and dilemmas faced by the characters who are trying to escape – whether physically or internally – provide rich material for crafting engaging and thought-provoking stories.

The choice of language – English, Yiddish, or Polish – plays a crucial role in shaping these narratives, as each language carries its own cultural and historical connotations that influence how the women's struggles and journeys are portrayed. Such representations shed light on possible reasons for the Jewish protagonists' actual or imagined flight and the adversities they suffered. English, as a cultural construct, offers a framework through which Jewish women's experiences can be articulated in terms of self-empowerment and personal growth. The language's flexibility and vast vocabulary allow for nuanced expressions of identity, reflecting the broader American cultural emphasis on reinvention and individual agency. Kallas's *Prodigal Daughters*, written in Polish and peppered with Yiddish, offers a different outlook. Polish, as the language of the broader society surrounding the Jewish communities in Poland, introduces an additional layer of cultural and social tension. The cultural

and historical nuances embedded in the Polish language influence the portrayal of escape, often highlighting themes of alienation, survival, and resistance. Writing in Polish reflects the dual identity of Jewish authors who navigate between their Jewish heritage and their place within the Polish society. Polish narratives may underscore the historical adversities faced by Jewish women, with the language itself shaping the stories in ways that reflect the broader socio-political forces at play. The choice of the Polish language gestures to assimilative tendencies within the Jewish diaspora, as culturally assimilated Jews were Kallas's main audience. On the other hand, the idiomatic expressions in Yiddish and the historical references deepen the portrayal of internal conflicts, particularly the tension between adhering to tradition and embracing modernity. Yiddish serves not only as a means of communication but also as a repository of shared experiences and values, shaping how Jewish women's struggles are framed and understood.

Motivations for Flight: Family, Love, and Education

There were numerous reasons why young Jewish girls decided to leave their parents' home, the community, or their native land. Many left due to family conflicts, especially when being forced to marry at a young age. Others had covert love affairs with Christian men and fled to be united with their lovers. Still, others dreamt of pursuing higher education at a gymnasium or university or engaging in an artistic career, pursuits that were forbidden by traditional parents and communities. Some others found refuge at convents, which promised to release them from an undesirable marriage or from abusive parents.³ Another group of young women left their homes to join political or anarchist groups, mainly trying to rebel against the social and political injustices enacted by the Tsarist regime. The barriers imposed by the existing patriarchy and the intolerant Shtetl society influenced many women, but these were not the only hindrances to their self-sufficient identities; some protagonists also struggled with the difficulties of grappling with personally constructed barriers to self-assertion. In both real and fictional stories from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, written by female authors and focusing on

Jewish women protagonists, separations due to migration often resulted in psychological and spiritual limbos. Leaving their Jewish past behind, without gaining full acceptance into the newly adoptive society, caused many young women to feel disoriented.

Novels and plays depicting a young woman's elopement to marry a lover were quite popular in British and American literature in the nineteenth century. These mostly included penny novels or sentimental plays in which a naïve young girl is tempted by a shrewd lover and enticed to trick her parents and run away from home.⁴ Narratives of Jewish women eloping to marry a Christian lover, after quarrelling with their families, and especially with fathers, are not new in literature either. Nevertheless, the stories of Jewish girls' elopement are quite different from those pertaining to their Christian counterparts. The Jewish woman stands as a triple embodiment of "the Other," bearing the markers of being a Jew, a woman, and one who, through elopement and marriage to a Christian, typically undergoes conversion to Christianity. This act not only challenges familial and patriarchal norms but also transgresses the boundaries of the Jewish creed, posing a threat to the principle governing the progeny of mixed unions.⁵ The narrative of the Jewish Father/Daughter conflict was initially introduced by Christopher Marlowe in his work *The Jew of Malta* and later echoed by William Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*. While Jewish sons are non-convertible, Jewish daughters are. In these narratives, the Jewish father is a patriarch, ready to "sacrifice" his daughter – Barabas for revenge: "sacrifice her on a pile of wood" (Marlowe 69), or like Shylock – for his own needs: "look to my house . . . For I did dream of money bags tonight" (Shakespeare, 2.5.15-19).

Jewish female conversion is connected to the assumption that "the religious difference of Jewish women is not usually imagined as physically inscribed in their flesh" (Shapiro 120), by contrast with male circumcision, hence permitting for a smoother shift between Jewish and Christian identities. The Romantic writers, adding traits such as erotic threat and transgressive sexuality, have adopted the tradition of depicting "convertible" Jewish daughters, though with some variations.⁶

Defying Tradition: The Bold Journeys of Jewish Runaway Daughters in Abbot's *Leah Mordecai* and Sonneschein's "Jew and Magnate"

In American literature, the most prominent examples of Jewish runaway daughters include the protagonist of a novel of the same name, written by Abbott, and Sonneschein's Lena Lehman in "Jew and Magnate." Lena leaves her Jewish husband, Felix Costa, to whom she was betrothed without her consent. Over the span of ten years, Lena and Felix endured a loveless union that failed to bear any offspring. Faced with Lena's sudden elopement, Felix, eager to avert any potential scandal, implores the rabbi to exploit the guise of Lena's inability to conceive as grounds for nullifying their marriage. In accordance with Jewish legal principles, a husband is granted the authority to divorce a wife without children or even consider the option of taking a second wife.⁷ In a short while, Lena undergoes a conversion to Christianity, sealing her commitment by entering matrimony with her paramour – a Hungarian Count.

