

Liberation from the “Oppression of Housewifery:” The Contributions of Canadian-Jewish
Women in WWII

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AP/HIST 4581: Worry and Wonder – Jewish Politics, Society and Religion in Canada

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Word Count: 3885

Friday, March 24, 2023

“It was not considered a Jewish thing to do, you know? For the girls,” Evelyn Bloom, a Jewish servicewoman who served in World War II, said.¹ Bloom refers to Jewish servicewomen's contributions to the Second World War, where their roles are still highly underrepresented in historical work. The contributions of Canadian-Jewish women expanded both the Canadian homefront through organizational work and the warfront through enlistment. They were neither quiet nor still, nor were they waiting on their male counterparts to win the war; they were active participants in the war effort, contributing what they could to end the war. The prime tool at their disposal was their feminism.

Feminism is a concept that has changed vastly throughout the years, being a topic historians constantly have to redefine. In the 1940s, feminism meant extending the role of women outside the home while maintaining the same domestic values. According to Ruth Milkman, “women’s place remained essentially conservative and family-orientated” leading women to place the “highest priority on a family life that could be sustained by their own special efforts,” resembling their contributions to WWII to be an “extension of domesticity.”² The Toronto Hadassah Council and the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) led the Canadian Jewish homefront efforts; Jewish servicewomen also served in active duty in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), in particular, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF).

But why is studying the contributions of Jewish women important? Why is it historically significant? It is crucial to acknowledge the 16,550 Jews (or 10 percent of the Canadian Jewish community) who contributed to the war effort, to keep their memory alive, and to credit them for

¹ Ellin Bessner, “Jewish Women in Uniform,” in *Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military, and World War II* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2018), 109.

² Ruth Milkman, “Review: Gender, Consciousness, and Social Change: Rethinking Women’s World War II Experience,” *Contemporary Sociology* 16, no. 1 (1987): 21-25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2071182>.

their work.³ This signifies an important and underexplored dimension to Canadian-Jewish women and their contributions to WWII, highlighting their agency. Jewish women fought against sexism and gender norms, claiming their Jewish and gender identities by overpassing the hardships brought by WWII onto the Jewish community and boundaries of gender, showing that WWII was not only a time for men to prove their nationalism and bravery but for women to do so as well.

This paper asks if the contributions of Canadian-Jewish women on the homefront and warfront led them to become proto-feminists, inspiring other women to follow. The main focus is how their gender and Jewish identities aided their feminism. It is critical to note the feminism of WWII looked different from the feminism of today, but the core principles of advocacy and agency remain the same.

This paper will argue that Jewish women were proto-feminists. A proto-feminist is a person who held feminist beliefs before feminism was a solid concept.⁴ Jewish women contributed to WWII by embracing their norms of femininity and Jewish identity on the homefront and warfront, utilizing their agency to drive their actions. However, they faced severe consequences, such as public backlash. First, this paper will analyze how Canadian wartime propaganda acted as a catalyst for Jewish women's feminism, both on the Canadian homefront and warfront, by accepting their contributions. Next, this paper will study Jewish women's motivations behind their contributions. Lastly, this paper will look at the maternal sense of Jewish women and how they used it within feminism, leading to an active voice in their

³ "Over 16,000 Jews, 10 Per Cent of Canada's Jewish Population, Joined Allied Forces," (October 1945), Box 1, Folder 9, Fonds 71 – Toronto Hadassah – WIZO, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁴ 'Protofeminist Definition & Meaning | YourDictionary'. Accessed 6 March 2023.
<https://www.yourdictionary.com/protOfeminist>.

contributions. Thus, feminism assisted Jewish women's contributions to WWII on the warfront and homefront.

