

Mrs. Soloveitchik: A Biographical Sketch

My father was known to his *talmidim* as the Rav. My mother was known as Mrs. Soloveitchik. Many times, when my father was invited to deliver a lecture, he would say, “I will talk to Mrs. Soloveitchik.” We children knew that was his way of saying no. He never spoke to her about the invitation nor did he speak.

Very few of my father’s *talmidim* knew my mother. My father commuted to the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS), at Yeshiva University in New York, from our home in Boston and she seldom travelled with him. It was only after the children had grown up and gone their own way that my mother began accompanying my father to New York.

Despite her seeming anonymity, my mother was well known in Boston where she was the Chair of the School Committee of the Maimonides Educational Institute (later called Maimonides School), which had been founded by my father in 1937. The School Committee made curricular and policy decisions and was involved in the everyday functioning of the school at the micro level. The school committee ran the school, and Mrs. Soloveitchik was the driving force of the committee.

Although my mother had a Ph.D. from Jena University in Germany, she never asked to be called by her academic title and was comfortable with being called Mrs. Soloveitchik. She was modest about her accomplishments and never sought the limelight. It was, perhaps, this modesty that enabled her to be a silent partner with my father in his efforts to raise the Torah level of the American Jewish community. She brought to this endeavor administrative ability, an educational vision that supplemented his, and an impressive imagination that conceived of projects that would enhance Jewish education.

After my mother’s death in 1967, my father found comfort in Torah, *shiurim*, and teaching his *talmidim*. He had lost his partner, and he

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mourned her long and hard. It is fitting that an edition of *TRADITION* devoted to my father, the Rav, should include a biography of my mother, Dr. Tonya Soloveitchik.

My mother was born on the seventh day of Passover 1904 into a home and family that shaped her worldview. Her mother, Grunia Zilber, married her father, Mayer Eliyahu Levit, in 1896 in Gelvonai, a farming area near Musninkai. My grandfather and grandmother made their home in Musninkai, a village halfway between Vilnius and Kaunas (known to Jews as Kovno)—the heart of Jewish *Lita*. Musninkai, or Musnik, was a *shtetl*—a village of workmen, shopkeepers, artisans, and peddlers who sold their wares to the neighboring villagers and farmers. Jews had been living there since the beginning of the eighteenth century. Musnik was a small; it had only 80 houses and three streets. Most of its inhabitants were Jewish. The family moved to Vilna before my mother was born.

My grandfather was born in Zietela (Dzetel), a *shtetl* in the Nowigródek area, 150 kilometers south of Vilna. I know very little about his background. Most of the population of Dzetel were traditional Jews. It was the birthplace of the Chofetz Chaim. Mayer Eliyahu was a merchant who sold apothecary supplies, and traveled near and far to peddle his wares, although he was not a very successful businessman as he found it hard to strike a good bargain. He was honest to a fault, and his heart was not in business. After the First World War, when financial conditions in Poland were unstable, he refused to trade in the black market, and the family struggled to make ends meet. My grandfather enjoyed studying Torah and he was what is termed in Hebrew a *Mokir Rabbanan* – one who values Talmudic scholars. He was not a person who sought out social interactions but found satisfaction in his family and in his relationships with Rabbinic figures. He was deeply attached to Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, whose wife was related to my grandmother Grunia.

My grandfather had a very close relationship with my mother, Tonya. She was the favorite of his four children; he made no effort to disguise his deep attachment to her. She was able to negotiate with him family differences in a clear and logical manner, and he trusted her as a reliable person and usually gave in to her requests. My grandparents emigrated to Neve Sha'anán (Haifa) in 1935 (my mother had arrived in America by that time). Their move was an expression of their commitment to *Eretz Yisrael*. My mother and her father corresponded weekly until his death in 1938.

My mother was deeply influenced by her father and his deep identification with the Jewish people. She often told the story of how her father, upon hearing that Mendel Beilis had been acquitted in the infamous

blood libel trial in 1913, knocked on the door of every neighbor on the street to apprise them of the acquittal and to wish them *Mazal Tov*. She internalized his deep identification with his people. My mother admired his honesty and principled position in business ethics, even though the family suffered financial hardship as a result. She also internalized his admiration for Jewish learning and for scholars who dedicated their lives to study and teaching.