Sonneschein refrains from condemning her protagonist for eloping and converting (Rabinovich, "Rosa Sonneschein's Fin-the-Siècle" 147). Instead of passing judgment, she extends compassion towards Lena's poignant story – a notable woman compelled to marry at a young age to an older man she does not love, facing scorn from the Jewish community for her childlessness. Lena's decision to leave her family, divorce her husband, and embrace a new faith exacts a heavy toll. Remarkably, even Felix, acknowledging that "Lena had suffered enough," (Sonneschein 5) takes an uncommon step in such situations by releasing her from servitude.

Sonneschein's compassionate perspective on Lena may be shaped by her personal experience with divorce. Sonneschein underwent a divorce in 1893, triggered by the scandalous revelation of her husband's affair with a congregant, a scandal that made headlines. The elevated social standing of Rabbi Solomon and Rosa Sonneschein, coupled with the rarity of divorces during that era, created quite a commotion. Beyond reflecting the author's personal journey, Sonneschein's narrative parallels the real-life elopement of Helen Wise Molony, daughter of the esteemed Jewish community leader, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. Solomon

Sonneschein, a close associate of Mayer Wise, officiated marriage ceremonies between Christians and Jews, a practice that clashed with Mayer Wise's and other influential Jewish leaders' views (Jones 7). Intermarriages, often preceded by a Jewish woman's elopement, were familiar to Sonneschein. Her sympathetic portrayal of Lena could very well have drawn inspiration from the experiences of Helen and other Jewish women whom Solomon Sonneschein united with Christian men in his synagogue.

In Abbott's narrative, Leah Mordecai, a compliant and meek Jewish daughter, takes the daring step of eloping with a Christian lover. Her decision stems from a life marked by mistreatment at the hands of a malevolent stepmother, parental neglect, and a treacherous separation from her Jewish betrothed. Benjamin, Leah's widowed father and a bank owner, weds Rebecca, his deceased wife's nurse, an illiterate and scheming woman who exploits the grieving widower and cruelly mistreats the orphaned Leah. Rebecca, now the mistress of the household, bears two daughters and orchestrates a plan to eliminate Leah and strip her of any inheritance. At the beginning of the story, Leah, an eighteen-year-old woman of striking beauty, excellent education, and compliance, is on the verge of graduating from a private school. Although Leah is betrothed to a Jewish man, the engagement is annulled when her suitor is misled by a rumor spread by Leah's malevolent stepmother about Leah's poor health. Heartbroken by this betrayal, Leah turns to Emile le Grande, a Christian military cadet and the son of a prominent judge, who becomes enamored with her. Despite familial objections, the couple elopes and establishes a joyful life in Cuba. However, their happiness is short-lived, as Leah's stepmother's machinations lead to Emile's imprisonment and ultimately culminate in Leah's tragic demise.

Several common features characterize the stories of the elopement of the Jewish daughter. First, in most, the Jewess is strikingly good-looking, usually pertaining to the Oriental "Belle Juive"⁸ type, having dark and shiny hair, an olive complexion, and beautiful eyes. Lena "dazzled the eyes that beheld her rich and radiant beauty . . . and a face bewitching in its Oriental completed the ideal" (Sonneschein 3).

Leah is also presented as an ultimate exemplar of the beautiful and Oriental Jewess with “the lustrous eye, the massive crown of hair that so often distinguish and beautify the Hebrew maiden” (Abbott 11). Anthony Bale posits that the inception of this stereotype finds its roots in the longstanding Christian-Jewish dynamics spanning centuries. He contends that

[t]he Jewess’s body is a site of competing jurisdictions, Christian and Jewish, with the rivalry between men articulated through controlling the Jewess. . . . The Jewish woman is that which licenses an unsettling – but useful – alliance of sex and violence within normative codes of Christian conduct, an imaginary Jewish body for the self-regarding gratification of the Christian devotional body. (99-100)

The protagonist’s Oriental beauty, usually paired with docility and goodness, makes the Jewish woman a desirable trophy for a Christian lover.

Nevertheless, these women acquire the agency to make choices without fear of familial abuse or having someone else decide for them, even when they elope to join their lovers. Secondly, despite the protagonists’ high moral stance and the marital bliss that they attain while residing with their chosen spouse, most find themselves in a social and psychological limbo, since they are usually rejected by the Jewish society, but are not accepted into the Christian one. Socially, they are shunned because they break the accepted conventions; psychologically, they feel confused, as they need to reinvent new selves in a strange community. In the worst cases, like in that of Leah Mordecai, the protagonist is left without means, gets sick, and eventually dies. The women’s new reality does not promise a solace to their inner turmoil, so both their physical and metaphoric escapes are in fact “narrow escapes.”

