

International Jewish Organizations During the Holocaust: Towards a Transnational History of the Women's International Zionist Organisation

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Introduction

International Jewish organizations played an important part in the formation and maintenance of Jewish identity across Europe during the Holocaust, yet histories of Jewish responses to their persecution have been largely conducted within national or even city boundaries. This article will explore the limits of such scholarship and how an international lens to Jewish institutions illuminates further both the specificities and continuities of their wartime connections, ideologies, activities and identities. It will do so by highlighting the case of the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO), an institution whose scholarship has been dominated by concepts of the nation-state. Traditional historiography on WIZO tells us much about its work in individual localities but fails to grasp the truly international aspect that was at the heart of its members' identities. Furthermore, Holocaust historiography has distorted our perspective on such organizations, focusing instead on Nazi policies, extermination, and national narratives of response and resistance. What this necessitates is an international approach that defies traditional geographical framing and, instead, focuses on the common threads and themes that are revealed by examining cross-border organizations and institutions contributing to Jewish identity during the Holocaust. Using WIZO as a case study, this article will chart its common practices, approaches and ideologies across national borders. In doing so, it will reveal how WIZO's character as a cross-border institution enabled its members to take part in transnational discourses at a time of crisis. Finally, this article will show that pursuing an international approach to their history exposes how subjective experiences were shaped by religion and ideology rather than nationality.

WIZO was established in London in 1919 by prominent Zionist Rebecca Sieff. Following the foundation conference, groups were soon organized in most countries across Europe. WIZO also had a presence in Mandatory Palestine, where it ran children's homes and agricultural training centers.¹ The organization's focus was largely on social work and education, though WIZO women are often cited as also being 'political figures'.² This is perhaps unsurprising given the close connection of WIZO leadership to other Zionist organizations - Rebecca Sieff herself was married to Israel Sieff, a prominent member of the Zionist Commission and involved with the World Zionist Organization.³ WIZO's ties with the Zionist establishment positioned them in close proximity to the broader Zionist and Jewish

¹ Leah Simmons Levin, "The Women's International Zionist Organization at the Critical Juncture of Statehood: A Political Analysis of the Israeli Women's Movement, 1918–2001," (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2003), 97.

² Ruth Schwertfeger, *Women of Theresienstadt: Voices from a Concentration Camp* (Oxford: Berg, 1989), 75-6.

³ Mary McCune, *The Whole Wide World, Without Limits: International Relief, Gender Politics, and American Jewish Women, 1893-1930*, (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 131.

community, a position that continued during the Holocaust as WIZO maintained strong links with the official Jewish leaderships.

WIZO groups across Europe, including in the United Kingdom, responded to persecution during the Second World War in similar ways: by striving to maintain Jewish culture and by supporting resistance and rescue operations. European WIZO groups did so by working under the auspices of an official structure like the *Union Générale des Israélites de France* (General Union of Jews in France, UGIF) in France or the Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe, developing underground wings of these organizations. In part thanks to their connection with these institutions, many WIZO groups had significant international connections, liaising with the American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) and other organizations in Switzerland, Istanbul and London as well as between different occupied countries. Finally, Zionist ideology played a central role in motivating and shaping WIZO's activities, though the way it manifested itself varied based on geopolitical factors. Each of these elements affirm the benefit of an international approach, revealing the ways that international connections, travel and identities influenced the WIZO.

The Women's International Zionist Organization as a Transnational Institution

An international approach to the wartime activity of the WIZO reveals the important role its members played in Jewish life during the Holocaust. This was particularly the case concerning the maintenance of Jewish culture as well as rescue and mutual aid efforts. Seemingly the only published book dedicated to the international history of WIZO, *The Saga of a Movement: WIZO 1920-1970*, edited by Fay Grove-Pollack, remarks how 'this history of WIZO's federation also reflects the story of the Jewish people of the last 50 years and the infernal horror of the extermination of six million Jews'.⁴ Grove-Pollack describes 'the role played by WIZO women in this, the darkest period of Jewish history', especially their involvement in 'saving women and children from the Nazi grip'. Similarly, one of extremely few studies on WIZO's work during the Second World War, Rosalie Gassman-Sherr's book *The Story of the Federation of Women Zionists of Great Britain & Ireland, 1918-1968* described how 'in every country where they had existed, they played a heroic role; they organized rescue work, cared for children in concentration camps, heartened and encouraged their people in every way they could'.⁵ Gassman-Sherr thus identifies that WIZO work took place across Europe in similar ways, yet few historians have studied WIZO like this. Along with reports written by WIZO women and presented to their post-war conferences, these two works stand almost alone in recognizing WIZO's international

⁴ Fay Grove-Pollack, *The Saga of a Movement: WIZO 1920-1970*, (Tel-Aviv-Jaffa: Women's International Zionist Organization, 1970), p. iii.

