

The development of professionalized Jewish nursing in Germany
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The following findings are based on the foundational work of Hilde Steppe (1947–1999), a pioneer of research into nursing history. She was the first to document the history of Jewish nursing in Germany, particularly in Frankfurt am Main, in her dissertation in 1997. Following her early death, we – Dr. Birgit Seemann, Dr. Edgar Bönisch, and myself – have continued and expanded the work on this topic within the Research Project „Jewish Nursing History“ since 2006. We regularly publish new findings on our website www.juedische-pfleugeschichte.de. In 2019, we published a book „Das Gumpertz’sche Siechenhaus – ein ‚Jewish Place‘ in Frankfurt am Main“, which documents an important social and health care institution in Frankfurt’s East end.

The emergence of Jewish nursing care must be viewed in the context of a professionalization of nursing in the 19th century. Steppe here speaks of the „construction of an occupation“, since this development was significantly impacted by external factors such as scientific advances in medicine, industrialization, wars, and the feminist movement.

The construction of the occupation of nursing in the 19th century was facilitated by the following factors:

- Developments within medicine
- Industrialization
- The enforcement of national constitutional interests through warfare
- The middle-class feminist movement

Alongside Christian and secular nursing care – such as Catholic orders like the Vincentians, Protestant associations like the Kaiserswerther Diakonie and secular associations like the Red Cross – a branch of nursing care emerged that was based on the ethical and religious values of Judaism. These include both ‚Zedeka‘, meaning charity, in its various aspects, and the commandment to visit the sick (Bikur Cholim). However, both principles were voluntary and not professionalized, and so did not involve payment or any standardized training with specialized knowledge.

The Establishment of Associations and Growth

In the second half of the 19th century, the idea of professionalized Jewish nursing care was almost inevitable. Three major developments finally contributed to the foundation of the „Verein für jüdische Krankenpflegerinnen“ – The Association for Jewish Nurses in Frankfurt:

1. the incorporation of Jewish communities in the „Deutsch-Israelitischer Gemeindebund (DIGB)“, the German-Israelite Union
2. the union of independent orders or ‚lodges‘ (Bne Briss U.O.B.B) and
3. the establishment of independent associations, often initiated by Jewish women, in various locations across Germany.

The „Deutsch-Israelitischer Gemeindebund“ (DIGB) was constituted in 1872 as the umbrella organization of Jewish communities in Germany. Its aim was to aggregate the various concerns of the individual communities with regard to social work, charity as well as the fight against antisemitism. To that end, it also took charge of the education of Jewish nurses. An application submitted to the DIGB in 1882 to endorse the education and training of Jewish nurses following the example of the Christian „motherhouse“ lists three reasons: 1. to ensure care for the sick through Jewish personnel, 2. to provide for single Jewish women, otherwise not provided for, and 3. to prove that Jewish women were equally suited for nursing care. The hospital of the Israelite Community of Frankfurt (Israelitische Gemeinde Frankfurt) had already taken on a Jewish girl for training in 1881, another was undergoing training at the time. The applicant argues as follows: „To meet the generally great needs, it was necessary that ‚an association for the establishment of a convent house (Stiftshaus) for single Jewish women and girls be created in every German community‘. Training was to take place in Jewish hospitals, the subsequent work to be carried out chiefly in Jewish communities“ (Steppe, p. 91). This proposal sparks some controversy. Among other things, the „motherhouse“ is rejected, since the unconditional obedience demanded there is deemed incompatible with Judaism. Demand is seen mostly in rural areas. Nursing care should rather continue to be a voluntary service, since the profession would prevent Jewish women from marrying. In spite of these objections, the idea of formal training for Jewish nurses is carried further and included in the DIGB program in 1882.

The second organization to support the professionalization of Jewish nursing care was the Independent Order Bne Briss U.O.B.B., which was established in 1882 as the first German offshoot of the organization of „lodges“ (B’nai B’rith), headquartered in the US. The „Sons of the Covenant“, as the name is commonly translated, pursued both cultural and charitable causes. In 1881 – almost in parallel to the discussions going on within the DIGB – an initial survey was conducted to assess the need for professional Jewish nursing care. Here, too, opinions were divided and an overall negative sentiment predominated. Nevertheless, the idea was carried forward by a few members (‚brothers‘)

from Frankfurt. In 1889, a committee for the education of Jewish nurses was formed and two women were accepted for training at the hospital of the Israelite Community. One of them was Minna Hirsch, the co-founder of the Frankfurt Association for Jewish Nurses.