My grandmother, Grunia, was cut from a different cloth than her husband. She was the one who set the tone for the family. Education was a prime value for her. She initiated the family move to Vilna as she felt Vilna had educational opportunities that were lacking in Musnik. Mayer Eliyahu would have been content spending his life in the quiet, rural village. She encouraged her four children to pursue higher education at universities, three of them in Germany in the 1920s. The youngest, Rachel, studied architecture at the Technion in Haifa for a short time and the American University in Beirut in the 1930s. Two sons—Baruch Zev and Arye Leib—were enrolled at what is now called the Friedrich Wilhelm University and was then called the University of Berlin. Baruch studied medicine and Arye veterinary medicine. They were ardent Zionists and were planning on emigrating to Palestine. The third, my mother Tonya, was enrolled at Jena University, then called Thuringian State University. (Jena is in Germany, about halfway between Berlin and Frankfurt.)

Mayer Eliyahu objected to his daughter pursuing higher education. He was a cautious person and was afraid that if she were well-educated, she would want to marry an academic who would certainly want a large dowry. My mother did not think this was reason to forfeit a university education. There was little money to pay tuition. My grandmother had always told her children that in the years to come they would forget that they had been hungry but being uneducated would forever negatively affect their future. And so, the Gymnasium (high school) tuition was always paid, and University tuition was sent to Germany. The meals, during the war years and when they were university students, were frugal and lean and the wardrobe was minimal. This thirst for education for her children was an expression of Grunia's own deep frustration at not having been educated as a child and young woman. She had grown up in an isolated farming area and educational opportunities for children were very limited. The teachers, who were willing to move to outlying villages—far from major Jewish centers—were not the most educated or skilled teachers. My mother's decision to study education was no doubt influenced by her mother's attitudes and example. Education was the staple of life; it was the key to the future.

Grunia's father Zadok Zilber was a rich landowner. Her mother, Sarah Blumeh Heimovitz came from a renowned Rabbinic family and, because of her Rabbinic forebears, had been sought after as a young woman. It was not unusual for a daughter of an esteemed family to marry into an affluent one. Sarah Blumeh was a niece of Rabbi Yitzchok Grodnenski from Shirvint, who was appointed as the *Moreh Tzedek* of Vilna in 1855. Vilna had an official government-recognized Chief Rabbi (Crown Rabbi), to whom the Jewish population paid scant attention; the *Moreh Tzedek* (Spiritual Rabbi), was the Rabbinical authority recognized by scholars and laymen alike. One of Sarah Blumeh's cousins was married to Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski (the *Moreh Zedek* of Vilna at that time); another cousin to Rabbi Reuven Dessler, an uncle to the daughter of Rabbi Israel Salanter. My grandmother Grunia's lineage was an integral part of her self-image.

Childhood

My mother spent her childhood and adolescence in a middle-class area of Vilna. She was the third of four siblings. The family lived in Bulhak's Hoif (courtyard). A courtyard usually had several three or four-story buildings surrounding an enclosed inner area. The courtyard was a world unto itself where children played; everyone knew almost everything about everyone else. The families in the courtyard were working middle class; they had little money to spare. Yet, there was money enough to support a nearby lending library even though the families could not always cover the monthly fee. The owner of the library would occasionally allow the children to borrow books even though their account was in arrears. The library had a wide range of books including classical and Haskalah literature. Young Tonya and her friends played, read, and went to school.

In an unpublished Yiddish manuscript written in 1967, Rachel, my mother's younger sister, portrayed my mother as being "not the ordinary child." She was a serious child who did not sing or dance. Yet, she was not morose or pessimistic. Her siblings called her "the mathematician" and "*tonu Rabbanan*"—a play on her first name and her "scholarly" demeanor. Rachel describes her as one who faced life squarely, graced with the ability to overcome obstacles. At the young age of eight, Tonya befriended a child of seven, who had a complex family life. This was a pattern that was to repeat itself throughout her childhood and adolescence. She organized the children's games in the *hoif*, tutored friends, helped the weaker students, and was supportive of troubled classmates. According to Rachel, adolescent Tonya was a mini-counselling center for her fellow students. She also was very supportive of their wanting higher education and encouraged her friends to seek admission to foreign universities,

even though she herself was unsure of whether she could afford to study abroad due to the family's precarious finances. When she was in the Gymnasia she was elected by her fellow students as their representative in their dealings with the school administration.

Education

My mother attended a secular school as did most of her friends from religious homes. The legendary *yeshiva bochur*, no longer was the ideal for many observant Jews. Such a boy was considered unworldly and incapable of supporting his family properly. The Yeshiva was reserved for those who would today be called Haredi. As children, the boys attended a *Cheder*, many of which had introduced newer pedagogical methodologies due to the realization that they were rapidly losing students to the secular school system. After the *Cheder*, those who could afford to studied in traditional *yeshivot*. Haredi girls had no organized school system and there were those who studied in secular schools, not unlike their observant counterparts.