⁵ Rosalie Gassman-Sherr, *The Story of the Federation of Women Zionists of Great Britain & Ireland, 1918-1968* (London: Federation of Women Zionists, 1968), 38.

reach.⁶ Instead, study into WIZO has taken place within national boundaries. Bringing these national studies together exposes the similarities between disparate, often unconnected WIZO groups in Europe and shows the importance of taking an international approach. Martin Wein, for example, described how ‘the overall rescue effort in Czechoslovakia... was perhaps best personified by Marie Schmolková’, a prominent member of Czechoslovak WIZO.⁷ Similarly, Ruth Schwertfeger chronicled how a WIZO group was established in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, where the women’s meeting every sabbath became a key part of spiritual and cultural life in the camp.⁸ In Poland, Natalia Aleksium’s analysis of *Yizkor* Memorial Books showed that ‘most female political figures included in the *Yizker Bikher* were women who led branches of the WIZO’.⁹ Aleksium explains how the *Pinkes Bendin* (the memorial book for Bedzin in Poland), for example, ‘described Chara Hutner as a distinguished political leader, president of the local branch of WIZO, and an activist in the Zionist funds’.¹⁰ In Western Europe, Lucien Lazare outlined how the WIZO leader Juliette Stern led a group of WIZO women who worked with the UGIF and the *Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants* (Children’s Aid Society, OSE) who saved an estimated 2,000 children by hiding them with foster parents.¹¹ Clearly, therefore, WIZO members across Europe played an active role in Jewish responses to the Holocaust. While the ways they did this were varied, they were united around the common theme of maintaining Jewish culture and life.

When an international approach is taken, social work – and particularly support for children – emerges as a major thread of WIZO’s wartime activity. While it appears that no single study has been conducted into WIZO’s social work from a European perspective, collecting details from national histories shows that across Europe WIZO members strove to support their fellow Jews. Renée Poznanski described how Juliette Stern, supported by WIZO women who acted as social workers, ‘set up an underground system within the UGIF for placing children with families’.¹² This system scattered children across France, often sending them to the southern unoccupied ‘free’ zone and to live with ‘aryan’ families. There, WIZO members would check on the children monthly, compiling reports on their status and delivering money for their care. Gassman-Sherr recorded similar activities elsewhere in Europe. Betsy Vromen-Snapper, for example, protected orphan girls in a WIZO home until their deportation together from the

⁶ See, for example: Women's International Zionist Organization, *WIZO on the Continent of Europe: 1939-1946* (London: Women's International Zionist Organization, 1946); Margarete Turnowsky-Pinner, *WIZO's Care for Immigrants and Refugees: Historical Survey, 1933-1946* (Tel-Aviv-Jaffa: Women's International Zionist Organization, 1946).

⁷ Martin J. Wein, "The Czechoslovak Exile in London and the Jews 1938-1945," *Holocaust Studies* 18, no. 2-3 (2012): 147.

⁸ Schwertfeger, *Women of Theresienstadt: Voices from a Concentration Camp*, 75-6.

⁹ Natalia Aleksium, "Gender and Nostalgia: Images of Women in Early Yizker Bikher," *Jewish Culture and History* 5, no. 1 (2002): 79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Lucien Lazare, *Rescue as Resistance: How Jewish Organizations Fought the Holocaust in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 348.

¹² Renée Poznanski and Nathan Bracher, *Jews in France During World War II* (Hanover, N.H. London: University Press of New England, 2001), 334-5.

Netherlands.¹³ Similarly, Marie Apte of Poland rescued and cared for thousands of German Jews until her murder by the Nazis in 1944.¹⁴ Wien's analysis of relief work in Czechoslovakia points further to the proliferation of WIZO in this area.¹⁵ While these examples from European countries do differ in their scope and focus, they nonetheless show social work as a common theme of the organization's response to persecution. Viewing WIZO through an international lens thus develops the idea of WIZO as a European-wide institution with institutional priorities.