Homefront propaganda is commonly found in the publications of Jewish organizations focused on recruiting more Jewish women to contribute to the war effort. It became a catalyst that showed Jewish women how and why to contribute. However, how organizations went about it proved concerning to Jewish women, as it was pressurizing and judgemental towards them. For example, Mattie Rotenberg, in an editorial for *Toronto Hadassah Reporter*, critiqued Jewish mothers "who spend hundreds, even thousands of dollars for personal finery and personal indulgence" yet cannot donate a sum for a Jewish child, signifying a double standard society expected of Jewish women to contribute all their resources to the homefront.⁵ Jewish women began to get tired of this treatment and decided to enlist, becoming advocates for themselves.

The initial approach of propaganda was an encouraging call from the Toronto Hadassah Council to their female Jewish members, reminding them "the need is urgent and critical" with "the assistance of every Hadassah member" being required.⁶ Jewish women were not lacking in contributing to the war effort; on the contrary, they understood their capabilities and "power to do," according to Rotenberg, marking the initial appearances of their proto-feminist behaviour through understanding their resources and how to use them, acknowledging the manipulative theme of structural propaganda.⁷ This manipulative theme pressured and guilt-tripped Jewish women to further contribute, citing "no Jewish woman can stand aside from this work."⁸ Toronto

⁵ "What Price Human Lives?" by Mattie Rotenberg (January 1939), Box 1, Folder 3, Fonds 71 – Toronto Hadassah – WIZO, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁶ "Red Cross Workers – Hadassah War Time Activities," (February 1945), Box 1, Folder 9, Fonds 71 – Toronto Hadassah – WIZO, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁷ "What Price Human Lives?" by Mattie Rotenberg (January 1939), Box 1, Folder 3, Fonds 71 – Toronto Hadassah – WIZO, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁸ "Be a Hadassah Member – In War and After the War" by Mattie Rotenberg (January 1943), Box 1, Folder 7, Fonds 71 – Toronto Hadassah – WIZO, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Hadassah Council's expectation of its female Jewish members showcased how it disregarded their voices.

Toronto Hadassah Council's expectation led to Jewish women having the responsibility of taking charge on the homefront through an active role in the community, enabled by the power propaganda gave them. Rotenberg, in an editorial outlining the suffering of the population, highlights there was no tolerance for anything else—"a 'let them eat cake' attitude does not become Jewish women at this time."⁹ This signified that Jewish women became advocates through the expectation of the Toronto Hadassah Council, which originated from the implication of a gendered bias that insisted women focus on domesticity. A possible counter to this argument is that they gave in to the demands of propaganda; however, they did not surrender but instead catalyzed. These propaganda articles of the *Toronto Hadassah Reporter* began to judge the whole character and work ethic of Jewish women based on one choice—whether to contribute to the war effort or not—stating "those who refuse to do Hadassah work on the pleas of local needs exhibit the same short-sightedness as the woman who refuses to shoulder her responsibilities to the community."¹⁰ Jewish women decided to take charge of their narrative. They changed the overall perspective by adopting an active voice; as Milkman suggests, "the war years offered living proof that a more egalitarian gender system was viable," signifying that Jewish women used the changed political environment to their advantage.¹¹

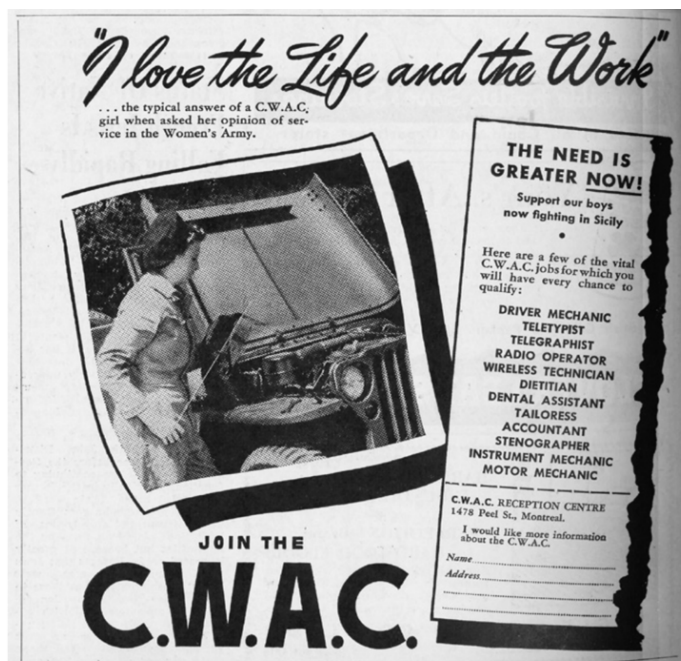
One way to use propaganda to their advantage was to enlist in the Canadian Armed Forces, using the propaganda of the CAF as a means of justification for enlisting. This signified