Escaping Oppression into Anarchy: Vladimir Jochelson’s *Gesia Gelfman* and Wittigslager’s *Minna: Wife of the Young Rabbi*

In contrast to literary depictions, several well-known Jewish women were actively involved in anarchist and nihilist groups across Russia, Ukraine,

Britain, and the United States. Prominent figures include Emma Goldman, Rose Pesotta, and Gesia Gelfman. However, few literary works address the lives of Jewish female anarchists in detail. Among the exceptions are Goldman's own biographical records and two notable works: Jochelson's *Gesia Gelfman: a Biographical Account* (1880),⁹ which chronicles the life and political activism of Gesia Gelfman, and Wittigschlager's semi-autobiographical novel *Minna: Wife of the Young Rabbi* (1905).

Born in Mazyr, Russia, Gesia Gelfman (1855-1882), the daughter of a Jewish merchant, defied her father's attempts to arrange her marriage. Opting for a different path, she fled to Kiev, where she toiled as a seamstress and midwife. Simultaneously, she aligned herself with a social revolutionary group. The year 1875 marked her arrest and conviction for the distribution of prohibited literature, leading to her imprisonment in the St. Petersburg Workhouse. Her fate took a turn in 1879 when she was exiled to the province of Novgorod. However, Gelfman's spirit was not easily subdued, as she fled just a few months later, casting her lot with the *Narodnaya Volya* (*People's Will*) revolutionary party in Saint Petersburg. The year 1881 bore witness to a significant event, as a member of the *Narodnaya Volya* group assassinated Tsar Alexander II. While Gelfman did not assume a frontline role in the act, she found herself accused of maintaining a conspiratorial residence. This led to her arrest, a particularly dire circumstance given her four-month pregnancy. After giving birth in prison in October 1881, Gelfman's tragic journey continued, culminating in her death three years later while still incarcerated.

The story of Gelfman's torture caught the attention of the press and of Human Rights organizations worldwide. There were demonstrations in her support in Marseilles ("Latest Intelligence"). *The Sacramento Daily Union Journal*, when commenting about Gelfman's brutal arrest, says that the arrest "will certainly have the effect of intensifying the hatred of the Nihilists, and eventually they [the Russian government] will take their revenge. Government descends to the ineffable cruelty and baseness involved in the torture of a woman, and above all, a woman in such a condition [pregnant]" ("Horrible Story"). Following Gelfman's imprisonment and sentence, Russian Jews suffered severe pogroms from neighbors, organized or propelled by the authorities who attempted to

divert the peasants' and workers' rage from the malfunctioning government to the Jews. Paradoxically, several Jews, including Gelfman, who sacrificed their lives for the improvement of the laborers' harsh working conditions, became the scapegoats, were accused of riots, anarchy and eventually of the assassination of the Tzar.

In his account of Gesya's life, the writer Sergey Stepanyak-Kravchinsky testifies about Gelfman's selfless personality, saying that Gelfman was one of the "unknown heroines, obscure toilers, who offer up everything upon the altar of their cause, without asking anything for themselves. They assume the most ungrateful parts; sacrifice themselves for the merest trifle" (101). He describes a fearless woman who walked for fourteen hours about St. Petersburg, delivering letters, helping comrades and strangers by sharing her meagre meals. Gesya was always jovial; she never complained, and her efforts were directed to one cause: helping the poor, the desolate workers by achieving proper and just working conditions. He also comments on her bleak childhood about which she scarcely spoke, even to close friends and intimates. Orphaned of a mother at an early age, Gesya was abused by a cruel stepmother and an indifferent father whose only goal was to marry her off at the age of sixteen to a Yeshiva student. Gelfman's aspirations to study or to become socially involved in labor struggles could be achieved just by fleeing to a big city, Kiev. Gesya, a frail girl of sixteen, penniless, destitute, without any profession or connections, was tremendously brave to flee. In Kiev, besides joining the Free Will party, Gesya managed to pursue education. She read a lot, attended lectures, and successfully completed midwifery courses. Unfortunately, her dedication and hard work were brutally disrupted by the atrocious regime.

Transitioning from Gelfman's real-life struggles to the realm of fiction/semi-autobiography, Wittigshlager's novel *Minna: Wife of the Young Rabbi* explores a similar narrative of oppression and liberation. Minna's journey from subjugation to a degree of personal freedom parallels Gelfman's real-life experiences, illustrating how fiction can reflect and expand upon the realities faced by women like Gelfman. *Minna: Wife of the Young Rabbi* delves into the convoluted journey of a nineteenth-century female protagonist, navigating the path from

oppression by tyrannical forces towards a realization of relative personal liberation and coherent selfhood. This transformation is primarily attributed to Minna's resilience, high moral values, and intellectual growth. Furthermore, Minna's narrative emerges as an early feminist paradigm, portraying a young woman's struggle against the restrictive practices of a Jewish community, patriarchal forces, and abusive labor conditions prevalent in New York and Chicago. Minna's tale of rebellion intertwines with the stories of contemporaneous female revolutionaries such as Lucy Parsons, Emma Goldman, and Hesya Gelfman. It suggests that Minna's depiction may have drawn inspiration from actual female rebels. The novel commences with Minna's father forcing her to marry a Yeshiva student she has never met. Enduring continuous mistreatment and physical abuse from her adoptive parents, whom she believed to be her biological ones until the age of thirteen, Minna finds the news of her non-consensual matrimony even more distressing. She recalls, "perspiration covered my forehead and then again, I was shivering cold. All that woman who called herself my mother had said, pierced me through and through" (Wittigschlager 6).

