Teaching at a Lebanese AIU School in the 1930s: Rebecca Goldman's Path from Kalisz to Beirut

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Abstract

This paper explores the microhistory of Rebecca Goldman, a Polish Jewish woman born in Kalisz who, after studying at the École Normale Israélite Orientale in Versailles, relocated to Beirut in 1935 as a teacher for the Alliance Israélite Universelle. Drawing extensively on her correspondence and educational reports preserved in the AIU archives, the article investigates Goldman's interactions with and perceptions of the local Jewish community in Beirut. Rebecca Goldman's narrative encapsulates the tensions of cultural identity experienced by Eastern European Jews navigating new socio-political environments. The paper also emphasizes how her Polish background and French educational formation created a significant cultural disconnect that affected her integration into the Lebanese Jewish community, leading to conflicts and misunderstandings. By examining Rebecca Goldman's personal journey, this research contributes to broader discussions on the emotional landscapes of Jewish migration, identity formation, and the intricate interplay between personal narratives and collective histories.

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Introduction*

Among the reports sent to the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) headquarters in Paris from teachers in Beirut in the interwar period held in the AIU archives, one is particularly striking and seems to be at odds with the organization's policy of the time. It was written by Rebecca Goldman. Writing about the 1936 school year, she commented:

> Zionist sentiment is almost non-existent in the hearts of the Jewish youth of Beirut. Living a quiet, middle-class life in peace with the Muslims and Christians, they think little of cooperating with the Palestinian youth [the Jewish youth in Mandatory Palestine], who pulsate with enthusiasm and zeal. One example among a thousand is proof of the indifference of the local youth towards the Zionist movement. A Palestinian recently came to Beirut and showed his friends a picture of the Tel Aviv port. The picture elicited a sarcastic smile from them. True, it is only a hundred-meter pier, but it is a valuable acquisition obtained at a high price, which did not move the local youth at all.[1]

As I looked at this document, several questions arose: Who was Rebecca Goldman and what prompted her to communicate such statements? How did her journey as a teacher unfold? How did she navigate interactions with the local community? This paper focuses on the correspondence between Beirut teachers and the AIU in the quest to unravel the threads of Rebecca Goldman's journey and illuminate the broader discussion on the emotional landscapes of Jewish migration and the intricate interplay between personal narratives and collective histories. I argue that Rebecca Goldman's narrative encapsulates the tensions arising from the identity-forming impulse against the backdrop of her birthplace and the subsequent uprootedness she experienced. The archetypical, mythogenic, contextualized place

*This research was funded by the National Science Center, Poland, under grant no. 2021/43/D/HS3/00437. The author would like to thank Natalia Aleksiun and the "Communities and Mobilities" research hub at the Azrieli Center for Israel Studies at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev for their valuable feedback.

[1] Moscou E 06.08 (Liban, Beyrouth), item 8, Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) Archives, Paris.

of birth represents more than just a person's geographic origin; it represents a formative cultural and historical identity that is both potent and emblematic.[2] However, as Rebecca transitioned to new environments—first to France and later to Beirut—this once deeply significant place of birth was transformed and reconstituted within the framework of her subjective practices and experiences as she navigated new geographies and social contexts.

The Researcher's Challenges

While trying to reconstruct Rebecca's story, I managed to contact her son. Owing to her premature death, he could only provide me with his mother's identity card from France. In 1933 the French Prefecture Seine-et-Oise issued an identity card for Rebecca Goldman.[3] This is furnished with a photograph of a smiling young woman looking confidently into the camera. Her attire, characteristic of the time, features a bow neck blouse of a style fashionable in the early 1930s.

This snapshot captures not just a moment in time but an emblematic expression of the hope and determination that must have spurred Goldman on as she embarked on a transformative journey. The document provides a genealogical roadmap, tracing her roots back to Kalisz, where she was born on November 26, 1915, to Isaac, a shoemaker, and Cypa (née Sieradzka) from Warta.[4] Kalisz became part of the Second Republic of Poland after its 1918 restitution. At some point, Goldman moved to Paris in order to enroll in the AIU seminar for teachers.

Thus I learned that Goldman belonged to a generation characterized by Kenneth Moss as the "unchosen people."[5] Moss argues that the transformations of the 1920s in Poland, while fostering the assimilation of Jews, also led many to the disillusioning realization that a promising future within the country was unlikely. During this period, a sense of hopelessness prevailed and a growing perception of

[2] Karolina Koprowska, *Miejsce urodzenia jako uwikładnie* (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2024).

[3] Picture of Rebecca Goldman's identity card, Serge Doubine's private archive, Paris.

[4] Birth certificate of Simcha Goldman, entry 204, Akta stanu cywilnego Okręgu Bożniczego w Kaliszu 1916, Archiwum Państwowe w Kaliszu, Kalisz.

[5] Kenneth B. Moss, *An Unchosen People: Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2021).

danger took root among the Polish Jews, fundamentally shaping Poland's Jewish political culture and identity. The existential uncertainties and perceived threats experienced in the 1920s and 1930s played a pivotal role in the transformation of the Jewish community's collective psyche and identity in Poland.