Although variation existed, when local WIZO branches enacted their work they often used similar strategies in both Eastern and Western Europe. Unlike other Zionist groups like the youth movement *Hashomer Hatzair*, which distrusted official Jewish leadership and sought to work independently of institutions like the Jewish Councils, the majority of WIZO groups in Europe operationalized their clandestine activities under the auspices of a legal organization. This provided them with an element of legal protection and an institutional cover for underground activities. Joseph Ariel describes how 'under cover of an apolitical philanthropic organization the Jews were able to set up their clandestine self-defense and expand their social activities to such an extent that they ultimately encompassed practically all aspects of Jewish life, both legal and illegal, in the occupied as well as the "free" zones of France'.¹⁶ Stephanie Corazza echoed these sentiments, arguing that these activities complicate our conceptions of official institutions. Corazza argued that while the UGIF 'can be considered as the equivalent in France of a *Judenrat*... its underground branch participated in widespread rescue activities in collaboration with WIZO'.¹⁷ Michael Marrus described how this was the case in Czechoslovakia too, where 'activist members of the Jewish agency established to administer persecution used the cover provided by that body to form a network of self-help'.¹⁸ While there is no evidence that the French and Czechoslovakian WIZO groups were connected, or that there was any kind of official overarching WIZO strategy to be connected to an official institution, the similarities do tell us something about how WIZO groups worked. Such common themes suggest that shared WIZO values existed and that these values shaped how the organization responded to persecution and interacted with others.

Indeed, WIZO's links to official institutions enabled it to establish international lines of communication during the war. These were particularly strong within Eastern and Central Europe and between these areas and neutral or allied countries. Marrus described how Gisi Fleischmann, the chair of Czechoslovakian WIZO, was in contact with the AJDC 'sending a stream of coded letters to its deputies

¹³ Gassman-Sherr, *The Story of the Federation of Women Zionists of Great Britain & Ireland, 1918-1968*, 38-9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵ Wein, "The Czechoslovak Exile in London and the Jews 1938-1945," 148.

¹⁶ Joseph Ariel, "Jewish Self-Defence and Resistance in France During World War Two", *Yad Vashem Studies VI* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1967), 221-250, p. 227.

¹⁷ Stephanie Corazza, "The Routine of Rescue: Child Welfare Workers and the Holocaust in France," (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017), 6-7.

¹⁸ Michael Robert Marrus, *The Holocaust in History*, (Hanover, NH: Published for Brandeis University Press by University Press of New England, 1987), 148.

in Switzerland'.¹⁹ WIZO's connection to the AJDC was longstanding; Wien showed how Marie Schmolková, herself heavily involved in social work, was the chief coordinator between WIZO and the AJDC in the 1930s.²⁰ Wartime international connections existed with the UK too. Recalling a WIZO conference in London on 8th November 1943, Gassman-Sherr described how WIZO founder Rebecca Sieff's speech, which outlined the situation in Europe, left attendees 'inspired and uplifted to learn of the heights to which their WIZO colleagues in Europe had reached' yet also 'plunged to despair' in knowledge of their persecution.²¹ Furthermore, letters between WIZO in the UK and the Polish government in Exile in London show how WIZO in the UK acted as a hub of information about atrocities in Europe and tracking down information about individuals' fates.²² Correspondence between WIZO groups and the free world, often written in code, enabled the flow of information about the Holocaust.²³ This triggered a flurry of activity in London as WIZO groups produced newsletters and pamphlets and wrote letters to raise awareness about the fate of the Jews and pressure governments to act.²⁴ The international connections between WIZO groups across Europe – particularly with the neutral and allied countries – is thus an important element of WIZO's work, with significant transnational consequences.

In addition to the flow of information, an international approach to the WIZO exposes physical cross-border experiences for some members of the organization. This was particularly the case for WIZO leaders, whose work took them across borders. Gisi Fleischmann, for example, as one of the WIZO leaders in Czechoslovakia, travelled to Hungary in an attempt to raise money for her rescue operations.²⁵ Similarly, Marie Schmolková was sent to Paris and London in the late 1930s to negotiate accelerated Jewish emigration from the Protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia. When the war broke out, Schmolková remained in London where she joined social work for Czechoslovakian Jewish refugees and exiles there.²⁶ Certain WIZO activities also necessitated international travel, thus expanding those who experienced it. Marrus described how Fleischmann helped set up an underground route from Slovakia to Budapest and 'worked closely with the Zionist youth organization *HeHalutz*, smuggling Jews across

¹⁹ Ibid., 148-9.