There was widespread agreement among religiously observant parents that their children needed a secular education rather than a *Cheder* in order to cope with the complexities of life and be able to earn a good livelihood. The secular schools in Vilna attended by their children were usually Socialist in orientation, Yiddish-speaking, and emphasized Yiddish culture and literature. Most parents chose these schools rather than one from the Tarbut religious school system, which had both secular and religious schools, and was not popular among religious parents as it advocated Zionism, encouraged children to speak Hebrew rather than Yiddish, and advocated *Aliya*. Parents, who usually had deep roots in Vilna and Yiddish, had justified fears of their children leaving and emigrating to Palestine. Many of the students of the Tarbut schools, both religious and secular, did indeed leave Vilna to emigrate to Palestine.

My mother began her studies at the Sophia Gurevitz Gymnasia in 1912. In 1915, when the Germans captured Vilna, the school relocated to Poltava, in what is today eastern Ukraine, and returned in 1918 when the War ended. I am positive that my grandmother would never allow her children to be "school-less" and so I assume that young Tonya was registered at another school during the war years. Thousands of Jewish refugees made their way to Vilna during that time. Food was scarce and the Levit children spent time with their maternal relatives in rural Musnik, which had produce from the neighboring farms or from the family's garden. When school was in session, my grandmother, Grunia, would make her way to Musnik, either by foot or by carriage, to bring food to Vilna for her family.

Tonya returned to the Sophia Gurevitz Gymnasia in 1918 and graduated in 1921. The school was founded in 1906 as Vilna's first Jewish private school for girls by Sophia Gurevitz and P.P. Antokolski. Until 1906 all schools were government sponsored, with no Jewish content and seldom a Jewish teacher, even though 40% of Vilna's population was Jewish. The language of instruction at Sophia Gurevitz Gymnasia was Russian, yet the school was proudly Jewish. The teachers were all Jewish and the curriculum emphasized Jewish content. When the school reopened in Vilna in 1918 it became a co-educational school under the auspices of CISZO (Central Jewish School Organization), the umbrella organization for Yiddish-language schools under the auspices of the Bund. The school grew rapidly in these post-war years; it very quickly had an enrollment of 869 students. With the return to Vilna instruction took place in both Russian and Yiddish, but in 1922, Yiddish became the only language in use. The curriculum of the Gymnasia was very broad and included languages – German, Russian, Yiddish, Latin; mathematics; physics; natural sciences; literature – Hebrew, Yiddish, and world literature. *Tanakh* was part of the literature curriculum. The faculty was a sophisticated one—well-educated and devoted to their students' intellectual and personal development. The Yiddish literature teacher was Max Erik a renowned Yiddish literary critic and historian.

Vilna did not have much respite from war as the Polish-Soviet War (1919–1921) reached Vilna in April of 1919. Vilna was conquered by the Poles and the Russians retreated. The implications for my mother and her friends were far-reaching. Their Russian matriculation would not be accepted at a Polish University. In addition, the University of Vilnius had a *numerus clausus* limiting the number of Jewish students who would be accepted. Unlike their American counterparts who were still struggling to have full access to higher education and advanced degrees, for the Eastern European young women, there were few barriers to higher education in Western Europe. It was a real option, and young women applied to universities in Western Europe, primarily Switzerland and Germany. And thus, my mother and her friends applied to universities in Germany as no formal or informal anti-Jewish restrictions existed there.

University Studies

It is not surprising that my mother chose to study education. Her natural inclination, her mother's influence, and her gymnasia experience all converged, and, I am sure, influenced her choice. I do not know why she applied to Jena University, especially as her two older brothers were students at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. Was it the faculty, the Education curriculum, her friends, or the fact that she thought she

would be accepted there? She never spoke about her choice. The fact that there was a branch of The Union of Jewish Student Association (*Verband Jüdischer Studentenvereine in Deutschland*) in Jena attests to the presence of other Eastern European Jewish students pursuing higher education in Jena. They were of sufficient number to justify opening a branch of the Association, which was an umbrella organization of Eastern European Jewish students who were pursuing their education throughout Germany in the 1920s.

My mother enrolled in the winter semester of 1923–1924, studying pedagogy, philosophy, history, and psychology, and received her doctorate on March 1, 1929, in education, philosophy, and history. Her thesis was titled *Die Entwicklung des Jüdischen Volksbildungswesens in Polen* (*The Development of Jewish Folk Education in Poland*). (See below for a description of the dissertation's contents, and how its ideas were put into action later at the Maimonides School.)