How did this context shape Rebecca Goldman's life and her trajectory from Kalisz to France? It is noteworthy that the decision for a woman to emigrate was an unusual occurrence, given the prevalent inclination of parents to dispatch their sons rather than their daughters to foreign lands.[6] The uniqueness of Goldman's path lies in the interplay of personal agency and societal expectations. By choosing to attend École Normale Israélite Orientale (ENIO)[7] to train as a teacher, she was likely defying both community and family gender assumptions. Her identity card reveals that Goldman was in the process of honing her skills, as it lists her occupation as "student" (*étudiante*). Thus, the document serves as evidence of her educational journey, which was to lay the foundation for her future role as an educator. Adding a linguistic layer to her identity, the document bears her signature, introducing us to the Yiddish version of her name—Ryfka Goldman, the version which must have matched whatever documents she presented to the French authorities. This linguistic choice is not a mere formality, it is a cultural assertion, a reaffirmation of her connection to her cultural heritage. At the same time, her records held in the AIU archives reveal that she faced linguistic challenges in navigating the French educational landscape. As her superiors later recalled: "The Polish-born teacher barely spoke French when she was accepted in Paris…

[6] Interestingly, Agnes Katalin Keleman in her PhD dissertation shows that according to university documents, the typical *numerus clausus* émigré from Hungary was the upwardly mobile son of a Jewish small-scale merchant. However, contrary to common expectations, female students who migrated did not come from higher social or more urban backgrounds than their male counterparts, Agnes Katalin Keleman, "*Peregrination* in the Age of the Numerus Clausus: Hungarian Jewish Students in Interwar Europe" (PhD diss., Central European University, 2019), 115.

[7] At first, the Alliance's teaching corps was primarily composed of young men from Jewish schools in France. However, as the network expanded, recruiting sufficient teachers from France, especially women, became a challenge. In response, the best graduates from Alliance schools in the Middle East and North Africa were brought to Paris for training before returning home to teach. In 1867, the École Normale Israélite Orientale (ENIO) was established in Paris to train male teachers. A separate facility for female teachers was acquired in Versailles in 1922. Until then, the girls involved with the AIU studied at the boarding schools of Madame Weil-Kahn and Madame Isaac or in the École Bischoffsheim in Paris.

and did not pass her school-leaving examinations until the end of her third year at Versailles."[8]

Goldman's biography must also be examined through the lens of the East European Jewish diaspora experience in France. Many of the Eastern European Jews who came to France like Rebecca sought to recreate familiar elements of their Jewish life within an unfamiliar new context. Although the French capital was markedly different from the cities they had known in Eastern Europe, these Jewish immigrants managed to carve out spaces that felt like home.[9] The Parisian East European Jewish culture of the interwar period was centered around a network of religious and nonreligious institutions, which operated independently from the local French Jewish ones. Additionally, the Yiddish press played a significant role in maintaining cultural continuity and community cohesion.[10]

Navigating Rebecca's story as a researcher who lacks specific biographical details about her activities either Poland or France presents a unique challenge. While I am familiar with the historical context of these regions, I had only fragmentary evidence, inference, and broader socio-political narratives from which to piece together her experiences. Understanding Poland's socio-political climate and France's cultural milieu during her time provides valuable context, yet the absence of direct accounts requires cautious extrapolation about Rebecca's actions and motivations.

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[8] Letter from Esther Penso, October 16, 1947, AM Liban E021 G, unpaginated, AIU Archives, Paris.

[9] Nick Underwood, "Aron Beckerman's City of Light: writing French history and defining immigrant Jewish space in interwar Paris," *Urban History* 43, no. 4 (2016): 618-634; 621.

[10] Paula Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 78-79. In contrast, for many Sephardi Jews the connection with France was hardly coincidental. Sephardi Jews had intimate cultural ties with the republic, which they emphasized. Many of them were alumni of Franco-Jewish schools, most of which were run by the AIU, and as a result, on their arrival in Paris, they were already fluent in French. They kept their own institutions but also tended to mingle into local French organizations. France became the new heartland of the Sephardi world, especially in the 1930s. Robin Buller, "Ottoman Jews in Paris: Sephardi Immigrant Community, Culture and Identity, 1918–1939" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2021).

Poland: A Generation in Motion—Jewish Youth Movements and Reform Pedagogy

Goldman's formative years were shaped within the socio-political milieu of the multilingual Second Republic of Poland, where she grappled with the myriad challenges and solutions to Jewish problems offered by Jewish organizations and political parties. This contextual backdrop provides a nuanced understanding of the emotional landscapes that influenced her later perceptions, choices, and desires. We know little about Goldman's childhood and youth in Poland. In particular, we do not know if she shared one of the important aspects of collective experience of Polish Jews of her generation—membership in a Jewish youth movement. The prominence of Jewish youth movements in interwar Poland played a pivotal role in shaping the ideological, cultural, and political mentalities of this generation, especially among those less connected with the traditional style of life. Within this context, Zionist youth movements emerged as a one of the dominant forces, channeling the aspirations and frustrations of young Polish Jews into structured frameworks of activism and self-education.