⁹ "What Price Human Lives?" by Mattie Rotenberg (January 1939), Box 1, Folder 3, Fonds 71 – Toronto Hadassah – WIZO, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

¹⁰ "Jewish Isolationists" by Mattie Rotenberg (December 1943), Box 1, Folder 7, Fonds 71 – Toronto Hadassah – WIZO, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

¹¹ Ruth Milkman, "Review: Gender, Consciousness, and Social Change: Rethinking Women's World War II Experience," *Contemporary Sociology* 16, no. 1 (1987): 21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2071182>.

how Jewish women successfully used propaganda in a feminist and Jewish narrative. Warfront propaganda became a catalyst for Jewish women and their role as proto-feminists, similar to homefront propaganda. The goal of the CAF was to recruit more Jewish women—specifically by targeting them in Jewish newspapers—in 1943 four recruitment ads were placed in the August 13 issue of the *Canadian Jewish Review*.¹²



Advertisement from *Canadian Jewish Review* August 13, 1943, 2. Image courtesy of Janice Rosen, Archives Director, Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives.

Advertisement from *Canadian Jewish Reviews* August 13, 1943. Image accessed from Sandra Lipton's "She Also Served: Bringing to Light the Contributions of the Canadian Jewish Servicewomen of World War II." <https://cjs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cjs/article/view/40016/36221>

According to Sandra Lipton, the reasoning for targeting Jewish women for enlistment was not only to recruit more women due to the war's longevity "but also by an urgent need to counter the negative public image of military women that had led to a decline in enlistment."¹³ Their goal

¹² Sandra Lipton, 2017, "She Also Served: Bringing to Light the Contributions of the Canadian Jewish Servicewomen of World War II," *Canadian Jewish Studies* vol. 25 (1), pp.98-99. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40016>.

¹³ Sandra Lipton, 2017, "She Also Served: Bringing to Light the Contributions of the Canadian Jewish Servicewomen of World War II," *Canadian Jewish Studies* vol. 25 (1), pp.98-99. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40016>.

was to break the gender image only during war due to CAF's need for recruits. Despite appearing as a feminist decision to the public, it was not. Jewish women used this opportunity of enlistment as a catalyst for their gender and Jewish identity politics, completely readdressing the initial response of the CAF by turning it into a feminist issue. Women, including Jewish women, became comfortable in social services and politics, such as achieving a rank in the military formerly reserved for men, allowing them to break gendered notions of women's roles.

Jewish women were also influenced by servicewomen to enlist, seeing their contributions glorified in newspapers. For example, the *Montreal Gazette* proudly represented Jewish servicewoman Mimi Freedman: "...few can boast the record of Miss Mimi Freedman...who spent six years and eight months in uniform. This entitles her to wear the white service chevron along with five red ones, marking her years in the forces."¹⁴ Unfortunately, Freedman was unexcused from the gendered notions of women in the military. When the *Montreal Gazette* (the same newspaper that glorified her contributions) wrote her career summary after her death, they placed the article in "the fashion section."¹⁵ This signified how warfront propaganda set itself up for a specific timeframe (i.e., 1939–1945) with the only goal being to *recruit* and *release* women immediately from service; the gendered notions were very much intact, leading Freedman to be unrecognized equally as her male counterparts. But gendered notions were not the only challenge; there was also the issue of traditional gender norms.

