

MISZELLE

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**Biographien jüdischer Frauen: Hannah Karminski (1897-1943) –
Jewish Feminist Leader and Social Worker**

We are not destined for silent surrender to fate, rather **we** are entrusted with the task of fighting for the victory of good; it depends on **us** whether life ends in us and with us, or whether it emanates from us and grows out of us: “I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live.”¹



Illustration 1: Hannah Karminski in her youth. (Private family collection)

“Choose life!”² Oddly for a Jew who decided to stay in Nazi Germany rather than flee danger by seeking emigration, these words from Deuteronomy were a motto guiding Hannah Karminski. This social worker and feminist leader born in Berlin in 1897 could have managed to escape, yet she stayed behind bent on serving the Jewish community. Her unusual decision, far from being impetuous, was well embedded in the trajectory of her life. It reflects the ethos she embraced long before the Nazi era – the social, religious imperative of “choosing life” not in an individualistic sense but as a moral choice, a call to act for the common wellbeing and “fight for the victory of god”, rejecting a “silent surrender to fate”.³

Remaining in Nazi Germany was not Karminski’s first remarkable decision: from early on, her deep social commitment led her off the beaten track. Whereas most – though by no means all – Jewish women of similar middle-class background followed convention and assumed at some point the traditional role of wife and mother, even after a brief professional career (as did her sister Erna), Karminski ventured on a different path.

¹ Karminski, Hannah: Vom Wesen der Wohlfahrtspflege, in: Jüdisch-liberale Zeitung 4 (1924), 4, p. [5]; emphasis in the original, the translations throughout are mine. The verse is from Deuteronomy 30:19.

„Nicht zu stummer Ergebung in das Schicksal sind wir bestimmt, sondern wir sind damit betraut, für den Sieg des Guten zu ringen, von uns hängt es ab, ob das Leben in uns und mit uns aufhört, oder ob es von uns ausgeht und über uns herauswächst: ‘Leben und Tod lege ich heute vor dich hin, Segen und Fluch: So wähle du das Leben, damit erhalten bleiben du und Deine Nachkommen.’“

² Karminski, Vom Wesen, 1924; Karminski, Hannah: Besprechungen: Gertrud Bäumer, Die Frau in der Krisis der Kultur, in: Der Morgen 2 (1927), 6, pp. 621-623, here p. 622; Karminski, Hannah: Jüdisch-religiöse Frauenkultur in typischen Formen und Außerungen, in: Wolff, Emmy (ed.): Frauengenerationen in Bildern, Berlin 1928, pp. 163-172, here pp. 168, 172.

„Wähle das Leben!“

³ Karminski, Vom Wesen, 1924.

„für den Sieg des Guten zu ringen“; „stummer Ergebung in das Schicksal“.

After graduating from Berlin's *Pestalozzi-Fröbel-Haus* in her late teens, she worked at a Jewish kindergarten; her experience with war-stricken Eastern European children made her determined to engage in Jewish welfare. Rather than indulge in a temporary occupation until finding a proper match, she enrolled in Hamburg's *Sozialpädagogisches Institut* (which opened in 1917) eager to improve her professional skills. The ideas she absorbed at this new, state-of-the-art social school headed by feminist leader and liberal politician Gertrud Bäumer and the contacts she established had lasting repercussions.

In the fall of 1920, Karminski made her public debut at an interconfessional conference convened in Jena by the *Deutscher Verband sozialer Jugendgemeinschaften*, a national association of young women's groups for social aid. Her participation at this event, with a lecture on the Jewish approach to social thought delivered alongside the Evangelical and Catholic perspectives, expressed an attempt at interfaith dialogue at a time of rising antisemitism.⁴ Her affiliation with this forum also reflected a mission that would remain dear to her: connecting young women with feminist activism and social work.

Karminski had the opportunity to advance this goal that same year, as head of a Jewish girls' club in Frankfurt. This institution, affiliated to the League of Jewish Women in Germany (*Jüdischer Frauenbund*, JFB), addressed the needs of young working women, offering them a space for healthy sociability and continuing education. Karminski used her position to empower the young women, instruct them about "the history and essence" of feminism and bring them closer to the women's movement.⁵ She also worked to deepen their Jewish identity while encouraging understanding between members of different Jewish denominations. All these efforts remained central elements of her future work.