Young people's enthusiasm, idealism, and uncompromising attitudes were perceived to make them ideal vessels for promoting and implementing social ideas. Political movements saw young people as a resource to be nurtured and molded.[11] Youth movements served as alternative homes for members of this generation. The youth was seen as the main driving force behind the new ideas. This turn of the political forces toward the younger generation was not unique to Jewish organizations, or to Poland. From the latter half of the nineteenth century onward, a wide range of activists and institutions had turned their attention in this direction. Their aims varied: some sought to mold young people into model citizens; others, on the contrary, wanted to forge them into revolutionaries. Undoubtedly, however, they all began to recognize the strength and potential in young people.[12]

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[11] Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[12] John Gillis, *Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1770–Present* (Academic Press: New York 1974), 95-183; Kathleen Alaimo, "Shaping Adolescence in the Popular Milieu: Social Policy, Reformers, and French Youth, 1870–1920," *Journal of Family History* 17, no.4 (1992): 419-438; Jürgen Reulecke, "The Battle for the Young: Mobilizing Young People in

Jewish political parties operating in interwar Poland were no less focused on youth than any others, in keeping with the spirit of the times. Youth movements became "a state within a state," a space where young people could find themselves. They not only conducted political agitation, but also offered informal education, organized entertainment, held summer camps, etc. This gave young people an alternative to what they saw as the traditional world of their home. As young people come of age, they often revolt against the prevailing order and the family; youth organizations were an arena for the eternal battle of the generations. As Ezra Mendelsohn phrased it: "For young Polish Jews, particularly in the 1930s, joining a political youth movement was the norm, the expected thing to do."[13] Like the political parties, the Jewish youth movements varied in their ideologies and social contexts.[14]

The membership numbers of the various organizations are difficult to estimate precisely, as their leaders probably exaggerated their statistics. We also know that their numbers were constantly fluctuating, and young people often skipped from one movement to another.[15] Nor is it easy to find synchronic information on all the organizations, which is why making comparisons of specific years is no small challenge. There is essential information to be gleaned from the estimates released by the movements themselves in their own publications, though even here we should remain suspicious.[16] Examining these numbers, however, we can clearly see

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Germany," in *Generations in Conflict: Youth Revolt and Generation Formation in Germany, 1770–1968*, ed. Mark Roseman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 92-104; Derek Linton, *Who Has the Youth, Has the Future: The Campaign to Save Young Workers in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[13] Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 48.

[14] For more on motivations for joining youth movements in interwar Poland: Kamil Kijek, *Dzieci modernizmu: Świadomość, kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2017); Daniel Heller, *Jabotinsky's Children: Polish Jews and the Rise of Right-Wing Zionism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Magdalena Kozłowska, *Świetlana przyszłość? Żydowski Związek Młodzieżowy Cukunft wobec wyzwań międzywojennej Polski* (Krakow–Budapeszt: Austeria, 2016).

[15] Kijek, *Dzieci modernizmu.*

[16] According to summaries prepared by the organizations themselves, 10,000 young people belonged to Tsukunft in 1933, while in that same year, ha-Shomer ha-Tsair counted 30,226 activists, Bnei Akiva around 20,000, Betar 33,422, and Frayhayt 10,000. The data for a similar period gives other movements as follows: Gordonia 7,000 (1930), Tseyrey Agudas Yisroel 10,000 (1931), and

which organizations were the most popular. If we were to sum up their membership counts, Zionists of all stripes would constitute an overwhelming majority.

One important factor that drove young people to join these movements was the urge to study and gain knowledge. Although the possibilities for self-education offered by youth movements were highly political, this was not perceived as something negative.

It is also worth noting that Jewish formal education in Poland at the time, both in Zionist and non-Zionist school networks, was undergoing reforms inspired by German and Austrian pedagogical thought. These reforms were influenced by the ideas of "new education" or "reform pedagogy," which had emerged as a response to the rigid, over-intellectualized schooling of the nineteenth century. While not a uniform movement, reform pedagogy brought together various trends under a shared commitment to rethinking education. At its core, the new pedagogy redefined the role of the child from a passive recipient of knowledge to an active co-participant in the educational process. These progressive ideas strongly influenced the creators of the new Jewish schools in Poland, as seen in both contemporary debates among educators and the innovative methods applied in various institutions. While the peak of these educational reforms came in the interwar period, their theoretical foundations had been developing since the early 20th century.[17]