Warfront propaganda challenged Jewish women due to depicting an image that enforced traditional gender norms. One Canadian propaganda poster shows a mother and her child,

¹⁴ "Mimi Freedman, Woman Veteran Overseas Six and a Half Years," *The Montreal Gazette*, Sept. 20, 1946. <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=u34tAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=CJkFAAAAIBAJ&pg=2578,3034475>

¹⁵ Ellin Bessner, "Jewish Women in Uniform" in *Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military, and World War II* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2018), 109.

signifying female and infantile vulnerability and the presumed sense that both mother and child needed male protection.



Gordan K. Odell, 1941-1942, Canadian War Poster Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library. Accessed from Norman Erwin's "The Holocaust, Canadian Jews, and Canada's 'Good War' Against Nazism." <https://cjs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cjs/article/view/39962/36169>.

Jewish women and men took control of their narrative, focusing on their Jewish identity.

According to Norman Erwin, they chose to frame the Second World War's narrative "around the theme of resistance," which gave them "meaning to the enormous loss of life" while also showing the impact of "the Nazi scourge" on the homefront.¹⁶ Erwin focused on a Jewish-male audience in his article, but this was also a prominent theme on the homefront with Jewish women, the community leaders and representatives. The Jewish community responded to the war, coming together to protest their perceived image. A realistic narrative could only come from them.

¹⁶ Norman Erwin, 2016, "The Holocaust, Canadian Jews, and Canada's 'Good War' Against Nazism," *Canadian Jewish Studies* vol. 24, 105-106. <https://cjs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cjs/article/view/39962/36169>

For Jewish women on the homefront, their motivations mirrored a responsibility to preserve communal Jewish identity; they experienced, as one, WWII as an attack on the community. Jewish women felt it was their responsibility to lead responses, adding to the existing contributions of national organizations led by men and women. Mattie Rotenberg stated that Jewish women “render[ed] every service in [their] power to help in the emergency,” the feeling of responsibility coming from their “long and hard struggle for equal rights as citizens” and “as women and as Jews.”¹⁷ Hence, being a Jewish woman proved beneficial in leading the homefront due to their gender and Jewish identity.

Their Jewish identity became their primary tool in justifying their leadership, stating they “have in Judaism a strong armour and a powerful weapon for carrying on this war of the mind,” in which the values of Judaism, namely “Truth, Justice, Peace, Freedom and Brotherly Love,” were qualities used for contributing to the war effort.¹⁸ This is significant for two reasons. First, Jewish women expressed how they were perfect candidates for leading the homefront due to Judaism’s qualities, ones required for leadership. Second, Jewish women depicted themselves as the soldiers of the homefront, equalizing themselves to the male soldiers of the warfront. Their equalization became evident in how they challenged the gendered nature of Judaism’s qualities, such as “Brotherly Love,” showing that said traits were not only applicable to Jewish men.¹⁹ This embodied the identity of a proto-feminist, where their feminist behaviour emerged from their advocacy of the Jewish community and their refusal to allow their ideals to crumble in a difficult time for the Jewish culture. Hence, they showed how WWII “offered living proof that a more

¹⁷ “Jewish Women as Citizens” by Mattie Rotenberg (October 1939), Box 1, Folder 3, Fonds 71 – Toronto Hadassah – WIZO, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

¹⁸ “The Battle of the Mind” by Mattie Rotenberg (February 1945), Box 1, Folder 9, Fonds 71 – Toronto Hadassah – WIZO, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

¹⁹ “The Battle of the Mind” by Mattie Rotenberg (February 1945), Box 1, Folder 9, Fonds 71 – Toronto Hadassah – WIZO, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

egalitarian gender system was viable” due to their commitment to contributing to the homefront as a collective group.²⁰