While in Frankfurt, Karminski joined the JFB after meeting its founder and president Bertha Pappenheim. The early 1920s were a time of crisis for the League. Pappenheim, with whom Karminski developed a close and lasting relationship, was anxious to step down after two decades in office; concerned about a general decline in leadership and a weakened association, she believed that a change was imperative,⁶ not just at the top: recruiting young members to the national board, qualified and motivated women as Karminski, was deemed vital. Karminski turned out to be a most valuable 'acquisition' – considering her lifelong devotion to the *Frauenbund* and her impressive accomplishments in the following two decades.

Karminski's rise through the JFB's ranks was rapid. In 1921 she first helped organize a conference.⁷ By 1922 she already enjoyed a prominent position considering her young age and brief affiliation with the League – she not only attended a major conference in Breslau and delivered a programmatic lecture towards the establishment of a new Silesian provincial branch,⁸ but was also charged with editing a JFB section in the

⁴ Karminski, Hannah: Der soziale Gedanke im Judentum, in: Denzel, Heidi (ed.): Religiös-soziale Bekenntnisse der Jugend. Aus dem Protestantismus, Katholizismus und Judentum, Stuttgart 1920, pp. 4–11.

⁵ H. K., Von den Mädchenclubs des jüdischen Frauenbundes, in: Jüdisch-liberale Zeitung, 3 (1923), 10, p. [3]. „Geschichte und Wesen“

⁶ Abschrift, Protokoll der 37. Vorstandssitzung, 19. Juni 1922, in: Otilie Schoenewald Collection, AR 3896 / MF 622, Leo Baeck Institute New York.

⁷ H.K.: Die erste Seite, Blätter des Jüdischen Frauenbundes [=BJFB] 14 (1938), 7, p. 2.

⁸ Breslau. Erste Tagung des Jüdischen Frauenbundes, in: Israelitisches Familienblatt, 24 (1922), 39, p. 3.

Nachrichtendienst, the new journal of the Central Welfare Board of Jews in Germany (*Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland*, ZWST). That hopes were pinned on her is clear from the invitation to join the German delegation to the World Congress of Jewish Women convening in Vienna in May 1923. Participating in this historic event proved to be a powerful experience that cemented Karminski's allegiance to the Jewish women's movement and her firm dedication to social goals. It also gave her the opportunity to expand her vision beyond the limits of local work.⁹

Later in 1923, she returned to Berlin to help revitalize the JFB's headquarters and soon was appointed vice-secretary of the executive board, secretary of the suffrage committee and head of the press committee. These titles multiplied in coming years, entailing an enormous amount of work and responsibility. Karminski played a key role in the efforts to expand the League and in the establishment of innovative social projects. She represented the JFB at multiple Jewish and interconfessional forums, collaborating on issues as varied as child welfare, programs for endangered youth, battling antisemitism, women's suffrage and cultural revival. Her duties took her on frequent trips around Germany organizing conferences, holding meetings and giving public lectures, and occasionally also abroad, as in 1925 when she attended two international conferences, one against white slavery in London and another for child welfare in Geneva. In addition, she edited the *Blätter des Jüdischen Frauenbundes* with Martha Ollendorff. Founded in 1924, this journal appeared monthly for 14 years until it was banned in November 1938. It served as the League's newsletter, invigorating its work and consolidating its ranks; it also offered Jewish women at large a unique platform for debate, instruction and empowerment. Karminski, a prolific publicist and writer, made over 170 contributions to this and other Jewish and feminist journals and publications between 1920 and 1941.

Despite growing conservatism vis-à-vis feminist aspirations (even within German women's organizations) during the Weimar Republic, Karminski did not shy away from activism deemed radical in the context of her time. As a single woman, she was well aware of the precarious situation and negative perception of unmarried women particularly in Jewish society, and she used her public voice to intercede on their behalf.¹⁰ She also fought against women's marginalization from politics in both national and communal levels. As member of the JFB's suffrage committee, one of her missions was to promote Jewish women's participation in general elections, urging them to implement their recent enfranchisement. A parallel effort lasting into the Nazi era was her battle for women's representation in Jewish communal institutions.

Moreover, Karminski endorsed pacifism, a controversial stance in Germany, and emphasized (Jewish) women's mission to propagate the idea of peace. As editor of the *Blätter* she made sure to include essays exploring the connection between pacifism, Judaism and women,¹¹ as well as reports about major peace organizations. She employed

⁹ Karminski, Hannah: Von der Weltkonferenz jüdischer Frauen. (Wien, 6.–11. Mai 1923), in: *Die Frau. Monatsschrift für das gesamte Frauenleben unserer Zeit* (Juli 1923), pp. 311–316.