Yugnt 10,000 (early 1930s). "Der yugnt-bund 'tsukunft' oyfn 4-tn tsuzamenfar fun Bund," *Yugnt veker* 2 (1933): 3; for ha-Shomer ha-Tsair, *Misparim*, "Ha-shomer ha-tsair: iton ha-bogrim shel histradrut ha-Shomer ha-Tsair" (February, 1934): 44; for Bnei Akiva, Baruch Yechieli, *Akiva: Tenuʿat Noʿar Tsionit-Kelalit: Ṣemiḥatah, Hitpatḥutah u-Leḥimatajbi-Shenot ha-Shoʿah* (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 1988), 76; for Betar, Isaac Remba, *Shnatayim: Din ve-Ḥeshbon shel Neṣivut Beitar be-Polin mi-Shenot 5692–5693* (Varsha: Futura, 1934), 3; for Frayhayt-Dror, Eli Tzur, "Dror," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. Gershon Hundert (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 429-430; for Gordonia, Tzur, "Gordonia" in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Gordonia, accessed March 30, 2025; for Tseyrey Agudas Yisroel, Gershon Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition: Agudat Israel in Poland, 1916–1939* (Jerusalem: Magness Press 1996), 135; for Yugnt, Bina Garncarska-Kadary, *Di Linke Poaley Tsiyon in Poyln biz der tsveyter velt-milkhome* (Tel Aviv: Farlag I.L. Perec 1995), 329.

[17] Anna Szyba, " 'Czy można zniszczyć kopiec mrówek?' Nauka przyrody w szkołach Centralnej Żydowskiej Organizacji Szkolnej (1921–1939). Teoria i praktyka," *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 268, no. 4 (2018): 744-745.

France: Identity, and Cultural Adaptation Between East and West

Paris between the wars was a meeting point for three Jewish communities with differing statuses in and relationships to France. There were the French Jews, who were local and highly acculturated, largely middle-class, and enjoyed a political equality unparalleled in Europe; Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe (mostly artisans and petty merchants); and Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, including Algerian Jews who, while not technically migrants due to their citizenship status granted by the Crémieux Decree of 1870, were nevertheless part of the broader MENA Jewish community in the city. Thus, the Parisian Jewish population that Goldman encountered upon her arrival from Poland was grappling with the challenges of integration, identity preservation, and community building. For Rebecca, these challenges were likely personal as well as communal. Her education at the ENIO was not just academic. It would have surely exposed her to the complexities of Jewish life in this major European metropolis.

Paris was the dream destination for thousands of migrants, including many Jews, who hoped to resettle after World War I, especially after the introduction of immigration quotas in the US in 1921. In the mid-1920s, one in ten Parisians was a migrant.[18] In France, 75% of all the Jews naturalized between 1924 and 1935 lived in Paris or its suburbs.[19] They tended to live in groups by country of origin, and sought to recreate the communal structures and atmosphere of the countries they had left by retaining, particularly in the early stages of their adaptation, their original lifestyles and customs.

Thus, Goldman's exposure to Frenchness was not a simple process. She belonged to one of the communities of Jews on French soil who considered themselves European and citizens of the "Western" world, although their position was ambiguous, especially in the eyes of the "native" Jews and even the other Jewish migrant group—arrivals from the Middle East and North Africa. These differences in perception and experience highlighted the fluid and shifting nature of meta-geographical concepts such as "the West" or even "Europe." For Rebecca,

[18] Clifford Rosenberg, *Policing Paris: The Origins of Modern Immigration Control between the Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 29.

[19] Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France*, 68.

these boundaries must have been particularly palpable. As a first-generation Eastern European Jewish migrant in France, studying at the AIU seminar alongside classmates from the Middle East and North Africa, she was constantly navigating these complex cultural and social landscapes.

When Rebecca relocated to France, she enrolled at the ENIO to train as a teacher. While migration from Poland to France was not unusual, her decision to attend the ENIO, the Alliance teacher training school, was uncommon for a young Jewish woman from Eastern Europe in the early 1930s. Founded in Paris in 1860, the Alliance aimed to advocate for Jewish rights globally and support Jews facing persecution. Its mission included promoting what it perceived as Jewish emancipation and security, as well as moral progress, particularly through education; assisting Jews in need; and fostering publications aligned with these goals. Inspired by liberal ideals and the principles of the French Revolution and civic rights, its founders envisioned universal Jewish emancipation and believed progress could ensure that antisemitism and persecution would eventually be eradicated. The organization gradually came to focus its efforts on Jewish communities in North Africa and the Middle East.[20]

The selection of future teachers was a rigorous process, and the preferred students the top graduates from Alliance schools. Their curriculum included a diverse range of subjects such as French, English, history, geography, arithmetic, physics, natural history, drawing, calligraphy, biblical studies, Hebrew, singing, and physical education. The Alliance's teacher training curriculum sought a balance between "modern education" and traditional Jewish learning. Central to the organization's mission was the goal of "westernizing" education, transforming students into advocates for its modern values.[21] The schools' graduates were often cast in the role of *de facto* ambassadors for modern Western civilization, which sometimes brought them into confrontation with local Jewish traditions in North Africa and the Middle East. Despite these challenges, the ENIO and its counterpart for women were successful. Their graduates became influential figures in the Jewish world of the Middle East and North Africa.

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[20] Aron Rodrigue, *Jews and Muslims: Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Modern Times* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2003), 7-15.