During her time at university my mother was in constant contact with her brothers in Berlin. She was the child to whom my grandfather sent the university tuition; it was her responsibility to send it on to her siblings. The money their father sent was limited and after they paid tuition there was little left for food or clothing. My mother would often repeat the "riddle" that she and her friends would ask: Who is poorer? The person who has only an everyday suit or the one who only has a Shabbat one? The staple of her meals were sardines. Despite this, I never heard her complain that her student days were difficult. Those were the facts of life and not worthy of bemoaning.

My mother and her siblings corresponded regularly. Because of the distance between Jena and Berlin (over 250 kilometers) they did not see each other very often. The young men were deeply involved with the *Studentenverein*—the older brother, Baruch, was the secretary of the organization in Berlin and the younger one, Arye, was its chairman. It was from them she heard of my father. In one of the letters to their sister Tonya, they reported that a brilliant young man from a very distinguished and prestigious Rabbinic family was studying philosophy at the University and that he had come to the *Studentenverein*. My mother wrote her brothers and expressed a desire to meet the young man about whom they had written. They invited her for Shabbat.

My parents met at the *Studentenverein* in Berlin and were married on June 15, 1931, in Vilna, after a long engagement. Young people did not marry until they had finished their education and could be self-supporting. They returned to Berlin after their marriage as my father had not yet completed his doctoral thesis. After the completion of the thesis and the birth of their first child, Atarah (Twersky) in 1932, they emigrated to

the United States, in August 1932. My father's parents had arrived in New York in 1929–1930, and my parents chose to go to the States as there was employment for my father and close family.

Arrival in Boston

My parents arrived in the United States in August 1932. American immigration policy did not welcome Eastern European Jews. According to the Immigration Act of 1924, entry for East Europeans was allowed to ministers of any denomination and to seminary professors. My father had been sponsored by the Hebrew Theological College in Chicago that had sent an affidavit attesting to employment. Upon their arrival in New York, my parents learned that the College could not pay the salary they had promised, as the country was then in the throes of the Great Depression. My father was able to find employment three months later as the Rabbi of the *Va'ad ha-Ir* of Boston, an organization of eleven Orthodox synagogues which were seeking a Rabbi to be the spiritual and halakhic authority for members synagogues. My parents arrived in Boston in December of 1932.

Boston was a city of great cultural diversity. Families whose names were familiar from colonial history, such as the Cabots, Lodges, and Adamses, lived in the Beacon Hill area. Irish families, whose grandparents had fled the Potato Famine in Ireland in the 1840s, lived in the South End. They were the largest ethnic group in Boston and city government was in their hands. The second largest ethnic group consisted of Italians who lived in North End and South Boston. These groups were proudly Catholic; the church was a presence in the city. Boston had a cathedral and an Irish cardinal; the busses going to the cathedral were crowded on Wednesday and Friday with Irish and Italian Bostonians going to weekday mass. The Jewish immigrants lived in East Boston and in the early years of the twentieth century moved to Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. Boston was also a university town; it had several colleges and universities. Neighboring Cambridge was home to Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Major medical university teaching centers such as Massachusetts General Hospital and Children's Hospital were to be found in the city.

The Boston Jewish community was of Eastern European origin—Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania—and was more traditionally oriented than the German Jewish immigrants who had settled in New York City. There were no Reform Temples in the Roxbury-Dorchester area and only one Conservative Synagogue—Mishkan Tefila. The synagogues were Orthodox even though most of their members did not strictly observe Jewish law.

Roxbury and Dorchester were bustling, vibrant Jewish neighborhoods with many synagogues—impressive Romanesque buildings that were local landmarks. The major thoroughfares had shops of every sort. The Jewish immigrants had small retail garment or haberdashery shops. They were also peddlers who sold clothing and housewares in outlying communities.

The Jewish community set up free loan societies, burial societies, cemeteries, Yiddish theater, and Hebrew schools that taught the children how to read Hebrew, *daven*, and about the *hagim*. Boston had an English language newspaper, *The Boston Jewish Advocate*, dedicated to Jewish local, national, and international news, and there was even a branch of the Workmen's Circle at the crossroad between Roxbury and Dorchester that focused on teaching Yiddish and was Bundist in orientation.