¹⁰ Naimark-Goldberg, Natalie: "Only an Unmarried Woman Will Devote Herself Fully to a Cause": Singlehood and Leadership in the Life of Hannah Karminski (1897–1943), in: *Zmanim: A Historical Quarterly* 148 (2023), pp. 18–31. [in Hebrew]

¹¹ See e.g. BJFB's March 1926 issue, which was primarily devoted to these themes (the idea of peace in Judaism, women and peace, pacifist education, etc.).

this platform to campaign against war, exhorting JFB members to sign international women's petitions eventually submitted to the disarmament conference in Geneva in February 1932.¹² Needless to say, this theme vanished from the JFB's public discourse after 1933.

Indeed, much changed after the Nazis' rise to power, and as the JFB's executive secretary, Karminski orchestrated its response to the new challenges. Even then, living under a fascist ideology that rejected women's emancipation, she did not abandon the feminist perspective. She promoted initiatives such as the creation of a united front of Jewish women for self-help and programs to enhance the prospects of young women, including vocational training in fields as teaching, nursing and home economics – a less-regarded but promising profession given the economic and political situation. Karminski pushed for Jewish female emigration from Germany as counterweight to the institutional emphasis on male emigration. She even interceded for interned Jewish women at concentration camps.¹³ All along, she persisted in the attempt to gain women a rightful place in communal leadership and continued voicing her criticism in this regard as late as 1938.¹⁴

Although the JFB officially ceased to exist after the November 1938 pogrom, Karminski's objective when staying in Germany was to carry on its social mission. An early accomplishment was her collaboration behind the scenes organizing the Kindertransports. Recently discovered personal letters sent to former colleagues in London reveal concrete plans to even escort one of the groups in mid-September 1939.¹⁵ However, the war broke out and the rescue operation was suspended.

Earlier that year, her parents left for Switzerland, where their younger daughter had lived since 1923; they pleaded with Hannah to come along, in vain. Although the resolution to stay in Nazi Germany was not hers alone – it was taken by community leaders as Rabbi Leo Baeck and Cora Berliner, this step remained exceptional. Karminski became head of the general welfare department in the newly-established Reich Association of the Jews in Germany (*Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland*), a position that involved exhausting and ever more disheartening work.¹⁶ Besides official functions, Karminski undertook informal tasks, as keeping elderly acquaintances company and helping them grapple with despair.¹⁷ She herself was able to draw support from a group of peers including Cora Berliner and particularly Paula Fürst, her closest companion.

¹² E.g., Karminski, Hannah: Generalversammlung des Bundes Deutscher Frauenvereine in Leipzig, in: BJFB 7 (1931), 11, p. 5.

¹³ Wünschmann, Kim: Before Auschwitz: Jewish Prisoners in the Prewar Concentration Camps, Cambridge, MA/ London, 2015, p. 126.

¹⁴ Karminski, Hannah: Die erste Seite, in: BJFB 14 (1938), 2, p. 1; Karminski, Hannah: Die erste Seite, in: BJFB 14 (1938), 3, p. 1.

¹⁵ Letters to Eva Reichmann, July 23, 1939, and Dora Segall, August 20, 1939: Fritz Segall Collection, 1/FSAF000032a, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn.

¹⁶ Maierhof, Gudrun: "Ich bleibe, um meine Pflicht zu tun". Hannah Karminski (1897–1942), in: Hering, Sabine (ed.), Jüdische Wohlfahrt im Spiegel von Biographien, Frankfurt a.M. 2006, pp. 220–228.

¹⁷ This aspect figures prominently in her family correspondence since 1939. See: Naimark-Goldberg, Natalie: "No Need to Worry": Hannah Karminski's Family Letters, Berlin 1939–1942, in: Masekhet [forthcoming, in Hebrew].



Illustration 2: “Stolperstein” for Hannah Karminski, Oranienburger Str. 22, Berlin-Mitte. (Photo by OTFW, Wikimedia Commons)

Karminski's early years illuminate her later actions and decisions, and yet, when studying her life, one cannot but ponder the twist of fate. Her first published text emphasized the centrality of family life in Judaism, especially for women – yet she remained single and childless.¹⁸ In 1928, she portrayed Jewish women's martyrdom as typical of the past – but eventually sacrificed her own life.¹⁹ On December 9, 1942, almost six months after Berliner and Fürst's deportation, Karminski was sent to Auschwitz, where she perished on June 4, 1943.

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¹⁸ Karminski, *Der soziale Gedanke*, 1920, pp. 5–6.

¹⁹ Karminski, *Jüdisch-religiöse Frauenkultur*, 1928, p. 164.