The narrative unfolds with a detailed exploration of the habits of the Jewish community, focusing on the deteriorated physical and moral condition of the Yeshiva students. Fortunately, Minna escapes her village with the help of a gentile neighbor a day after the marriage ceremony. Settling in Hamburg, Germany, she discovers her pregnancy, gives birth to a son, and works as a servant. However, her illegal residence is discovered, leading to her deportation to England, where she toils as a seamstress until her adoptive parents, now residing in England, tarnish her reputation. Left with no alternative, Minna flees to New York, where she engages in labor union activities while working as a seamstress, passionately advocating for her fellow workers. Subsequently relocating to Chicago, she juggles night studies in medicine with day shifts in the garment industry. Actively participating in the Chicago Labor Union, she joins demonstrations and delivers impassioned public addresses, seemingly influenced by Lucy E. Parsons. Parsons, a prominent female leader during the uprisings, notably the anarchist riot dubbed "The Haymarket affair," was an articulate speaker and founder of the

newspaper *Freedom*, addressing labor organizing. According to Irina Rabinovich, Minna's addresses echo Parsons's speech titled "I am an Anarchist," wherein Parsons urges laborers to action, highlighting the injustices of the system ("Wilhelmina Wittigslager's Minna" 658). Like Parsons, Minna addresses "the woman question," condemning the oppression of women under capitalism. Minna's feminism, akin to that of Parsons, views women's oppression as a product of capitalism, though Minna, in contrast to Lucy, does not address racist discrimination.

Navigating Education and Identity: Kallas' *Prodigal Daughters*

As the narrative of Minna's life intersects with broader themes of social reform and labor rights, Kallas'¹⁰ novel *Córki marnotrawne* (1912)¹¹ [*Prodigal Daughters*] further delves into the ideological and social changes occurring within early 20th-century Jewish-Polish society.¹² Historians Jonathan Frankel (202) and Nora Levin (30) agree that the rebellions of Jewish women against their families were more tumultuous than those of men because their pursuit of independence tarnished the family name and jeopardized marriage prospects for their siblings. The novel begins with a conversation between Malka and her friend Renata, in which Malka complains that her mother again burnt all her books. As it is not the first time, Malka considers escaping from home, in which education is perceived as a threat. The symbolic gesture of burning the books is a powerful metaphor of suppression that signifies the rejection of knowledge, a fear of change and progress. Simultaneously, the burning flames symbolize the girl's unrelenting passion and determination in the quest for knowledge, which she seeks against all odds. The author navigates the narrative perspective through an intricate interplay of gender, national, and religious lenses, thereby delineating the girl's evolution from Orthodoxy to the realm of social liberalism. Combining feminism with the demand for Jewish emancipation, Kallas' novel portrays narrative manifestations of ideological and social changes in the early 20th-century Jewish-Polish society.¹³

The novel depicts the Klingers, a Jewish family of shopkeepers, whose eight children are raised according to the Jewish practice: the boys

learn in religious schools, and the girls are groomed for marriage. Two of the titular “prodigal daughters,” however, Malka and her sister Hania, want to continue their education. Since “there were no rabbinical rules or guidelines with respect to the education of daughters” (Manekin, *The Rebellion* 107), in a traditional patriarchal Jewish family, the woman’s worth was measured against her chances of matrimony, while education was an unnecessary foible that jeopardized her chances of marriage. Thus, Kallas’ narrative is structured by polarities, showing the competing influences through the generation gap between the Jewish parents and children, with a special focus on education, assimilation, and the women’s rights. While the parents fear that secularization will undermine rabbinical orthodoxy and devalue religious observance, resulting in the weakening of the Jewish identity, the children see themselves as part of a larger world and want to exploit the new possibilities of economic, social, and cultural advancement. Young Jewish women often find allies in Jewish socialist activists, who champion their quest.¹⁴

The Klingers are successful storekeepers, with Mrs. Klinger combining commercial labor with wifehood and motherhood. A close vicinity between domesticity and paid work, as the store is downstairs, blurs the border between the private and the public, allowing very little room for personal autonomy. Both spheres are under strict social and familial scrutiny, especially her responsibility for the future of the children. In this capacity, Mrs. Klinger’s main worry is to marry off every one of them, preferably by seniority. As it is the mother’s task to secure the daughter’s matrimony, she must do everything to ensure happy nuptials. The youthful entry into matrimony finds its origins in distinct gender roles assigned to Jewish girls and boys, as upheld by classical rabbis who deemed marriage an obligation stemming from the directive to “go forth and multiply” (Maimonides 212), and that is why Malcia¹⁵ is engaged to marry a boy of her parents’ choice.