My mother and father came to the Boston of Jewish Roxbury and Dorchester, not Harvard and MIT. My father had no entrée into university circles. Only in later years, when his English language philosophical writings were published did the academic world take note of him. My father was to minister to the religious and educational needs of the immigrant Jews who were the members of the synagogues that formed the *Va'ad ha-Ir*. My mother left the academic environment of Jena and the intellectual hustle and bustle of Vilna to be the wife of the Rabbi. As my father's role as spiritual and religious mentor was not limited to one congregation but to a conglomerate of synagogues, he had few pastoral responsibilities. There was little expectation that my mother would be the classic Rebbetzin. At that point in her life, my mother would have, probably, found this a daunting challenge. Her self-image was that of an independent person who defined herself by her own achievements and not by her husband's profession or standing. She would often tell the story that when she received her doctorate she was congratulated by the faculty and greeted as *Frau Doktor* Levit. The thought that passed her mind at that moment was that any ignorant uneducated woman who married a doctor had the same title and there should be a way to differentiate between those who had received the title by marriage and those who had earned it through hard work and diligence. The Boston community recognized that my mother was different from the very beginning. She was reserved and did not reach out easily to others. She was a private person who never sought limelight or wanted to be the center of attention.

Early Years in Boston

To the best of my knowledge, my mother did not seek employment when she came to Boston. In the '30s, only a third of American women worked, mostly as unskilled laborers. The professional women were teachers and

nurses, who usually resigned when they married. Only 12% of married women worked. Woman's role was to raise the children; the men were the breadwinners. She was dedicated to raising her young family. In the early years after her arrival in Boston, raising the children was her priority. By 1937, there were three young children to raise. She often disapprovingly said that, when we were young, she would watch as the neighbors sent the children outdoors with the maid. The mothers stayed home to rest. She, however, did no such thing. Educated parents should raise their own children and not leave the responsibility to uncultured hired help. She prided herself that she was the one who raised and educated us. She enjoyed raising her children and, in a letter to her brother, described our development with humor and pride. One child sang songs that she made up herself, another was doing well in school, and the third was mischievous and had an engaging smile.

My mother took us to the local playground often. We spent hours in the public library, browsing and choosing books. We went to the beach during the summer months, travelling by bus and subway as we had no car. Even though my mother did not know how to swim—how would a native of land-locked Vilna know how to swim?—she somehow managed to teach us the skill. We went for long walks in Franklin Park, which was close to our house.

There is no doubt that the world from which my mother had just come and the world to which she came were radically different. The Roxbury and Dorchester community was full of immigrant Jews, who valued education, yet had had no opportunity to be educated themselves. They worked long hours in order to enable their children to study. The difficulties they faced were great and, in many families, it was only the youngest child who was able to study beyond high school and have a profession rather than a trade. There were few women or men who had an education comparable to that of my mother. It is hard to imagine the sense of strangeness and differentness she must have felt in those years.

Despite this, she continued on her way. If as a teenager she had worried about her friends, as a young woman she continued to worry about her family. She scrimped and saved and sent passage to her sister, Rachel, to come to the United States as she felt that the social and educational opportunities in Haifa, where her sister lived, were limited. Rachel moved into our home. When her two sisters-in-law, Shulamith Soloveichik (Meiselman) and Anne Soloveichik (Gerber) came to Boston to pursue higher education, she opened her home to them. After the death of my grandfather in 1938, my mother sent money for passage to her mother to come to the United States to live with us. Money was scarce in the '30s, yet the financial consideration was not the deciding factor.

Involvement in Jewish Education

In 1937, my father founded the Maimonides Educational Institute, now known as the Maimonides School. The school offered a dual program of Jewish religious subjects such as *Humash*, *Gemara*, *tefilla*, Jewish History, and Hebrew in addition to the curriculum of the public school system. The by-laws of the school stated that among the aims of the founding corporation was “the educational instruction of Jewish youth in the tenets of the Jewish religion; to maintain and operate a school for the dissemination and teaching of Hebrew religious and literary works based upon Orthodox traditional Judaism, together with secular education in co-ordination with and under the supervision of the public school authorities and covering all the subjects taught in the elementary and high schools of our public schools...”¹

Many members of the Boston community were very much against the opening of a Jewish school. They considered the public school system as the path to integration and assimilation into American society. Opening a Jewish school, they claimed, would return the Jewish child to the ghetto. My mother was hesitant about my father’s initiative—not in principle, in fact she strongly allied herself with his vision, but in pragmatics. She felt that he and the handful of lay leaders who supported him would have great difficulty raising the funds needed to run the school. Despite her hesitation, she joined the endeavor and in a short time, her administrative talents and her academic background and knowledge came to the fore. While my father determined educational policy, it was my mother who implemented it. She was able to translate the educational policy into practical ways of running the school.