An egalitarian system became apparent in how the National Council of Jewish Women thought to “best contribute to the general war effort” by “stimulat[ing] the war work of Jewish Women’s organizations.”²¹ For example, one of their community projects was “providing a training ground for Jewish women social workers,” offering them the required experience in which organizations “are seeking trained women,” signifying how their program gave Jewish women “an equal opportunity with other women.”²²

Similarly, Jewish servicewomen on the warfront held motivations for enlisting; however, they differed in that they took active roles for individualistic reasons, meaning private matters they valued on a personal level. Due to the nature of WWII, “Jews had more reason than most Canadians to enlist” because of “Hitler’s war of extermination against Europe’s Jews,” leading to Jewish organizations encouraging enlistment.²³ But for servicewomen, it was more personal because enlistment liberated them “from the oppression of housewifery,” according to Milkman, signifying a more personal reason for contributing.²⁴ It allowed them to express their “quest for adventure,...desire to save Jews...and an eagerness to join” an equal stance with their male counterparts in the CAF.²⁵ These qualities mirrored their proto-feminism, where their desire to

²⁰ Ruth Milkman, “Review: Gender, Consciousness, and Social Change: Rethinking Women’s World War II Experience,” *Contemporary Sociology* 16, no. 1 (1987): 21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2071182>.

²¹ Unnamed Script (unidentifiable date), Box 2, Unlabelled file – M68 A11, Fonds RG 297 CJC War Efforts Committee Box, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

²² “Report of the Dictionary of Council of Service for Foreign Born, Inc. of the National Council of Jewish to the Board of Directors” by Emma S. Schreiber (November 13-16, 1939), Box 10, File 28, Fonds 38 – National Council of Jewish Women, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

²³ Jack Granatstein, 2013, “Ethnic and Religious Enlistment in Canada During the Second World War,” *Canadian Jewish Studies* vol. 21, p. 128, <https://cjs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cjs/article/viewFile/39917/36132>.

²⁴ Ruth Milkman, “Review: Gender, Consciousness, and Social Change: Rethinking Women’s World War II Experience,” *Contemporary Sociology* 16, no. 1 (1987): 22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2071182>.

²⁵ Sandra Lipton, 2017, “She Also Served: Brining to Light the Contributions of the Canadian Jewish Servicewomen of World War II,” *Canadian Jewish Studies* vol. 25 (1), p. 101. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40016>.

break barriers made warfront motivations individualistic, stemming from a personal desire to break gender norms. Furthermore, there was also a sense of protecting their own Jewish identity, as they felt obligated to defend a part of themselves that was under attack.

This feeling of protectiveness spread to their patriotism, a “prime motivator” behind their enlistment.²⁶ For instance, Esther Mager joined the RCAF in 1941 after she took an ambulance course and felt patriotic for being Canadian and proud of being Jewish.²⁷ Pride for one’s Jewish identity was common among the entire RCAF troops, wherein Mager recalls a band of two Jewish boys whose songs were sung by Jewish servicepeople—they met because both were Jewish, signifying unity among Jewish servicepeople that was unique due to their pride for Jewish identity and community, despite being in a group setting where Canadian-ness was the commonality among troop members.²⁸

But there was an immense biased selection process in the RCAF. The RCAF emphasized class distinctions in selecting members, in addition to servicepeople’s “education... [due to it being] considered an indicator of intelligence.”²⁹ Norda Bennett, a Jewish servicewoman for RCAF whose parents were influential in the Jewish community, is evidence of a biased selection. Her father was the president of the Canadian Jewish Congress Central Division, and her mother was the vice president of the Toronto Hadassah Council.³⁰ Bennett herself had extensive

²⁶ Sandra Lipton, 2017, “She Also Served: Bringing to Light the Contributions of the Canadian Jewish Servicewomen of World War II,” *Canadian Jewish Studies* vol. 25 (1), p. 100. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40016>

²⁷ The Memory Project: Esther Mager, Historica Canada, Audio accessed at Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

