Modern Jewish Social Work. The Israelite-Humanitarian Women’s Association

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

Founded in 1893, the Israelite-Humanitarian Women’s Association [1] advocated for women’s rights as well as social policy issues in Hamburg and explicitly addressed a Jewish audience. The source presented here is a printed copy of the association’s by-laws of March 19, 1911, printed in 1912 by Martin Philipsen’s printing office in Hamburg. Set in Gothic print, the document is twelve pages long and divided into 18 paragraphs stating the following: name and location of the association, its purpose, questions of membership and membership fees, as well as organizational structure. This last point includes provisions on the fiscal year, the board, the administrative committee, reporting and accounting, general meetings, changes to the by-laws, and dissolution of the association. The reason for this reprint of the by-laws was the association’s inclusion in the city of Hamburg’s register of associations on March 28, 1911. 18 years after its inception, this Jewish women’s association had achieved its goal to be officially anchored in the community’s public life. The meaning this step carried becomes evident by the fact that the official confirmation of inclusion is printed at the end of the by-laws.

Establishment of the Israelite-Humanitarian Women’s Association

It is evident from the association’s name that it considered itself a decidedly Jewish organization championing welfare work as well as Judaism. The adjective “Israelite”, quite commonly used in the 19th century, indicates its Jewish character. At the same time, the term “Israelite” was meant to emphasize that the difference between Jews and non-Jews was considered merely a matter of confession. The term “Jewish” was increasingly secularized in the 19th century and thus expanded to include an ethnic meaning as well. Associations sought to avoid this by using the term “Israelite” instead. The addition “humanitarian” expresses a fundamentally charitable attitude oriented towards welfare, which was a constant in Hamburg’s Jewish community. The by-laws were printed at the same printing business as those of Hamburg’s German-Israelite Congregation [2], and the Jewish Masonic Lodge made their premises available to the association for its general meetings. In order to be as effective as possible in different areas, the association cooperated with various other Hanseatic foundations and charitable organizations.

In 1908, Sidonie Werner, who had trained as a teacher, replaced Gustav Tuch as chairperson of the Israelite-Humanitarian Women’s Association [3] and successfully established many new programs of support especially for children, youth, and women. An active women’s rights advocate, she specifically lobbied for qualified professional training for women and sought to professionalize women’s social work in order to
expands women’s influence beyond purely charitable work. As §2 of the by-laws states, by helping women help themselves, the association hoped to empower women to improve their situation and support sisters in need. §8 stipulates that the amount of the membership fee could be determined by each member, thus opening up membership for less affluent women as well. Following the example of the General Association of German Women [4] founded in Leipzig in 1865, the Israelite-Humanitarian Women’s Association [5] only admitted women as full members. This created a protected space for Jewish women to discuss their interests and issues as well as expand their organizational skills and professional ambitions.

Aims of the Israelite-Humanitarian Women’s Association

Since its inception, the association focused in particular on expanding education for women and girls and promoting employment opportunities for women, thus joining the middle-class women’s movement in Imperial Germany in its demands for women’s access to higher education, professional training and qualified employment opportunities. The goal was to make women economically independent and offer them the possibility of a self-determined life as an alternative to the existing middle-class ideal of women as wives, housewives, and mothers. In addition, social work to help the needy is clearly emphasized in §2 as well. During Sidonie Werner’s tenure as chairperson, the association established numerous new social projects. In 1909, an employment agency for women was set up in order to reduce poverty among women. A project for women run by women, it proved very successful. Since the middle-class women’s movement had established its own employment agencies, it is safe to assume that only Jewish women were placed through this agency. The Israelite Boarding House for Girls opened in Hamburg the same year. Its independent association had strong ties to the Israelite-Humanitarian Women’s Association [6] due to Sidonie Werner’s involvement along with that of several other board members, which serves to illustrate the association’s interest in cooperation with other organizations as stated in the by-laws. The boarding house provided affordable, clean, and respectable accommodation to unmarried employed girls. Just how great the need for such accommodation was is demonstrated by the enormous demand. The boarding house opened in January 1909, offering 14 beds. Only one year later, it was overcrowded, housing 23 boarders, and had to reject numerous applicants due to lack of space.