Maimonides Educational Institute was different in two ways from other Jewish Day Schools founded in those years. Maimonides had mixed gender classes that offered the young men and women the same curriculum, including Talmud. (While in New York the Yeshivah of Flatbush and Ramaz were co-ed, both in Chicago and Baltimore the day schools were single gender. Young women’s schools did not offer them Talmud studies.²)

My mother, Dr. Tonya, was deeply involved in all aspects of the school, whether financial or educational. There were two committees that were responsible for the running of the school—the Board of Directors and the School Committee. My mother was the Chair of the School

1 Quoted in Seth Farber, *An American Orthodox Dreamer: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Boston’s Maimonides School* (Brandeis University Press, 2004), 54.

2 Yeshivah of Flatbush was founded in Brooklyn in 1927; the Ramaz School was founded in New York City in 1937.

Committee until her death. She handpicked its members—professionals and laypersons who shared her educational vision. The basic character traits demanded of the members of the School Committee were integrity, loyalty, and discretion. All major decisions about the school, be they curricular, staffing, or expansion were made by this Committee. Maimonides was to reflect the religious policy that had been envisioned by my father and the educational policies he and my mother shared. They were to be implemented by her.

Educational Vision

My mother had a vision of how a school should be run. She believed that educational policies were to stand on their own merit and were the sole purview of those who were entrusted with their implementation. Educational policy of the Maimonides School was to be determined only by the School Committee under the aegis of Rabbi Soloveitchik and Dr. Tonya Soloveitchik. Even though, the Board of Directors was responsible for the financial wellbeing of the school, it was not to be involved in any way with the school's educational aspects. The decision to expand the school from a grammar school to a high school was made by the School Committee even though the decision had far-reaching financial implications. The opening of the high school was spearheaded by my mother, who convinced the opponents to this expansion in her inimitable logical manner. She argued, at the School Committee meeting, that according to halakha it was the obligation of the Jewish community to see that every child got a Jewish education. In addition, she added, experience had shown that those who finished only six grades were not fully committed Jews. "Our school, the MEI, is the only school of its kind in the vicinity to give our children the type of necessary Jewish education the children need, and at the same time give adequate English schooling. It is therefore necessary and important to help our children keep up their Jewish studies in the proper surroundings."³ She addressed the School Committee which was to make the decision and not the Board of Directors.

As the Maimonides School was deeply rooted in Jewish tradition while at the same time enabling its students to receive a fine secular education, I would like to suggest that my mother's role in the school also reflected her educational creed as it was presented in her doctoral thesis. Her thesis is prefaced with a historical account of Jewish education in Poland in the 1920s. She presents a critical description of the Haskalah movement, calling it to task for not wanting to preserve Jewish tradition;

3 Minutes of the School Committee (May 16, 1950), quoted in Farber, *An American Orthodox Dreamer*, 111.

she quotes Graetz: “They cared as little about the future of Judaism as they did about its past.”⁴ She is sympathetic to the traditional *Cheder* as reflecting ancient Jewish values, yet she also calls the old model to task for its lack of secular studies, the use of corporal punishment, and alienating the child from nature. She describes the *Volksschule* (the Jewish Bund schools) in a positive manner, identifying with its holistic view of the child and especially with its insistence upon Yiddish as the language of instruction. My mother quotes her thesis advisor, Professor Peter Peterson: “Beneath language rests the most essential part of a people. Through language, the dormant part of peoplehood comes to expression. Languages are carriers of meaning, interpreters of the inwardness of man, and of the people.”⁵ Yiddish language represented a deep attachment to the past; it was the bond that kept the Jewish people connected to its tradition. This link to the past was the essential part of the *Volksschule* credo. The schools were related to the needs of the children, both psychological and intellectual, while at the same time, by revitalizing the national past, enabled them to be proud Jews—not a simple task for children who had, more often than not, experienced anti-Semitism.

The combination of child-oriented educational pedagogy and a connection to the Jewish people and past should be the components of Jewish education. She concludes: “Those who want to adopt a more moderate position and synthesize traditional and modern education, face a problem that is still unsolved today.”⁶ It was in the Maimonides School that my mother was able, in her words, “to synthesize traditional and modern education.”

And indeed, that is what she did. She and the School Committee were attuned to the financial needs as well as the physical and psychological development of the students. A request from the Coca-Cola Company to put a vending machine in the school⁷ (rejected for fear the children would stop drinking milk), sex education for the students,⁸ financial help to a needy student who could not afford the application fee to college,⁹ the employment of a psychologist,¹⁰ were among the topics discussed at length by the Committee.

4 Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews* (1870), vol. 11, 162, quoted on p. 17 of the doctoral dissertation.