²⁸ The Memory Project: Esther Mager, Historica Canada, Audio accessed at Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

²⁹ Mathia Joost, 2015, “Racism and Enlistment – The Second World War Policies of the Royal Canadian Air Force,” *Canadian Military History* vol. 21 no. 1, pp. 6-7. <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1644&context=cmh>

³⁰ “Canadians in the War,” *The Canadian Jewish Review*, June 25, 1943. <https://newspapers.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/mcc-cjr:17171>.

educational credentials, including a degree in philosophy and English from the University of Toronto.³¹ She was also a member of the *Varsity*'s editorial team and awarded prizes for her poetry contributions in elementary school, symbolizing her involvement in the community and community politics.³² Despite excellent credentials, like those of Bennett, Jewish women were not openly welcomed in the RCAF.

Unsurprisingly, antisemitism existed in the military forces, where Jewish servicewomen—like Francis Labensohn—were discriminated against for openly identifying as Jewish. Labensohn's identification with Judaism led RCAF to use religion as a physical characteristic, calling her a “short, slight, Jewish girl with dark hair and eyes and shell-rimmed glasses.”³³ This signified RCAF considered being Jewish a “personal and physical characteristic,” such as a moral or racial trait, as opposed to a merely descriptive ethnic or religious identification.³⁴

Lastly, this paper will analyze the maternal sense of the Jewish women of the homefront and warfront and how they used it as a tool for their feminism. They used the traits of maternal sense, such as “distiller and guardians of the Jewish ideals, ...selfless in her faith and devotion...[and] keeping...[and] conquer,” passed from “mother to daughter,” to contribute to the war effort; they took these traits applied in their home and used them as tools of advocacy.³⁵

³¹ “Canadians in the War,” *The Canadian Jewish Review*, June 25, 1943. <https://newspapers.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/mcc-cjr:17171>.

³² “Canadians in the War,” *The Canadian Jewish Review*, June 25, 1943. <https://newspapers.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/mcc-cjr:17171>.

³³ Saundra Lipton, 2017, “She Also Served: Brining to Light the Contributions of the Canadian Jewish Servicewomen of World War II,” *Canadian Jewish Studies* vol. 25 (1), p. 103. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40016>

³⁴ Saundra Lipton, 2017, “She Also Served: Brining to Light the Contributions of the Canadian Jewish Servicewomen of World War II,” *Canadian Jewish Studies* vol. 25 (1), p. 103. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40016>

³⁵ “Purim: Woman's Day” by Margaret Gould (February 1939), Box 1, Folder 3, Fonds 71 – Toronto Hadassah – WIZO, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Their maternal sense embodies a traditional and familial role and values. It is the *way* Jewish women used their maternal sense in shaping their advocacy and agency in matters of the war effort that this paper will use, taking a historical approach to see how it progressed through the years.

The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) on the homefront was a “changeable [organization]” that was “flexible...to the times.”³⁶ A clear example of this is Camp Borden. Camp Borden was the training base northwest of Toronto, training soldiers who enlisted in Ontario learned basic skills before being shipped overseas.³⁷ Female members of NCJW established a comforting place for “entertaining the men and women of the armed forces,” having spent “thousands of hours in their Thrift Shops” so that they can have “funds for their various projects” and be able to supply “good useable clothing to people in low-income brackets.”³⁸ Camp Borden is historically significant due to its library being the “first military library at Camp Borden,” signifying the NCJW were setting a precedent with their maternal sense, beginning a shift in the awareness of the mental well-being of soldiers.³⁹ For example, with Camp Borden’s library, soldiers taking a break from service would have a “place in which to read, study and relax, equal in comfort to any city library,” signifying the NCJW was caring for the mental state of the soldiers, looking out for their comfort and relaxation while simultaneously raising awareness on mental health in soldiers when it was not a conventional thing to do at the time; this is evidence of their proto-feminist behaviour, where Jewish women