Now for the third group. At several locations across Germany, nursing associations were established, in order to promote and regulate the education and employment of Jewish nurses. Frankfurt was a forerunner here – and I will now focus mainly on the developments in this association. The foundation of the Association for Jewish Nurses of Frankfurt am Main combines two of the aforementioned developments. By 1893, a total of five women had been trained in the hospital of the Israelite Community. Together, they established the „Verband jüdischer Krankenpflegerinnen“ (Association of Jewish Nurses) in 1893. At the same time, the lodge U.O.B.B. was taking action and some doctors lent their support, so that on October 23rd 1893, the „Verein für jüdische Krankenpflegerinnen zu Frankfurt am Main“ (Association for Jewish Nurses of Frankfurt am Main) was founded. Minna Hirsch (1860–1938) became the first matron. Students were trained at the hospital of the Israelite Community, training usually lasted one year with a three-month trial period. They committed themselves to 'serving at least three years as a ‚Vereinschwester‘ (nurse) in the association, after completing their training. So, after all, an organizational structure had emerged that was similar to the ‚motherhouse‘; nurses and students were lodged right next door to the hospital and assigned to their respective nursing positions by the Association. They did not earn a salary but were provided with a stipend as part of their membership in the Association, as well as cover for sickness and old age.

Allow me to introduce one of the founders of the Jewish nursing association of Frankfurt: Klara Gordon (1866–1937), an „upstanding Jew, universally respected as an excellent representative of her profession“. Born in Eastern Prussia, she arrived in Frankfurt in 1890, in order to train as a nurse in a Jewish environment. As already mentioned, she and four of her colleagues founded the „Verband jüdischer Krankenpflegerinnen“, which then merged with the „Verein für jüdische Krankenpflegerinnen“ that had been established by male doctors and sponsors. After passing the exam, she completed her one-year training in 1893 and began working in inpatient and outpatient care. Following a regular rotation, she was assigned as a nurse for the poor in 1895 to tend to patients of all faiths who were in need. In 1897, the Association of the Jewish Hospital in Hamburg, which at that time did not have a nurse training program of its own, inquired in Frankfurt after an experienced nurse, suited for leadership. Klara Gordon followed their call. At first, she had only one experienced elderly lady and around six wardens to work with in Hamburg.

Klara Gordon
(1866-1937)



Source: Lindemann, Mary 1981

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Over the next four decades, she went on to build the nursing division of the Israelite Hospital in Hamburg. In addition, in 1902 she assumed leadership of the Israelite nurses' residence (Schwesternheim) which had been established as an independent foundation, as well as the state-approved nursing school in 1908. In her, we see an example of both the entrepreneurial spirit and the principle of networking.

After much debate, in 1905 the individual nursing associations joined together to form an umbrella organization to better represent their shared interests.

At the beginning of World War I, there was no question among Jewish nursing associations that they, too, would take an active part in caring for the wounded. Unfortunately, I do not have time today to go into detail here and would like to skip ahead now to the end of the Weimar Republic. By this time, after a brief decline in the early 1920s, the enrollment numbers in nursing education were rising, the curriculum had been significantly refined, the duration of the training had been extended to two years. From this period, I would like to introduce you to Thea Levinsohn-Wolf. Born on December 10th, 1907 in Essen, she joined the nurse training program at the hospital of the Israelite Community in Frankfurt in 1927. She had defended this choice against the will of her parents, who had envisioned a life as a wife and mother for her. After completing two years of training, she graduated with excellent results in 1929 and began working in the women's surgical ward.

Thea Levinsohn (1907-2005):

with colleagues of the surgical ward in the hospital of the Israelite community in Frankfurt



Nurse Thea

About 1930

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Source: Thea Levinsohn-Wolf, *Stationen einer jüdischen Krankenschwester. Deutschland – Ägypten – Israel*, Frankfurt am Main 1996, p. 30

As already mentioned, Frankfurt held both a magnetic as well as a signaling effect. In 1932, the Jewish community of Alexandria was in urgent need of trained personnel. Dr. Fritz Katz (1868–1969) joined from Frankfurt and only two months later, he requisitioned Thea Wolf, who was still unmarried at the time and whom he had come to know as a competent nurse. Following the Frankfurt model, she established a nurses' residence on the grounds of the new Jewish hospital in Alexandria, while also taking the position as head nurse of the hospital's surgical ward. In this function, she was able to provide support to many Jewish refugees from 1933 onward.

Thea Levinson in Alexandria
1944



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Source: Thea Levinsohn-Wolf, *Stationen einer jüdischen Krankenschwester. Deutschland - Ägypten - Israel*, Frankfurt am Main 1996, p. 82

Originally, the plan had been for her to return to the hospital of the Israelite Community in Frankfurt after two years, so in 1934. However, due to the Nazi takeover, she remained in Egypt. I cannot relate all the details of her life here. Her journey led her to Palestine, later Israel, to Essen, back to Israel and, finally, to Frankfurt, where I had the opportunity to meet her.



1995

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Hilde Steppe and Thea Levinsohn-Wolf reviewing documents at the Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences



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Thus, even as Thea Levinsohn-Wolf was establishing a system of Jewish nursing care in Alexandria, the Nazis were drastically cutting back the rights of Jews living in Germany, culminating in deportation and genocide.