5 Levit, doctoral dissertation, fn. 157.

6 *Ibid.*, 73.

7 Minutes, School Committee (December 1, 1948), 32, private collection provided to me courtesy of Dr. Zev Eleff.

8 *Ibid.*, 33–34, 39.

9 *Ibid.*, 106.

10 *Ibid.* (June 13, 1954), 121.

The School Committee was uncompromising in its demand that teachers be loyal to school policy. An example is reported in the committee minutes, when a teacher who had been at the school for three years asked for a raise in salary.¹¹ The committee instructed the principal to inform him that the teacher was only to teach in Hebrew, nor was he to discuss the “propriety of coeducation” or the “suitability of girls to study *Gemara*” or “the length of girls’ sleeves.” The minutes note that standards set by the school were known to the teacher when he accepted the position. In addition, it was noted that a woman teacher rather than a man was to counsel the young women. If the teacher accepts these conditions, the committee will act on his request for a raise. The school was to reflect the religious educational policy that had been envisioned by my father, Rabbi Soloveitchik, alongside my mother’s vision of a school that enhanced the psychological and physical development of each child.

My mother shared my father’s vision of excellence that was reflected both in the religious and secular curricula. There was great emphasis upon higher education at outstanding universities. All students were to learn Talmud and Bible, they were expected to be committed to strict religious observance and they were encouraged to continue their education at Ivy League Colleges if possible. They were to become part of the American scene not as assimilated Jews but as proud, traditional Orthodox Jews with professional training and skills. Excellence was the motto of Maimonides Educational Institute—high halakhic standards and high educational strivings. As the high school grew, it began to model itself not only on the public school system but primarily on Boston’s renowned private preparatory schools. If excellence was the school’s motto, then excellence was to be found in those programs. The School Committee adopted ideas from other schools, be they public or private; curricula, methods of teaching, and textbooks, for example, were based on the shared experience of other schools.

Fundraising

Perhaps as a result of my parents’ insistence that educational policy be independent of the financial arm of the school, they felt that they should be active in raising funds for Maimonides. They worried about money necessary to implement their vision—not a simple matter in the ‘40s and ‘50s of the twentieth century in a city that had been unenthusiastic about a religious Day School. In the early years, there were many times that my parents and the small group of laymen that were devoted to the school

11 Minutes of the School Committee (May 14, 1959), quoted in Farber, 84–85.

took personal loans to pay salaries on time. My mother even attended all the Ladies Auxiliary meetings as she wanted to support the women who were raising money for the school. My parents' commitment to ensuring that salaries were not in arrears was unwavering. They continued to personally support the school financially and were prominent among its financial sponsors. As time went on, my mother became rather adept at fundraising; not only was she able to develop relationships with philanthropists but she captured their imagination with the projects she envisioned. Usually, the philanthropists were attracted by my father, Rabbi Soloveitchik, but it was Mrs. Soloveitchik who thought of the projects that enticed them to offer support. Together, my parents were able to negotiate the difficult task of building permanent quarters for the school. Maimonides moved from a rented facility in a dilapidated local synagogue, to a rather old-fashioned building that had once housed the Adams family (descendants of two American presidents), to rented quarters here and there and, finally, to a modern up-to-date building in the Brookline area of Boston.

Help to Holocaust Survivors in Vilna

At the end of the Second World War, when the fate of the Jews of Europe was widely written about in the United States, my mother initiated a community project, collecting clothing to send to survivors in Vilna. She needed to find an organization through which she could send the donated garments, and the only agency that was involved in relief to liberated Vilna was the Russian War Relief. It had been founded in 1941 and was active through 1945. The organization was willing to send the clothing to Vilna's Jewish survivors if the shipment contained a ton of clothing. My mother rented a store, organized a group to collect, clean, and repair clothing donated by the Jews of Roxbury. The community responded and one ton of clothing was collected. A handwritten note in Yiddish was pinned to every item expressing warm feelings and assurance that there were Jews in the United States who cared about their brothers and sisters who had survived. The clothing arrived in Vilna and part of the shipment was distributed to Jewish survivors, yet the bulk was given to the general population.¹² My mother was gratified that she sent the clothing; she never knew that although her project helped many survivors, her friends, whom she had wanted to comfort and help, had not benefitted from it.