[21] Ibid., 34-36.

Adepts from Eastern Europe like Rebecca were rather the exception than the rule in this milieu, and they likely faced additional linguistic obstacles. As Aron Rodrigue demonstrates, between 1869 and 1925, only 2 of the 156 female graduates of AIU seminars who became teachers originated from regions within the current borders of Poland.[22] Rebecca, therefore, was one of a very small group of Eastern European Jewish women who ventured down this unique educational path. Her academic education therefore entailed not merely the acquisition of knowledge but also integration into a new cultural and social framework that was vastly different from that of her roots.

As mentioned above, at the time of Rebecca's arrival in France, the Jewish population in Paris was grappling with the challenges of integration, identity preservation, and community building. This would likely have exposed her to the complexities of Jewish life in this European metropolis. Even living in Versailles, on the outskirts of Paris, Rebecca would have likely encountered diverse Jewish communities. The French capital at this time had a Jewish immigrant population of 200,000. This tended to be underestimated by the native French Jews, who assumed the number to be about 100,000. In reality, however, recent migrants represented two-thirds of the Jewish population in France, estimated at 300,000 people.[23] The 150,000 Ashkenazi Jews constituted the majority of the migrants. Those Eastern European Jews who chose France as a destination usually did so because they had been rejected by other Western countries.[24] Sephardi migrants were a smaller group, but still relatively significant among the French Jewry of the time. Some of the immigrants perceived France as a temporary halt, expecting to travel on to the United States. Jacques Biélinsky, an editor for *L'Univers israélite* (Jewish Universe), a popular traditionalist French-Jewish weekly, referred to them as "birds of passage" in the process of "transmigration."[25]

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[22] Ibid., 50. Rodrigue notes that these are not firm figures but are complete enough to give a good indication of the countries of origin of the Alliance teaching body.

[23] Jérémy Guedj, "Les Juifs français face aux Juifs étrangers dans la France de l'entre-deux-guerres," *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 78 (2009): 43-73. On the previous wave of migration to France during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Nancy L. Green, *The Pletzl of Paris: Jewish Immigrant Workers in the Belle Epoque* (New York: Holmes and Meir, 1986).

[24] Rosenberg, *Policing Paris,* 29.

[25] Guedj, "Les Juifs français face aux Juifs étrangers."

Attending classes, Goldman immersed herself in the French language and culture, which constituted a critical aspect of her "Frenchification." The previously mentioned identity card is the only document she signed as "Ryfka"; all other documents bear her signature as "Rebecca." On the other hand, it is worth highlighting, that her school, unlike the AIU boarding schools girls attended before 1922, was located not in Paris but in Versailles, and outings were infrequent. Although the teachers were recalled by graduates as "competent," and many had even retired from the French École Normale Supérieure, they must have also seemed "too old." The French-born director, Henriette Antebi, was remembered as someone who "could push severity into cruelty."[26] An important note in Rebecca's experience is that Antebi opposed the Zionist views of Mathilde Levy-Haarscher, the first director of the AIU school for girls in Jerusalem.[27] Thus Goldman was likely aware of the ideological tensions the Zionist ideas stirred within the AIU network.

Lebanon: Navigating Expectations and Reality

Rebecca Goldman's experience as an AIU teacher in Beirut reveals a disconnect between her self-perception as an educator and the perspectives of her superiors, colleagues, and some members of the local community. This gap is evident in the stark contrast between her detailed teacher's reports, which reveal her pedagogical efforts and modern educational approaches, and the critiques from the school supervisors. Central to this discord was the process of Goldman's adaptation to the cultural and social milieu of Lebanon, a challenge compounded by her preconceived notions and "mental maps" shaped by her upbringing in Poland and

[26] Frances Malino, " 'Adieu a ma Maison': Sephardi Adolescent Identities, 1932-36," *Jewish Social Studies* 15, no. 1 (2008): 131-144; 141.

[27] Karene Sanchez-Summerer, "To 'strengthen Mediterranean resistance'? Albert Antebi and the porous boundaries of cultural identification in Ottoman Jerusalem (1896-1919)" in *The Social and Cultural History of Palestine Essays in Honour of Salim Tamari*, ed. Sarah Irving (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 39.

her training in France.[28] These perceptions, informed by the flourishing Zionist youth movements and educational ideals of interwar Europe, clashed with the realities of the Lebanese Jewish community. This dissonance not only shaped her professional struggles but also seem to have framed some of her critical evaluations.