³⁶ Booklet outline NCJW’s founding story since 1897-1947, Box 10, File 8, Fonds 38 – National Council of Jewish Women, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

³⁷ Ontario Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery, “Military Training in Ontario,” Archives of Ontario Website, accessed March 21, 2023, http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/explore/online/d_day/training.aspx

³⁸ Booklet outlining NCJW’s founding story since 1897-1947, Box 10, File 8, Fonds 38 – National Council of Jewish Women, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

³⁹ “Library for Soldiers Jewish Council Effort” (February 1940), Box 10, File 29, Fonds 38 – National Council of Jewish Women, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

advocated for soldiers when no one else did, symbolizing soldiers are *people, not tools*.⁴⁰ Not only were soldiers' mentality being taken care of but so were their physicality, with their comfort being a priority: "fifty to sixty men will be comfortably accommodated and the library is to be well lighted and heated."⁴¹

The NCJW also cared for the soldiers' spirituality, holding service and sending "a practising minister" to allow Jewish soldiers to continue their worship and celebrate spirituality.⁴² The soldiers' reactions proved this was a strategic and much-appreciated act, stating NCJW "have every reason to be proud of the good" they are doing with Camp Borden, which acts as a "home from home" for soldiers, including even the Americans!⁴³ Not only were Jewish women able to create a comfortable space for soldiers, but they showed American Jews the Canadian-Jewish identity by welcoming American-Jewish soldiers into the Canadian-Jewish community, symbolized in Camp Borden. Jewish women were successful in showing the spirit of the Canadian Jewish community and what it meant to be a *Canadian Jew*. Hence, Jewish women used their maternal agency to advocate for soldiers' mental and spiritual well-being.

The maternal sense of Jewish servicewomen on the warfront was more complicated due to facing more implications from what society perceived as the ideal Jewish woman. The RCAF allowed women to enlist with their female division (named the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division [RCAF WD]) in 1941, in which they disallowed women to do "direct combat jobs," but were allowed to fill "support roles in order to free the men from combat duty," doing

⁴⁰ "Library for Soldiers Jewish Council Effort" (February 1940), Box 10, File 29, Fonds 38 – National Council of Jewish Women, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁴¹ "Library for Soldiers Jewish Council Effort" (February 1940), Box 10, File 29, Fonds 38 – National Council of Jewish Women, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁴² Report on the Activities of the War Efforts Committee, Canadian Jewish Congress, Eastern Division, November 17, 1940 to December 31 1940, page 3, Box 2, Unlabelled File – 188, RG 297 CJC War Efforts Committee, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁴³ Thank you letters from soldiers under the CJC's 'A Long Way from Home,' (1941), Box 10, File 29, Fonds 38 – National Council of Jewish Women, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

work that included “laundry work, postal sorting, and clerical jobs.”⁴⁴ This signified the implication of a gender bias Jewish women had to deal with in the RCAF, where their initial purpose—according to the RCAF—was to be maids for the male soldiers.

However, by enlisting and advocating for equal roles with their male counterparts, they began their proto-feminist behaviour by working towards achieving equal treatment. In this respect, Jewish servicewomen were more restricted than Jewish women on the homefront due to restrictive policies they followed to remain in service. For example, Esther Mager would bring lunch to two servicemen who overlooked a transport area; this was not her only job (she also analyzed the destruction of airplane crashes) but began with gender roles before she was able to move up the ranks to equalize her position with her male counterparts.⁴⁵ One of the implications of this gendered notion of Jewish women serving was that they “hid their military experience because of the negative public perception of female soldiers,” according to Lipton, refused to speak openly about their experiences, signifying how their maternal sense and the traits that come with it (described above) are not valued as they are on the homefront.⁴⁶ Historically, Jewish women’s—and women’s in general—roles meant to be in the home; this is what Jewish servicewomen were breaking by enlisting, doing so in a time where breaking gender norms was not conventional.