²⁰ Wein, "The Czechoslovak Exile in London and the Jews 1938-1945," 147-8.

²¹ Gassman-Sherr, *The Story of the Federation of Women Zionists of Great Britain & Ireland, 1918-1968*, 38.

²² See, for example: 'Letter requesting information about WIZO members in Lodz and Transylvania, dated 25th September 1944', YVA M.2 506, p. 28; 'Letter regarding the fate of WIZO members in Poland, dated 7th November 1944', YVA M.2 506, p. 38; 'Leaflet from the Federation of Women Zionists of Great Britain entitled "Mass Murder of Jews"', YVA M.2 506, p. 21.

²³ Livia Rothkirchen and Michael Berenbaum, "Fleischmann, Gisi," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 74-5.

²⁴ See, for example: "'A Call to the Women's Organisations of Great Britain and the Allied Nations" from WIZO Chairman Rebecca Sieff', YVA M.2 506, p. 19; 'Letter from WIZO Chairman Rebecca Sieff urging women's organizations to disseminate information about Jews in occupied Europe and calling for government action, dated 10th December 1942', YVA M.2 506, p. 20.

²⁵ Rothkirchen and Berenbaum, "Fleischmann, Gisi," 74-5.

²⁶ Chaim Yahil, "Schmolka, Marie," *ibid.*, 146.

the frontier into Hungary'.²⁷ This often included Jewish refugees from Poland, whom WIZO, as part of the Bratislava 'Working Group' for Jewish aid, helped cross the borders into Slovakia and then Hungary.²⁸ Thus WIZO's activities often engaged in international travel too. The movement of WIZO women and children to foster parents between the Northern and Southern zones of France provides an interesting addition to the story of WIZO international travel. This activity itself raises complex questions about how we conceive of the term 'international'. Although still traveling within France, both WIZO members (with forged papers that showed them as 'aryan') and the children they smuggled crossed a physical border into a geographical space that afforded them a greater element of security. The partition of France into two zones thus created a geopolitical situation that Stern, and many others, exploited to their advantage. This tells a similar story of the movement that Fleischmann facilitated between Poland, Slovakia and Hungary. WIZO's work thus had a significant international element, based on their perceptions of safety with regards to geography which impacted the subjective experiences of leaders and others alike.

Given the pan-European reach of WIZO and the evident prevalence of common values among disparate and often unconnected groups, the question of a shared ideology becomes important. Central to this issue are the pre-war roots of the organization. Leah Simmons Levin outlined how at its founding WIZO was born out of the British Zionist establishment and thus 'saw its role as helping nation-building' along the principle that 'women should take on specific responsibilities, notably social welfare and education independently and autonomously from men'.²⁹ This established a picture of WIZO as an organization committed to certain values that they maintained during the war, for example of social welfare. Indeed, Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz argued that 'pre-war activist women became prominent in the alternative leaderships which sprang up throughout occupied Europe'.³⁰ This echoes Michmann's description of the youth movements as an 'alternative society' and highlights how WIZO existed as an institution in and of itself, not merely responsive to persecution.³¹ Commenting on this, Corazza proposes that an 'alternate chronology of rescue and relief' existed for WIZO in France. Corazza argues that 'rescue activities took the form of social welfare work [which WIZO had been active in before the war], and in many ways continued after the war's end though the meaning of the work changed'.³² Similarly, Wein described how the rescue efforts in Czechoslovakia had their 'roots in the [pre-war] women's movement and traditional poor relief'.³³ Equally, a memorial book from Újpest in Hungary chronicled how WIZO social and cultural work existed both before and after the war.³⁴ Across Europe,

²⁷ Marrus, *The Holocaust in History*, 149.

²⁸ Rothkirchen and Berenbaum, "Fleischmann, Gisi," 74-5.

²⁹ Simmons Levin, "The Women's International Zionist Organization at the Critical Juncture of Statehood: A Political Analysis of the Israeli Women's Movement, 1918-2001," 96.

³⁰ Baumel-Schwartz, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*, 23.

³¹ Dan Michman, "Jewish Leadership in Extremis", 335.

³² Corazza, "The Routine of Rescue: Child Welfare Workers and the Holocaust in France," 282.

³³ Wein, "The Czechoslovak Exile in London and the Jews 1938-1945," 147.