After completing her studies in Versailles, Rebecca Goldman, like all AIU teachers, was assigned to work at one of the organization's schools. Her initial letter to the board of Alliance, dated August 5, 1935, indicates that the location she was sent to, Beirut, was not her desired destination. In this letter, she requested a transfer to Haifa (referred to as Caiffa) and suggested that she be replaced with her colleague Sonia Levine. Presumably, she had already built up an image of a place in Mandatory Palestine in her "mental map," and during the evaluation process, when she found herself in unfamiliar Beirut, Haifa seemed like a place she knew and understood better.[29] The suggestion regarding the switch with another teacher indicates that there were other girls of Ashkenazi origin among her close friends from the AIU seminar (those, as noted above, were rather rare in those circles), suggesting that they likely formed a cohesive group due to their shared cultural background. Levine herself, born in 1917 in Teheran[30] to a family of migrants from Białystok who later moved to Mandatory Palestine, shared similar experiences to Goldman, being from a minority group in Middle Eastern Jewish milieux, and possibly was also Zionist-leaning.[31] Goldman argued that teaching mathematics in the final year of primary school, as she had been assigned, was beyond her capabilities.[32] However, it is also plausible that she simply wanted to move to Mandatory Palestine, where the environment was more familiar to her than in Lebanon (or at least she thought it was). Subsequent correspondence supports the validity of this hypothesis. Her request was rejected, and she

[28] I use the term "mental map" as understood by Peter Gould and Rodney White, that is: "invisible landscapes that people carry in their heads." Gould and White, *Mental Maps* (New York: Routledge, 2002), v.

[29] Ibid., 1-6.

[30] Moscou 100-1-55/20, AIU Archives, Paris.

[31] "Sonia Levine family history records," Ancestry, accessed March 30, 2025, https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/52340809/person/26877879336/facts.

[32] Moscou E 06.08 (Liban, Beyrouth), item 21, AIU Archives, Paris.

remained in Lebanon her entire life, with a brief interlude when she worked in Damascus.

Letters written by Rebecca Goldman in the interwar period show that she did not fully know how to interpret the community she encountered and the different hierarchies she experienced. Beirut had emerged as a major Levantine port city in the nineteenth century, its Jewish community forming within the context of nineteenth-century colonial expansion. The city was unique: the only port city in the eastern Mediterranean to become the capital of a modern state while maintaining both its economic position and heterogeneous character long after the Ottoman Empire's collapse. The Jewish population of Beirut grew significantly, from a few hundred at the beginning of the nineteenth century to 2,500 in the 1890s and 3,500 by the 1920s. By the end of the mandatory period, its Jewish population had increased to 5,022.[33] Unlike in Alexandria, another Middle Eastern Jewish metropolis at the time, Beirut's Jewish population growth was primarily due to migration from the Syrian interior, especially from Mount Lebanon and Damascus, though a small number of families came from other Ottoman cities like Baghdad, Istanbul, Salonica, and Izmir. By World War I, the community also included a small number of Ashkenazim who had fled persecution in Russia.[34] In the late 1920s, Beirut's Jewish community included a broad middle class of salaried employees, clerks, petty merchants, and a few professionals, with a small wealthy class paying the community *arikha* (assessment) tax. However, up to 20 per cent of the community remained in the lower class.[35] The three main ethnic groups—Arab Jews, Sephardi Jews, and Russian Jews—did not mix well, each living separately within their family and business spheres, as noted by Yomtov Semach, who served as the Alliance school director from 1905 to 1910.[36] Rebecca would thus likely have mixed primarily with the Russian Jews in her private contacts. Indeed, in 1939 she informed the Alliance board that she was to marry Ashkenazi Ariel Doubine, a teacher at Collège de la

[33] Tomer Levi, *The Jews of Beirut: The Rise of a Levantine Community, 1860s–1930s* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 78.
[34] Ibid., 47.
[35] Ibid., 48.
[36] Ibid., 81.

Sagesse.[37] Her professional life nonetheless involved intensive contact with Alliance teachers and pupils who were not necessarily of Ashkenazi origin.

Goldman's first report sent to Paris, for the 1935-1936 school year, gives a thoughtful examination of the challenges she faced and the strategies she employed to keep her students engaged. As an educator, Goldman emphasizes the essential role of students' vested interest in the educational process, and acknowledges the difficulties posed by their diverse personalities. She discusses the psychological intricacies of capturing the attention of thirty to forty students with varying temperaments and interests, noting that the modern classroom setting, with its increasing student numbers, presented different challenges than the more focused environments of preceptors like the ancient Isocrates, who set up his own school of rhetoric at the Lyceum, and the royal French tutor, Fénelon. Goldman advocates for a nuanced approach, where teachers must actively engage students by tapping into areas that resonate with their feelings or ideas. Through vivid examples, such as connecting geography lessons to local landscapes and experiences, she highlights the importance of adapting teaching methods to the students' interests and the local environment.[38] This seems to be a unique approach in Alliance's schools, where studying often "did not lead to the adoption of the culture and language of the surrounding society but resulted in an increased orientation toward a distant civilization"—namely the French one.[39] Goldman candidly admits to difficulties making certain subjects, like French grammar, interesting to students who were, in her eyes, primarily concerned with their grades. She addresses the need for teachers to recognize and gradually strengthen students' attention spans, especially in the case of those with "lower mental energy levels." The report also touches on the delicate balance between demanding attention and respecting the need for breaks and relaxation as part of a child's

[37] Moscou E 06.08 (Liban, Beyrouth), item 3, AIU Archives, Paris. Ariel Doubine after WWII, in the 1950s and 1960s, served as a member of the committee responsible for the administration of the local school, Talmud Torah Selim Tarrab, as well as on the community's cultural and social committee, which shows that he was clearly a person well integrated and accepted by the community. What is more, he may have influenced Rebecca, since the couple did not emigrate. Kirsten E. Schultze, *The Jews of Lebanon: Between Coexistence and Conflict* (University of Sussex Press: Brighton, 2001), 102-103.