Marriage is compared to trade, when the goods exposed too long on the counter will garner less attention from potential customers; hence, a mother’s mission is to marry pubescent daughters. While the sons have roles in Jewish religious life, and the father ensures that they know the Torah, the daughters’ future is the mother’s responsibility. Any pursuits

other than domestic, such as secular education, might endanger the daughters' chances of matrimony. Though Mrs. Klinger knows only Yiddish, she does not see herself as a backward Jewess, something her daughters accuse her of. In Hania's eyes, the mother's practicality and a little bit of social refinement, which she picked up while standing behind the store's counter, are her only advantages. Mrs. Klinger allows her daughters to be educated and employs private tutors, as "employing private tutors for Jewish girls avoided the effects of socialization with non-Jewish school friends" (Manekin, *The Rebellion* 58). But this is only to a certain degree, as too much education, in her view, is considered a flaw. Rudimentary knowledge suffices for girls who need to know about home economics. In Mrs. Klinger's opinion, learning stupefies women, unnecessarily diverting their attention from the important matters of family life.

As the female roles in Judaism are strongly set, books are not for everyone, repeats Mrs. Klinger. Furthermore, a girl's knowledge and emancipation will meet with resentment on the part of the Jewish community, resulting in the difficulty of finding a fiancé who would be equally educated, or who would want an educated spouse.¹⁶ A Jewish man needs a wife who is a caregiver, not a doctor or a philosopher, declares Mrs. Klinger. Thus, women's education is shown as a threat to a Jewish sense of masculinity and patriarchy, which upsets the gender dynamics. Hence, there are constant arguments with Malka, who wants to continue her education but who is already engaged to be married and should not get involved in any activities that might jeopardize her nuptials.

Another reason that prompts Mrs. Klinger to disparage her daughters' education is the fear that, having read all those secular books, Malka will lose faith. Instead of following the Torah's commandments (Mitzvoth), she might question God's existence. Then, in time of crisis, she will have nowhere to turn to, as, according to her mother, religion is man's only consolation. Mrs. Klinger fears that secularism, perceived as a consequence-of education, will bring a decline in religious authority, leaving her daughters spiritually and culturally unmoored. For an observant Jewess like herself, the belief in God gives the strength to face life challenges. In tandem with his wife, Mr. Klinger opposes Malka's

education, and his reasons derive from experience. Since life is hard enough, he states, more knowledge will add to the burden. He believes that ignorance is bliss because the lack of inquisitiveness allows people to concentrate on a simple, mundane existence. There is knowledge that comes from the books, Mr. Klinger claims, and more useful knowledge that comes from tradition and culture. Additionally, he worries that secular education will draw his daughter closer to the world of Goyim (non-Jews). Using the juxtaposition of “us” and “them,” the father expresses a fear of assimilation. “Their” books and schools are good only for those Jews who want to become doctors, lawyers, and engineers, because then assimilation will facilitate inclusion into the Polish, mainstream society. This dichotomy is further carried on, thereby demonstrating the difference between the two types of education: the Jews study books to understand the word of God, the gentiles to obtain paid occupation. By disparaging the values of social assimilation, Mr. Klinger reveals the Jews as clannish, the term often used in anti-Semitic rhetoric.

Although the Klingers express their disapproval of secular education, there are circumstances when they allow it, even though they usually have an ulterior motif. Malka’s father allows his sons to learn Polish and German, so that they can pass as cultured, even though their main aim is to study the Torah. Similarly, Malka’s friend, Freiówna, is allowed to learn French because, as her father believes, a good merchant needs to know languages, and she will be useful in his wholesale business. Like Mr. Klinger, however, he warns his daughter not to get too deep into reading and over-thinking. Rachel Manekin confirms that “girls with knowledge of European languages, or who could help their fathers with their business accounts, were highly esteemed, even in the most Hasidic households” (*The Rebellion* 236). Thus, extra secular knowledge is welcome when it might help improve their social standing or prove useful in business dealings with non-Jews.

The Klingers stress the importance of staying within the Jewish tradition and express their disapproval of secular education, but their motifs and portrayals are different. Mrs. Klinger is described negatively, as a belligerent Jewish mother who destroys the daughter’s textbooks and even resorts to physical abuse to teach Malka a lesson. There is not only a

complete lack of understanding between the mother and her ambitious daughter, but also no willingness to recognize the other's viewpoint. Mrs. Klinger is a traditional Jewess whose obligations are to her family, helping in business, running a kosher household, and ensuring that the children are married off. Her world is confined to domesticity, while any transgressions threaten her *status quo*. Eugenia Prokop-Janiec confirms that "[i]t is the Jewish mothers that are usually presented by the writer as the most dangerous and the most ardent guardians of the traditional patriarchal order and its norms" (*Pogranicze polsko-żydowskie* 147).