³⁴ László Szilágyi-Windt, *Az Újpesti Zsidóság Története* (Tel-Aviv: 1975), 238, 287, 312.

therefore, WIZO existed as an organization centered around social work long before the Holocaust. This constituted a shared ideology that WIZO groups in European countries took forward during the Second World War and continued afterwards. Viewing WIZO from an international perspective thus underlines the centrality of ideology that existed in groups across Europe and motivated and shaped their activities.

WIZO ideology did not, however, exist in isolation to wartime events and was not impervious to them. Gassman-Sherr argued that WIZO was ‘faced constantly with the dilemma of prosecuting the war effort to their uttermost without being diverted from their own cause as women Zionists’.³⁵ This dilemma was played out across Europe by groups that had to balance their ideological desires with the material necessities of life under persecution. This conundrum is most obvious in the debate on placing Jewish children in non-Jewish families which occurred in France. Corazza described how WIZO was ‘an organization concerned with preserving the children’s original family and Jewish identity’.³⁶ Adler explained that it was because of this ideology that ‘Jewish children were not usually placed with Christian families or in Christian institutions for fear that they would be exposed to the danger of conversion’.³⁷ While this may have been the case for some WIZO groups, it is not indicative of the broader picture. Lazare challenged these assumptions of the importance of ideology, pointing out that the Paris WIZO group in fact preferred to place over 1,000 children with non-Jewish families or institutions, instead of increasing their capacity in Jewish-run children’s homes.³⁸ Striking the balance between preserving their Jewish identity and taking the steps necessary to secure their safety challenged WIZO groups to be flexible with their ideological commitments. While most visible in this example from France, similar discussions occurred across Europe. A report to a post-war WIZO conference, for example, stated that Polish WIZO, like those across Europe, met at the beginning of the War ‘to adapt it to the “new and horrible conditions of life”’.³⁹ The impact of the German occupation did, therefore, also shape WIZO policy across Europe. This often challenged WIZO ideology and activity, as it had to modify its *modus operandi* to fit with the circumstances.

The geopolitical situation and context framed these interactions and discussions, as WIZO groups in different parts of occupied Europe reacted in different ways. As has been seen, in France a complex balance between ideology and pragmatism was reached as WIZO increasingly placed children in non-Jewish homes to protect them from persecution. Elsewhere in Europe, however, ideology played a stronger part in WIZO activities. This was particularly the case in Eastern territories where Jews were either trapped in ghettos or closer to escape routes to the British mandate of Palestine. Exploring Jewish

³⁵ Gassman-Sherr, *The Story of the Federation of Women Zionists of Great Britain & Ireland, 1918-1968*, 36.

³⁶ Corazza, "The Routine of Rescue: Child Welfare Workers and the Holocaust in France," 288.

³⁷ Adler, *The Jews of Paris and the Final Solution*.

³⁸ Lazare, *Rescue as Resistance*, 177.

³⁹ Women's International Zionist Organization, *WIZO on the Continent of Europe: 1939-1946* (London: Women's International Zionist Organization, 1946), 60.

women in Theresienstadt, for example, Schwertfeger identified how WIZO discussion groups formed a central part of the spiritual and cultural life of the ghetto.⁴⁰ Conversely, for Jews who still had the chance of escape, WIZO's Zionist element shone through strong. Commenting on this, Marrus dubs it 'quite a different current of resistance activity associated with the rescue of Jews – smuggling refugees to sanctuary on the periphery of the Nazi empire, often sending them on to Palestine' as opposed to hiding them in situ or smuggling them into Switzerland as was the case in France.⁴¹ Brian Amkraut described how WIZO had a representative on the Youth *Aliyah* committee in Slovakia, helping to coordinate and fund children's travel to Palestine.⁴² Similarly, Asher Cohen explained how at the Palestine Office in Budapest, where Moshe Krausz prepared lists of those who could leave Hungary for Palestine, a team of WIZO women 'performed much of the technical work'.⁴³ Spiritual matters and a concern with *Aliyah* appear, therefore, much more in Eastern European WIZO than in Western. This is not to say that Western European WIZO was not concerned with matters of *Eretz Israel*. Indeed, the London WIZO regularly reported on the situation in Palestine and raised money for WIZO projects there, while many Italian WIZO leaders emigrated to Palestine themselves.⁴⁴ Clearly, a spiritual and ideological concern with *Eretz Israel* was common among all WIZO groups. These examples do, however, show how the international situation determined to a certain extent how WIZO was able to implement and achieve its goals. The character of Nazi occupation and the geopolitical context thus significantly impacted WIZO's work in Europe.