Boarding houses for working women

Like the concept of an employment agency, the idea to establish boarding houses for unmarried female workers was not new. Beginning in the late 19th century, activists in the middle-class women’s movement had founded these establishments based on an American model in order to improve living conditions for unmarried women who earned their own living. A boarding house for female workers founded in 1890 by Hanna Bieber-Böhm in Berlin, for example, was open to both female laborers and women belonging to the emerging professional category of salaried employees. Boarding houses for working women represented a protected space which fulfilled a dual function. By providing affordable, clean, and respectable accommodation, women were given the opportunity to earn their living with dignity, thus preventing their social decline into poverty and prostitution. At the same time, the boarding house protected the reputation of its female boarders.
Modern methods of social work

The association considered the prevention of hardship and poverty another important task. Its infant care program, established in 1909, illustrates this point well. In taking up this issue, the association addressed a pressing issue at the time, which became even more charged due to their focus on socially disadvantaged mothers. By means of breastfeeding premiums, the association hoped to motivate destitute mothers to breastfeed their infants and care for them themselves. Even if these premiums could not replace a wage, they offered a means of support. However, the association did not rely on financial support alone to prevent poverty and hardship, it also offered specific education. For example, it paid for a physician, Dr. med. Bland, to carry out free exams for infants and to give lectures on proper child care from infancy to school age. As offers like this one show, women and their living conditions were taken seriously. Specific and practical sources of support and education were designed to enable them to take care of their children. The association sought to effect a deep and lasting change in the situation and behavior of women rather than simply try to reduce their destitution through financial support. This shows that the Israelite-Humanitarian Women’s Association was open to the application of modern methods of social work, as several other of its social projects illustrate as well. Since its inception, it ran a recreational home for children in the spa town of Bad Segeberg and supported Hamburg’s children’s day care center for boys and girls. Both of these institutions enabled women to earn a living while knowing that their children were looked after, thus the association promoted female employment and at the same time provided child welfare services. Not just an association advocating for women’s rights, the Israelite-Humanitarian Women’s Association [7] defined itself as a Jewish organization specifically seeking to improve the lives of Jewish women. It adopted successful strategies and methods employed by the middle-class women’s movement in its work and attempted to do justice to the new image of womanhood by creating exclusive spaces for Jewish women. Non-Jewish women’s organizations in turn were inspired by the work of Jewish associations.

The Israelite-Humanitarian Women’s Association and the middle-class women’s movement

The existing, lively exchange of ideas between the general and the Jewish women’s movements was based on strong personal ties as well. One of the members of the German General Women’s Association, which had marked the beginning of the middle-class women’s movement in Germany with its founding in 1865, was Henriette Goldschmidt, wife of Leipzig Rabbi Abraham Meyer Goldschmidt. Johanna Goldschmidt, a Jewish pedagogue in Hamburg, had connections to activists in the middle-class women’s movement going as far back as the revolution of 1848/49. Bertha Pappenheim, too, had been active in the German General Women’s Association’s Frankfurt chapter since 1895. A founding member and first chairperson of the Jewish Women’s Association [8], which had been founded in 1904 and was modeled on the League of German Women’s Associations [9], she maintained close contact to Sidonie Werner, who took up the office as chairperson in 1915. Considering these connections, it is hardly surprising that the relatively young Israelite-Humanitarian Women’s Association [10] did not simply see itself in the tradition of Jewish welfare organizations and limit its activities to the community, but instead engaged in debates on women’s rights and adopted modern methods of social work from the general women’s movement.
A protected space for Jewish women

It is by no means unusual for a women’s association to pursue local projects and to set goals decidedly focused on women and children. While there were many programmatic parallels and personal ties to the general women’s movement in Imperial Germany, the by-laws clearly state that the Israelite-Humanitarian Women’s Association considered itself an organization run by Jewish women for Jewish women. Maintaining their Jewish identity and culture evidently played an important role. This is reflected particularly in the establishment of support and spaces exclusively for Jewish women, where their religion was respected and where they could live as equals.

Select Bibliography


Notes

[1] Israelitisch-humanitärer Frauenverein
[2] Deutsch-Israelitische Gemeinde
[3] Israelitisch-humanitärer Frauenverein
[5] Israelitisch-humanitärer Frauenverein
[6] Israelitisch-humanitärer Frauenverein
[7] Israelitisch-humanitärer Frauenverein
[8] Jüdischer Frauenbund
[9] Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine
[10] Israelitisch-humanitärer Frauenverein

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