It is very difficult to reconstruct the life circumstances of the Jewish nurses, since many sources were destroyed. But in Frankfurt, we do have so-called 'Hausstandsbücher' or 'household books' - official documents registering the inhabitants of individual houses including the moving dates. Hilde Steppe was the first to uncover them. The household books of the Jewish Nurses' Residence and the hospital of the Israelite Community have remained intact.

From the wealth of data, I would like to highlight the topic of emigration (which is once again relevant today):

Number of Nurses	Country of Emigration	
29 nurses	England	1939
8 nurses	Palestine	1934 to 1937
5 nurses	USA	1933 to 1941
3 nurses	Switzerland	1938 to 1940

Number of Nurses	Country of Emigration	
1 nurse	America	1937
1 nurse	Argentina	1938
1 nurse	Belgium	1939
1 nurse	Chile	1939
1 nurse	Cyprus	1935
1 nurse	Lithuania	1933
1 nurse	Norway	1941
1 nurse	South Africa	1938

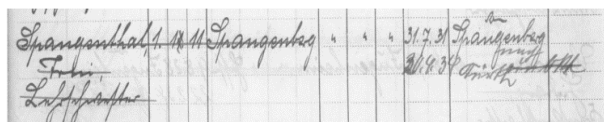
Source: Hausstandsbücher 655, 686, 687; Institut für Stadtgeschichte Frankfurt am Main

Of 262 persons registered, 59 were able to emigrate. The country of emigration is noted for 53 of them: England is at the top of the list with 29 nurses, all able to leave in 1939. It is followed by Palestine with eight nurses, the US with five, Switzerland with three, and finally one nurse each who left for America, Argentina, Belgium, Chile, Cyprus, Lithuania, Norway and South Africa. Of course, we have no way of knowing whether they actually arrived at their intended destination, were allowed to stay, or had to continue looking for a safe haven. Five entries are listed as „traveling“, one each as „emigrated“ and „unknown“. You can see on the list one person who emigrated to Argentina. I have met the daughter of Toni Spangenthal and am indebted to her for tales and photographs from her mother’s life.

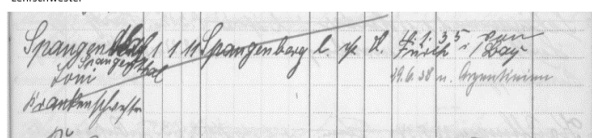
Toni Spangenthal was born on January 1st, 1911 in Spangenberg, Northern Hessia. Before she became a nurse, she worked as a laboratory assistant. On July 31st, 1931, she moved into the nurses’ residence in Frankfurt to begin her training.

Entries by Toni Spangenthal in the household book

Einträge von Toni Spangenthal ins Hausstandsbuch



Spangenthal, Toni, Lehrschwester
Geboren 1.1.11 Spangenberg
Einzug 31.7.31 Aus Spangenberg
Auszug 30 (?) 4.34 Nach Fürth



Spangenthal, Toni, Krankenschwester
1.1.11 Spangenberg
I=ledig d=deutsch
Isr. = Religion
10.1.35 Aus Fürth i./Bay
29.6.38 n. Argentinien

Spangenthal	Born 1.1.11	Spangenberg		Joined 31.7.31	from Spangenberg
Toni				Left 30(?) .4.34	for Fürth
Apprentice Nurse					
Spangenthal	Born 1.1.11	Spangenberg	unmarried; German; Jewish	Joined 10.1.35	from Fürth / Bavaria
Toni				Left 29.6.38	for Argentina
Nurse					

After a placement in Fürth from April 1934 – January 1935, she returned to the Jewish nurses’ residence in Frankfurt and remained there until her emigration.

Toni Spangenthal
(1911-1985)



Nurse Toni enjoyed working on the infectious disease ward

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In Frankfurt, she met her future husband Alfred Berg (born 1910) through her cousin, who was also enrolled in the nursing program. He was a tradesman and was forced to leave for Argentina as early as 1936, due to severe antisemitic discrimination. His preferred destination had been Palestine, but he was left without any other option. Luckily, he was able to get Toni Spangenthal to Argentina in

June of 1938. The wedding was held onboard the ship, as soon as it arrived in Buenos Aires. Their children Silvia and Angel were born in 1941 and 1943.

The whole family

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The family had to live in the harshest conditions in the countryside. Their mother's certifications were not recognized, she was forced to work illegally as a private nurse. At first, the children were placed with an aunt and uncle in the countryside, while their parents remained in the capitol to earn money. It took several years before the family could move to Buenos Aires together and the daughter Silvia could attend school.

As soon as she turned eighteen, Silvia immediately left for Israel, where she began her training and worked in several capacities of nursing with great joy.

The family tradition keeps on:
Silvia Berg, the daughter of Toni Spangenthal after here exam in Israel

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This is where I close my overview of Jewish nursing history and I would like to take the memory of those who were saved under the most difficult circumstances and all those who were not permitted to survive, as a constant reminder to us that such events must never happen again.

Thank you for your attention.

Archives

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