[38] Moscou E 06.08 (Liban, Beyrouth), item 12–13, AIU Archives, Paris.

[39] Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey, 1860–1925* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 119-120.

learning process. Furthermore, Goldman acknowledges the impact of external factors, such as insufficient lighting or uncomfortable seating, on students' ability to focus. In her analysis, she contends that a teacher's deep understanding of children's natures, and constant adaptation of knowledge to their interests are key factors in sustaining their attention. Her pragmatic suggestions, including potential curriculum adjustments and allowing brief moments for relaxation, reflect a keen awareness of the complexities involved in effective teaching. In essence, Goldman's report provides a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussion about effective pedagogical strategies and reflects the modern pedagogy she was likely exposed to in both Poland and France.

Interestingly, the 1947 supervisor's account of Rebecca Goldman's work, then Doubine, provides a contrasting perspective to the educator's own report. The supervisor, Esther Penso, describes Goldman's initial challenges in the AIU environment, including language barriers and health issues during her training in Paris, and suggests that she struggled to meet expectations in Beirut.[40] Penso accuses Goldman of mistreating students:

> she was given a position in Beirut, where she completely disappointed us. Mrs. Doubine had no patience with her pupils in Beirut, and abused our girls, who are generally very gentle in their manner. Parents of the pupils complained about Mrs. Doubine's attitude and some parents withdrew their children from the school.[41]

The supervisor's portrayal of Goldman's lack of conscientiousness and the need for close supervision is in stark contrast to the educator's own reflections on teaching methodology and efforts to engage students. While Goldman's report emphasizes the challenges of maintaining student interest and offers pedagogical insights, the supervisor's document paints a picture of a teacher who faced difficulties in multiple aspects of her role, including interactions with students and their families, as well as meeting the expectations of her superiors. The supervisor's account points to a disconnect between Goldman and her students, evidenced by

[40] Letter from Esther Penso, October 16, 1947, AM Liban E021 G, unpaginated, AIU Archives, Paris.
[41] Ibid.

complaints from parents and a subsequent transfer. She was also accused of sending older girls to clean her house: "On Fridays and Saturdays one or two of the students would spend the day in her house in turns, sweeping, washing, or running errands. The parents complained and begged me not to say anything to Mrs. Doubine, because they feared 'repression' from her."[42] Penso's harsh description of Rebecca raises questions about whether this stemmed from Rebecca's replication of the teaching methods she had experienced in Versailles or from potential personal and cultural misunderstandings between the two women. Rebecca's own marginalized perspective may have led her to misinterpret the new environment she had entered, resulting in conflicts. Her understanding of the society she lived in was undoubtedly influenced by her place of birth and further shaped by her experiences in France.

In her report dated December 24, 1936, Goldman stated:

> Beirut is in crisis, like many European countries. However, the Jewish youth in those distant countries is very active and fights for moral and social problems. Many direct all their efforts towards the Jewish cause and cooperate spiritually and materially in the realization of a dream that might put an end to the persecution and desires to exile the wandering Jew. There is no visible effort here towards alleviating these moral and social problems or furthering the ideal of the rebirth of the Jewish nation.[43]

Her harsh evaluation was clearly shaped by her background and in particular the culture of the flourishing youth movements in interwar Poland. She continued: "On the whole, the Jewish youth in Beirut do not pursue any specific goal. Nevertheless, they pass their time quite pleasantly. Afternoon dances and family gatherings are frequent. Here, the main entertainment of the young is playing cards."[44] What she observed, as studies by Alon Tam on Cairo suggest, was that

[42] Ibid.

[43] Moscou E 06.08 (Liban, Beyrouth), item 8, AIU Archives, Paris.

[44] Moscou E 06.08 (Liban, Beyrouth), item 9, AIU Archives, Paris. Her words are echoed in the 1941 memorandum written to the directors of the Zionist Organization in Jerusalem by Zionist activist Yosef Sneh, in which he wrote on Jewish youth in Lebanon and Syria: "When it comes to dancing organizations which to our regret exist in Damascus, Beirut, and Aleppo, there is not much to say. These are rotten youth, all they strive for is to dance and to be in the moment. They are as

new urban spaces such as dancehalls and coffeehouses were crucial to modern middle-class formation and socialization, serving as settings for recreation, entertainment, and the performance of class identity. This was the typical Middle Eastern style of doing politics and being involved in the socio-political life of the time.[45] Only two years after relocating from Europe, she appeared to misinterpret these cultural codes. Goldman's narrative shows that her letters could be seen as written by an *implicated subject* as understood by Michael Rothberg, that is: a "participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles."[46] Additionally, it is striking that she not only misread the Beirut Jewish community but also wrote her letters in opposition to the stated objectives of the Alliance, which promoted equal rights, emancipation, and integration of the Jewish minority in its host society.[47] She concluded the letter with bitter words which once again revealed her position as a person looking at the Middle East through the lens of concepts she had known from Poland and possibly France:

> What will Beirut's Jewish youth be like? Their future is not difficult to predict, if judged by the past. If they were able to remain idle while blood boiled in their veins in Palestine, they will continue to lead the peaceful and easy life the East offers, not feeling the need to fight for ideals.[48]

The orientalized community of the Beirut Jewish youth is here contrasted with the Zionist Jewish youth from Eastern Europe, who served as a role model, as they managed to settle in Mandatory Palestine and fight for their ideals.

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distant from the Hebrew culture and the language as East to West." Yosef Sneh memorandum, November 26, 1941, S25\1964, p. 3, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

[45] Alon Tam, "Between 'Ḥarat al-Yahud' and 'Paris on the Nile': Social Mobility and Urban Culture among Jews in Twentieth-Century Cairo," *Jewish Social Studies* 28, no. 2 (2023): 203-237; 225.

[46] Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 1.

[47] While the Paris central committee of the Alliance remained officially opposed to Zionism, there was a growing acceptance of initiatives such as Hebrew secular education among local actors, reflecting a shifting on the ground. Schultze, *The Jews of Lebanon*, 49-50.

[48] Moscou E 06.08 (Liban, Beyrouth), item 10, AIU Archives, Paris.

The sense of difference was mutual, as Goldman was received in the school as an outsider. In 1937 the director of the AIU in Beirut, Élie Penso, wrote of her: "She is a young teacher with good intentions, but her general knowledge is quite limited. Mrs. Penso closely supervises her and gives her advice. However, Miss Goldman is certainly not equal to her colleagues in Beirut."[49] No other teacher assistant received such negative remarks in the document. In the same document, Penso described the students as "eager to learn," praising them for having "mastered the French language and culture, and some of them give the impression that they were born in France."[50] He wrote also proudly of the Jewish community of Beirut that: "it is now perfectly organized" and that "it can serve as a model for neighboring communities."[51] The categories and concepts he used to describe the youth were better tuned to the AIU board's expectations but also reflected his position within the organization. Last but not least, his worldview was shaped in different socio-political terms.

Conclusions

Despite Goldman's efforts to engage students and adapt to her new environment, her reports and observations reveal a significant disconnect from the local Jewish community's socio-cultural dynamics. Goldman's (Eastern) European perspective, shaped by her life experiences in Poland and France, clashed with the Middle Eastern context, leading to her critical view of Beirut's Jewish youth and their perceived lack of Zionist sentiment and social activism. Her letters reflect an inherent bias, influenced by her Polish-Jewish background and the ideological currents of her upbringing and her formation in the French Jewish seminary. This bias likely contributed to her difficulty in fully understanding and integrating into the Beirut community, which had its own distinct historical and cultural trajectory. Rebecca Goldman's narrative illuminates the complexities of European Jewish identity in transit, which remained relatively static despite the new locales during the interwar period. Her journey from Kalisz to Versailles, and eventually

[49] Moscou E 06.14 (Liban, Beyrouth), items 134, AIU Archives, Paris.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Moscou E 06.14 (Liban, Beyrouth), item 135, AIU Archives, Paris.

to Beirut, encapsulates the tensions between carrying cultural baggage, understanding the meaning of certain concepts, and adapting to new socio-political environments. From her early life in interwar Poland, marked by the disillusionment of Jewish youth seeking alternatives, to her unique path as a student and teacher within the AIU network, Rebecca's experiences reflect both personal agency and the broader historical forces at play. Her struggle to navigate new cultural landscapes underscores the enduring influence of her formative years in Eastern Europe. The significance of her birthplace continued to inform her sense of self, even as she adapted to new environments. This duality of belonging and alienation highlights the complexities of identity formation amidst displacement. Unlike most papers in this issue, which focus predominantly on Middle Eastern perspectives, this article emphasizes how the Middle East shaped the emotional landscapes of outsiders who encountered it. Rebecca Goldman's experiences serve as a compelling example of how external observers' emotional frameworks and preconceived ideas influenced their interpretations and interactions within Middle Eastern Jewish communities in the interwar period.

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Keywords: Alliance Israélite Universelle, Interwar Period, Polish Jews, Beirut, Youth, Jewish migration

How to quote this article:
Magdalena Kozłowska, "Teaching at a Lebanese AIU School in the 1930s: Rebecca Goldman's Path from Kalisz to Beirut," in "(E)motional Maps: Affective Geographies among Jewish Migrants from North Africa and the Middle East," eds. Aviad Moreno, Piera Rossetto, and Emir Galilee, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 27, no. 1 (2025), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15947