Conversely, Mr. Klinger is a mild-mannered husband, largely absent from domestic problems. He is more sympathetic to Malka's pleas and allows her to finish matriculation examinations before marriage. When Malka brings her matriculation certificate home, the father shows it to his sons with pride, and even holds her in high regard. It seems that Mr. Klinger's respect for knowledge allows him to appreciate his daughter's endeavor. By contrast, Malka's mother's parochialism and provinciality leaves no room for discussion, and no argument is able to convince her about the value of education for a Jewish woman. Thus, access to knowledge, traditionally reserved for the Jewish men, is another factor that testifies to the changing relationship between the two generations of Jewish women.

The overarching thread guiding Kallas's narrative is access to education in a traditional Jewish family, represented through the struggles of two Jewish sisters, Malka and Hania. Both women view secular education as an important element of their identity and a means to enhance their social position. The integration of secular curricula into Jewish schools would allow them to obtain a certificate of secondary education and make it possible to pursue a degree in Polish universities. As it is not the case, they must enroll in private classes that prepare them for the final exams, leaving their parents unaware of the conspiracy. Carole Balin believes that "those Jewish women of Eastern Europe who chafed under the gender division and consequent educational restrictions of traditional Jewish society found secular culture and political activism particularly alluring" (8). Malka hopes that a matriculation certificate will impress her parents, who will finally understand her desire for knowledge;

however, the lie does not come easy, as she is torn between parental loyalty and the will to live her own life. She is the product of a traditional Orthodox upbringing, and every transgression brings her anxiety. However, her determination is evident when she decides to sell her engagement ring to pay for tuition and the textbooks. The girl's struggle for a new position for women reflects a time of change, when young Jews recognized secular education in a local vernacular as a viable avenue of social inclusion in a modern Western civilization.

When Malka considers escaping from home, she is agonizing between the desire to follow her dreams and the loyalty to family and tradition, especially since she was brought up to become a dutiful Jewish daughter. Leaving her family also means parting with important elements of her identity, such as religion and culture, and embracing secularism instead. Given that the Jewish families are tightly knit, her decision would affect many: her parents, an elderly grandmother, and seven siblings for whose future she feels responsible. The family will be stained by her transgression and will suffer ridicule on the part of society, which happened to the Altmans, who sat *shiva*¹⁷ when their daughter ran away to a Catholic convent and never mentioned her again, or Reb Mendel Frei's family whose elder daughter escaped from home because her parents wanted to marry her off. This scandal was even covered in the local newspaper, bringing more shame to the family. Therefore, Malka ponders the decision to escape home, weighing the consequences: if she decides to escape as a married woman, the blame will fall on her husband, as the one responsible for her actions. If, however, she runs off before her wedding, her family would have to take the brunt of humiliation. She concludes her ruminations stating that the pain resulting from the shattered dreams will be easier to bear than the misery she would inflict on the loved ones.

Critique of Arranged Marriage and the Quest for Independence in Kallas' *Prodigal Daughters*

Another focus of Kallas' narrative is the critique of arranged marriages, "in which family finances, religion and filial loyalty were seamlessly connected" (Hertz 98). Pursuing university education provides a viable

alternative to the tribulations of Malka's mismatched matrimony. An intellectually open-minded Malka finds no partner in Rafael, "a young man with side-locks, somewhat of a Talmudic scholar" (Scharfstein qtd. in Manekin, *The Rebellion* 34), ensconced in the Orthodox world, ideologically and emotionally alienated. He is called a "bumpkin" (Kallas 99), portrayed as "sickly and frail" (110); however, he is "very rich and from a good family, well-learned and gentle" (66), the features that resonate with the strategic marriage choices that enable social mobility even within the extended kinship network. When Rafael turns out to be impotent, it is the young wife who is brought by her mother to a doctor, with a veiled suggestion of defloration. There is a practical reason for that: if it comes to a divorce, the Klingers will have to pay back 10000 koron to the Puffeles because Malka has not born a child. If there was a child, then the husband's family would have to pay the money to the Klingers. Thus, arranged matrimony is shown as a trade transaction, with a pecuniary interest involved. Therefore, pursuing education might be Malka's ticket to independence, and a way out of the stifling home and unwanted marriage.

Malka's younger sister Chana, whom the author gives the Polish name Hania, is a rebel who follows in the footsteps of her older sister. Young as she is, she realizes what happened to her older sisters, whose marriages were arranged by the parents. Hania is determined to shape her own future life, vowing to join a Catholic Convent rather than succumb to traditional rules. Luckily, she is fifteen and not yet of marriageable age, and therefore enjoys more freedom than her sisters. It is Hania who devises a plot to escape from home, using Malka's wedding gifts as a way to make money to escape. Finally, we see both sisters in Paris, where they try to carve their own paths. As money does not last long, Malka translates pamphlets, but is also looking for a job, while Hania is developing her writing skills. The debate on the status of assimilated Jews in independent Poland was one of the key topics in the assimilationist press. Thus, the narrative decision to send the Jewish girls to Paris might raise inquiries whether it was influenced by concerns over "*a numerus clausus* for Jews at Polish universities . . . or growing violence against Jews on the various campuses on the part of right-wing Polish students" (Bacon). In letters to

a friend, the sisters write about how they are fascinated by Paris' multiculturalism and intellectual ferment; however, the open ending of their story lacks a definite ideological or feminist conclusion. Malka and Hania manage to get away from the patriarchal Jewish Orthodoxy, but life in Paris will bring new kinds of dependence, as they must negotiate new gender and social roles.