WIZO was an international Zionist organization with a pan-European presence and common ideology. Motivated by Jewish and Zionist ideology, WIZO took part in rescue and resistance activities across Europe, hiding children, smuggling people across borders and providing spiritual and cultural support. Not only were these activities bound together by a shared ideology across nations, some of them were international in their nature, too. The international flow of information and people through WIZO contacts and routes generated cross-border subjective experiences for those involved and enabled WIZO members to contribute to transnational discussions on the fate of European Jewry. Enabling these connections was WIZO's place within the Jewish establishment. Across Europe, WIZO groups worked with the official Jewish leadership to develop underground arms of institutions that were created to administer persecution. Viewing WIZO through an international lens reveals how this *modus operandi* was a common element of WIZO groups in occupied Europe. It also, however, highlights how geopolitical differences in regions of Europe influenced WIZO's activities; no institution exists in

⁴⁰ Schwertfeger, *Women of Theresienstadt: Voices from a Concentration Camp*, 75.

⁴¹ Marrus, *The Holocaust in History*, 148.

⁴² Amkraut, "Let Our Children Go: Youth *Aliyah* in Germany, 1932–1939," 259.

⁴³ Cohen, *The Halutz Resistance in Hungary, 1942-1944*, 163-4.

⁴⁴ 'WIZO London Monthly Newsletter, June 1942', YVA M.2/506, pp. 4, 6; Women's International Zionist Organization, *WIZO on the Continent of Europe: 1939-1946* (London: Women's International Zionist Organization, 1946), 54.

isolation, all are impacted by their context. An international approach thus affirms how WIZO existed as an international entity in and of itself, deeply rooted in a Zionist ideology which shaped its actions.

Conclusion

Applying an international scale of analysis to the history of Jewish institutions and identity during the Holocaust necessitates a reconceptualizing of Jewish movements like the WIZO. These organisations are shown to have acted with common purpose, held common ideology, and resulted in similar subjective experiences for their members and those who interacted with them, almost regardless of their geographical location. This was not because the same story was repeated in different localities across Europe, far from it: important national and regional specificities exist. They are, however, variations of a core narrative, with a coherent set of values and a common *modus operandi*. For WIZO, an embeddedness in the Zionist establishment as well as a commitment to Zionist ideals provided these imagined connections between groups in different nations. Cross-border people smuggling and a focus on social work further characterised WIZO activities wherever they were found in Europe. Only an international scale of analysis can identify these common threads. By treating these organizations as international institutions, not as merely products of their localities, it becomes possible to build a metanarrative of Jewish institutions and identity during the Holocaust.

Local context is not, however, irrelevant. Far from it, the way in which these institutions existed and interacted on local, national and international levels shaped how they acted and the impact that they had on people's identities and experiences. The act of occupation, for example, fundamentally reshaped borders in Europe and created new geopolitical realities that Jews needed to negotiate. An approach, focused on international and spatial influences, shows how in the course of their activities Jews' experiences were shaped as much by border crossing as by border making. Supposedly impermeable boundaries have been shown, in fact, to be passable. Potent, often life changing meaning has been attributed to different areas of Europe, perceptions of which have driven previously unimagined activity. Jews' own understanding of the concepts of national, regional and international were themselves important elements of their institutional and personal identities. These forces, themselves relating to different scales, acted across Europe: members of WIZO groups passed information across borders, smuggled people across them in the pursuit of safety, and maintained an intense ideological link to a yet-to-exist land of Israel.

The approach of international history thus contributes significantly to the research of Jewish institutions and identity during the Holocaust. It reveals European connections, both physical and imagined, where before there was assumed parochialism. Few scholars have explored this, yet the works of Fay Grove-Pollack and Rosalie Gassman-Sherr, along with the arguments put forward here, show that such an approach has the power to reconceptualize our understanding of Jewish institutions and identity during the Holocaust. It exposes the power of Zionist and Socialist ideologies in binding – often unknowingly

– disparate people in common action and similar activities. Finally, it complicates our understanding of how different scales interact with each other and of how Jews themselves perceived these scales and their meaning. In doing so, the international lens changes the way we think about Jewish institutions and Jewish identity during the Holocaust.

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