Jewish women advocated for their rights as *Jewish women* to be heard in the RCAF, as seen in how they were accommodated with Jewish chaplains to attend service and participate in

⁴⁴ Saundra Lipton, 2017, “She Also Served: Bringing to Light the Contributions of the Canadian Jewish Servicewomen of World War II,” *Canadian Jewish Studies* vol. 25 (1), pp. 97-98. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40016>.

⁴⁵ The Memory Project: Esther Mager, Historica Canada, Audio accessed at Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁴⁶ Saundra Lipton, 2017, “She Also Served: Bringing to Light the Contributions of the Canadian Jewish Servicewomen of World War II,” *Canadian Jewish Studies* vol. 25 (1), p. 97. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40016>.

concession.⁴⁷ This signified a shift in treatment from traditional roles to consideration of their Jewish values and identity. Jewish servicewomen also became more active in their pursuits, showcasing their agency in matters personal to them, such as their families. For example, Evelyn Robson's daughter states she followed her husband overseas, becoming a cook in 1944 and enlisting to stay with her family; this shows a maternal sense to keep the family structure, but it also Robson's agency in enlisting to maintain her family structure and serve her country, using RCAF WD to her advantage.⁴⁸ Overall, Jewish servicewomen faced more implications than Jewish women on the homefront from their maternal sense, stemming from the traditional gender role of a Jewish woman. They took that image and used it to take charge, broke the perceived gender image and established the beginning of the path to equality.

But the path to equality was not simple, especially with post-war memory being spun mainly by men. The main focus was how to conceive the contributions of Jewish women—and women in general—to WWII. Mimi Freedman's contributions, as previously mentioned, were reduced to the fashion section of the *Montreal Gazette*.⁴⁹ This placement signified Freedman's career summary author saw her contributions as a small feat placed within topics targeted at women, not society. Freedman's post-war memory was not deemed crucial by the *Montreal Gazette* to be credited in a significant section, signifying how they held power in the organization of the contributions of Jewish women.

Despite the negative perspective of society's post-war memory, Jewish women focused on the positive. For example, Esther Thorley, who served in the CAF, credited her service for

⁴⁷ Saundra Lipton, 2017, "She Also Served: Bringing to Light the Contributions of the Canadian Jewish Servicewomen of World War II," *Canadian Jewish Studies* vol. 25 (1), p. 104. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40016>.

⁴⁸ Ellin Bessner, "Jewish Women in Uniform" in *Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military, and World War II* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2018), 106.

⁴⁹ Ellin Bessner, "Jewish Women in Uniform," in *Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military, and World War II* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2018), 109.

forming her character: “I became more demanding, more outspoken,” signifying the commencement of a feminist identity.⁵⁰ This crediting symbolized how Jewish women conceived their contributions as character growth, adding to their gender and Jewish identities through their experiences on a level of personal maturing.

Proto-feminism was also evident in Jewish women’s personal growth, impacting their lives. Mimi Freedman proved to be an inspiration to Jewish women showing them, through her long and successful RCAF career, the ability and power to contribute to the war without having their gender hinder them. Inspiration among Jewish women was not uncommon, as it led to their leadership on the homefront through organizations such as the Toronto Hadassah Council and the National Council of Jewish Women. Proto-feminism spread among the female Jewish community, becoming part of their routines due to seeing each other in an active role.

In conclusion, this paper argued that Jewish women embraced their gender and Jewish identities in their contributions to WWII, leading to their feminist behaviour as proto-feminists. First, this paper analyzed homefront and warfront propaganda, concluding it catalyzed Jewish women’s advocative roles. Next, this paper studied Jewish women’s motivations, concluding their motivations reflected their values and personal matters. Lastly, this paper studied the maternal sense of Jewish women and how they transformed their family values into active ingredients of advocacy, becoming advocates for the well-being of soldiers, despite facing backlash from the Canadian public’s gendered bias.

⁵⁰ Ellin Bessner, “Jewish Women in Uniforms,” in *Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military, and World War II* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2018), 112.

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