In their quest for secular education, the Jewish "prodigal daughters" find support in the socialist ideology, which criticizes the ignorance of Orthodox Judaism and promotes female agency. Manekin argues that "socialists in Austria were among the supporters of granting women equal rights in education" (*The Rebellion* 41). While stressing class rather than ethnic divisions, socialism helped Jews to integrate into the Polish society and to prevent identity problems associated with assimilation. Malka's teacher, Henryk Grossberg, represents assimilated Jewish intellectuals, who encourage ambitious Jewish women to pursue education, whereas her friend Regina is an emancipated Jewess, who enjoys more freedom only because she lacks a dowry, which greatly discourages potential suitors. Regina studies medicine with a view to becoming a community worker, as she wants to contribute to society through the promotion of modernization and rectification of social injustices. Regina organizes meetings frequented by young, assimilated Polish Jews, at which they not only criticize religious fanaticism that spiritually enslaves the Orthodox Jews, but also discuss how best to educate the masses so that the Jewish and Polish people alike can reclaim agency, raise their living standard, and enjoy social equality. These ideological discussions offer a commentary on Jewish-Polish relations at the time, as well as present differing views within the Jewish diaspora on Jewish modernization and emancipation.

Prokop-Janiec argues that Kallas' novels "share a common model of the world, in which the essential categories are development and its purpose, change and improvement, while the essential subjects are the nation and humanity" ("A Woman Assimilationist" 6). Motivated by intellect, Kallas' heroines might have been an inspiration to other women to think freely, without the restrictions of religious doctrines and social mores. In fact, Malka's brother Abram was encouraged by his sisters' elopement. He was an obedient Jewish son, who studied the holy texts as

his father requested but also found meaning in modern knowledge, such as Nietzsche, and became a member of the socialist society. He even entertained an idea of following into Malka's footsteps and taking matriculation exams that would open up higher education for him. Thus, Malka's desires, so bitterly shunned by her parents, find an unlikely follower in her brother.

The juxtaposition of traditional values represented by the parents with the progressive and assimilative desires expressed by their daughters constitutes the overarching thread guiding this narrative. The Klingers, as the name suggests, cling to traditional values, refusing to acknowledge the change in their children's view on life. In an era when a Hasidic daughter's education comprised basic prayers, deeming foreign subjects and languages superfluous, Kallas introduced female protagonists with an insatiable desire for knowledge and autonomy. Struggling to reconcile familial expectations with their yearnings for higher education and torn between loyalty to Judaism and the freedoms of modern society, Malka and Hania make a challenging choice to escape their Yiddish-speaking, Hasidic home. Even though leaving home gives them access not only to intellectual engagement but also to personal fulfilment, their rebellion was not openly against Judaism but rather against the traditional world of their parents and the predetermined lives charted for them.

Conclusion

Despite blending various literary genres and occasionally verging on melodramatic narratives with improbable twists, Sonneschein's, Wittigslager's, and Kallas' novels, as well as Jochelson's biographical account, stand out as unique records of early feminist struggles. Despite their varied settings and tones, the narratives share a common thread in their portrayal of young, intellectually motivated women striving to break free from lives they perceive as oppressive. The dissonance between young women's traditional Jewish homes and the lure of modernity often results in emotional and cultural alienation but also inspires decisive action. Ultimately, the difficult decision to leave home provides these

women with access to intellectual engagement and personal fulfilment, illustrating the complex interplay between tradition and modernity.

Through this comparative study, the article not only explores the distinct experiences of Jewish women in different cultural contexts but also sheds light on the broader social and cultural forces at play. The American context, with its focus on individualism and personal agency, contrasts sharply with the Polish-Jewish context, where the weight of historical and social challenges looms large. By examining these elements, this article highlights how different cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts shape the depiction of Jewish women's escape in literature. These narratives, whether American or Polish-Jewish, reveal the deep-seated challenges and universal human desires for personal freedom that drive the "prodigal daughters" to seek new paths and validate themselves beyond the confines of their traditional environments.

Notes:

¹ Among these studies are: *Jewish Women in Eastern Europe*, edited by ChaeRan Freeze, Paula Hyman, and Antony Polonsky; Antony Polonsky, *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*; Eliyana R. Adler, "Out of the Ghetto?," and Manekin, *The Rebellion of the Daughters: Jewish Women Runaways in Habsburg Galicia*.