12 Personal communication with Chaim Bassok, survivor who was in Vilna when the shipment arrived.

Furthering Jewish Education

My mother's role in furthering Jewish education was not limited to Boston. As her children grew and left the home, and as the Maimonides Educational Institute developed and became a full-fledged high school, my mother began to accompany my father to New York. My parents spent two to three days a week in New York, living on campus, but their home remained in Boston. My mother began thinking about ways of improving the Yeshiva. Through my father she met philanthropists, some of whom were more connected to the University side of the institution rather than the Rabbinic side. She was able to interest them in four major innovative projects: an advanced institute for ethical studies, the Rogosin Institute; supplementing the salaries of the religious studies instructors; opening a Kollel; and launching a branch of RIETS in Israel (the Gruss Center).¹³ These were very substantial gifts in an era when Orthodox institutions were not used to receiving large sums of money for development. In 1970, Yeshiva University renamed its Manhattan Central High School for Girls, The Tonya Soloveitchik High School for Girls.

Illness and Death

My mother was diagnosed as having Hodgkin's Lymphoma in the beginning of 1963. She received the prescribed treatment for the disease and was hospitalized several times. Her last hospitalization was for several months. During this last hospitalization, my father curtailed all his activities to a bare minimum and spent his days in the hospital with my mother. One Thursday morning in March 1967, my mother urged my father to travel to New York in order to conclude an agreement with Joseph Gruss who was to give a very substantial donation to Yeshiva University. My father agreed as my mother's medical condition was stable. He returned in the late afternoon, after having successfully fulfilled his mission, to find my mother unconscious. She had suffered a major gastrointestinal hemorrhage.

My mother died on 11 Adar II, March 23, 1967, and was buried in Boston on 12 Adar, my father's birthday. He was a widower for 26 years.

Educational Legacy

My sister, Dr. Atarah Twersky, became the Chair of the Maimonides School Committee shortly after my mother's death—an office she held until 2006. During her years as Chair, she continued to implement my mother's

13 Yosef Adler, "A Special Zechut: Serving as the Rav's *Shamosh*," in *Mentor of Generations: Reflections on Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, ed. Zev Eleff (Ktav, 2008), 226.

vision, in cooperation with my father and her husband, Rabbi Yitzchak (Professor Isadore) Twersky.

Jewish education has changed greatly since my mother wrote her thesis. The Haredi *yeshivot* today bear little resemblance to the schools she described. In today's Day Schools, of both the modern variety as well as among the Haredim, to varying degrees, modern pedagogical methods have been blended with traditional religious studies that was the hallmark of these schools. Corporal punishment is a thing of the past. Child oriented activities have been added to the curriculum, such as trips, parties, and assemblies. There is an awareness of the psychological needs of the child and there is an ongoing dialogue between parents and educators about the psychological and learning issues that challenge their children. In the United States, there are even Haredi *yeshivot* that own summer camps and move their schools to these campuses for the month of July. The young men study Torah yet have time each day to engage in sports or other activities. Although the *Cheder* has made significant changes in the way they relate to the individual student, their focus has remained on religious studies. Secular studies are minimal and language is not emphasized.

The Haredi women's educational system, Beit Yaakov, that was very small in the 1920s, has grown and consists of thousands of students. These schools do not emphasize advanced Torah learning. They emphasize piety and service to the family and community. And yet, these schools are keenly aware of the psychological needs of their students who have, of late, turned to employment in a variety of fields ranging from nursing to computer science. The girl's educational system is very attuned to the psychological development of their students.

The *Volksschule* no longer exists. There were Yiddish language secular schools in the United States and Canada in the first half of the twentieth century. They all but disappeared by the 1950s. The Jewish community was integrated into the general society and educated its children in American schools, both public and private. The Socialist orientation of the *Volksschule* was far removed from the American belief in capitalism and free enterprise. Those interested in Jewish education were no longer connected to Yiddish language and Socialism. They founded Jewish Day Schools, both Orthodox and Conservative. Ironically, Yiddish which had been the hallmark of *Volksschule* is today spoken almost exclusively by the Haredi sector. Hebrew has become the *lingua franca* of the Jew.

Jewish education in the Modern Orthodox or Centrist Jewish community has also changed. My parents' vision of a co-educational school (with the same curriculum for the young women and young men) has not been accepted by the majority of communities. The reasons are many and

beyond the scope of this essay. However, what has been widely accepted is their curricular vision—the world of *beit midrash*, including Talmud, and intense Torah learning as an integral part of women’s religious education. This has led to the growth of high schools and advanced institutes for the study of Torah for women both in Israel and in the United States.

IT IS VERY FITTING THAT *TRADITION* should publish this biographical sketch. It was in these pages that “The Lonely Man of Faith” first appeared in 1965—two years after my mother was diagnosed with cancer. My father dedicated the essay “To Tonya—A woman of great courage, sublime dignity, total commitment, and uncompromising truthfulness.”