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Lahnstein Scholarship 2010

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#### Conferences attended in 2010-2011

In search for a Jewish culture: Definitions, Contexts, Meanings at the University of Poznan (20-21 June 2011)

POLIN Conference (03/03/2011-10/03/2011) at the Galicia Jewish Museum in Krakow

Fifth Session of the International Forum of Young Scholars in East European Jewry in Lviv (27-30 June 2011)

Symposium of the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies in London (12-13 December 2010)

#### “Sarah Schenirer and the History of Bais Yaakov.”

In my research, I examine the foundation and development of Bais Yaakov, a religious educational movement for Orthodox girls in pre-war Poland. The first school was founded in 1917 in Krakow by Sarah Schenirer. The 1919 affiliation with Agudas Yisroel, the political party of Orthodox Jewry, was a significant turning point in Bais Yaakov development, as it marked a transition from a private initiative run by an individual to a school network managed by a political party. With over 250 schools and 38,000 students by the end of the 1930s, Bais Yaakov became the largest religious educational movement in Poland, spreading into Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, Romania, and Palestine. Schenirer, after her death in 1935, became its spiritual icon.

The rapidly changing political landscape in post-World War One eastern and central Europe resulted in an increasing politicisation of the hitherto apolitical Orthodox Jewry, who had defined themselves as klal yisroel, the collective of all Jewish people – that is in religious rather than political terms. In this process, education became a central issue, as it helped protect religious identity against outside threats, such as assimilation, but also radical political movements, notably socialism and Zionism.

Bais Yaakov seemed controversial at first, as Orthodox leaders in eastern Europe strongly opposed any innovations to the tradition. Following the halakhic tradition they considered religious education of women to be a violation of the law. However, they also recognized that restrictions imposed on women's education gradually led to erosion of Jewish identity in Orthodox families. Women's retreat from tradition was considered to be one of the main threats to Orthodox Jewry and was therefore strongly criticized, especially in times of growing secularization and the emergence of radical political movements. As a result, despite initial controversies, Bais Yaakov soon gained approval of the religious elite in Poland and the support of German neo-Orthodoxy. Bais Yaakov can be seen as a unique multicultural initiative; established in Krakow, which was previously part of the multinational Habsburg Empire, it combined "modern" German influences with "traditional" spirituality of Polish Jews. It was also a complex cultural and social phenomenon, reaching beyond issues of education.

The aims of my dissertation are threefold. First, it will explore how political and social developments in the period under discussion influenced a shift in the concept of Jewish traditional education that brought about Bais Yaakov. Second, it will examine how Bais Yaakov transformed the existing teaching practice and challenged the concept of women's religious education. Third, my dissertation will analyse the impact of Bais Yaakov on the formation of a new religious identity resulting from interactions between East and West.