² See e.g., Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* (1925). The novel depicts the struggle of Sara Smolinsky, a young Jewish woman in New York's Lower East Side, as she fights against her father's strict, traditional control to pursue her own dreams. The novel portrays Sara's physical and emotional escape from the constraints of her home, representing the broader conflict between Old World traditions and the New World's opportunities. Mary Antin's autobiography, *The Promised Land* (1912), chronicles her journey from a small town in the Russian Empire to the United States. Antin's narrative is one of intellectual and cultural flight rather than physical escape. Her flight is away from the old-world traditions, religious orthodoxy, and the limitations imposed on Jewish women in Eastern Europe. Through education and assimilation, Antin liberates herself from the constraints of her past, symbolizing the broader journey of many Jewish women who sought freedom and self-determination in America.

³ The flight of Jewish women to convents, while important, is out of the scope here.

⁴ See, e.g., Robert Morris' *The Elopement, Or Love and Duty. A Play in Three Acts* (1860), William Clark Russell's *The Strange Elopement* (1892), and Compton Mackenzie's *The Passionate Elopement* (1911).

⁵ Rabbi Louis Jacobs, a Jewish theologian, posits that there was a transformation in the marriage practices of Jewish communities during the first century BC,

transitioning from a patrilineal to a matrilineal-based principle for the offspring of mixed unions with gentiles. (For an in-depth exploration of Rabbi Louis Jacobs' theological treatise, refer to Miri Freud-Kandel's recent book, *Louis Jacobs and the Quest for a Contemporary Jewish Theology*, 2023).

⁶ There are multiple stories of a Jewish woman's elopement and conversion authored by French, British, and German Romantic writers. In most cases, the daughter elopes to escape a forced marriage or due to insufferable parental abuse. See, for example, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise* (1779). In this German play, Recha, the adopted daughter of Nathan, a Jewish merchant, is revealed to be of Christian birth, which complicates her identity and potential conversion. In Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (1819), Rebecca, a Jewish woman, is desired by a Christian knight and faces the possibility of forced conversion, though she remains true to her faith. Eugène Sue's novel *Le Juif Errant* (1844-1845), while focused on the legend of the Wandering Jew, includes Jewish female characters who struggle with their identities in a Christian-dominated society, reflecting themes of conversion and escape.

⁷ "If a man married a woman and stayed with her for ten years and she did not give birth, he is no longer permitted to neglect the mitzva to be fruitful and multiply. Consequently, he must either divorce her and marry someone else, or take another wife while still married to her" ("Mishana Yevemot" 6:6).

⁸ The literary images of exotic Jewesses who tempt Christian lovers have found many forms in European literature. They include portrayals of beautiful but innocent young Jewish women, who, helped by their lovers to find truth convert to Christianity (Shakespeare's Jessica), temptresses who are ready to die instead of enduring life without their lover (Fromental Halévy's Rachel) or images of "a femme fatale" (Oscar Wilde's Salome) whose goal is revenge. The "Belle Juive" ("Beautiful Jewess") is both a menace to and an object of strong desire for the Christian man; however, she is much more predisposed to male influence and conversion than her male counterpart who cannot be granted salvation through Christianity.

⁹ Vladimir Ilyich Jochelson (1855-1937) was a Jewish Russian ethnographer and a revolutionary who edited the anarchist *Vyestnik Narodnoi Voli* newspaper and spent years in jail for his involvement in anti-Tzarist activities. Gesia Gelfman was one of his fellow anarchists in St. Petersburg. The book was written in Russian, published anonymously in 1880, and then republished in 1918 with the writer's name. (Note that Gesia Gelfman is sometimes referred to as Hesya Mirovna Helfman or as Jessy Helfman).

¹⁰ Aniela Kallas (Aniela Korngut, 1868-1942) was a Polish assimilationist writer of Jewish origin. In her works, she tackled important social problems related to women's emancipation, Jewish assimilation, intergenerational conflicts, and social stereotypes.

¹¹ The dates of publication of Kallas's novel vary between 1913 (Manekin, *The Rebellion*) and 1912 (Prokop-Janiec, "A Woman Assimilationist").

¹² The Kluger affair might be the basis of a 1913 novel by the Jewish feminist writer A. Kallas, "the only female author who wrote about the runaways during

this period” (Manekin, *The Rebellion* 76). Anna Kluger was born into a prominent Hasidic family in Kraków. When she completed primary education at the age of fifteen, she was married off to a yeshiva student. She fled home and sued her parents for not allowing her to pursue university studies. She finally won her case in the Viennese Supreme Court. Manekin researched Kluger’s case.

¹³ The author “belonged to the first generation of Jewish women educated in Polish schools in Galicia” (Prokop-Janiec, “A Woman Assimilationist” 2).

¹⁴ See Manekin’s “From Anna Kluger to Sarah Schenirer: Women’s Education in Kraków and Its Discontents.”

¹⁵ Malcia is a diminutive form of Malka.

¹⁶ “The awareness of the growing gap between young women and their prospective grooms based on their respective educational experiences came to the fore in 1900, following the highly publicized case of Michalina Araten, a young woman from a wealthy Hasidic family” (Manekin, *The Rebellion* 31).

¹⁷ Shiva stands as the Jewish mourning ritual, commencing immediately after the burial and extending over a period of seven days.

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