

“ONE HEART, MANY SOULS”: THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN AND
IDENTITY FORMATION IN ST. LOUIS, 1919-1950

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways middle-class Jewish American women expressed their Jewish identities through particular volunteer activities from 1919 to 1950. Focusing on the St. Louis chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women, this work examines options for adaptation of identity formation and expression in order to gain a better understanding of the ways in which ethnic and religious group identification is established and altered. During the period from 1919 to 1950, many opportunities existed for middle-class American Jewish women to create and recreate themselves, emphasizing particular ethnic, religious, class, or gender identities in response to their different needs at any given time.

I maintain that Jewish identity is strong and adaptable and that concepts of Jewishness are, like race and gender, socially-constructed. They are therefore mutable rather than fixed. Individuals form an identity, but others around them may perceive that identity differently. Communities also form identities and interact with one another. Interactions between the individual and her community and between different communities can thus shed light on the ways in which identity is formed on both an individual and a collective level.

Members of St. Louis’s Chapter of Council engaged in activities that appealed to various identities, emphasizing different faces at different times. They never completely cast off any of their different selves, but they did favor one over the others when they deemed it necessary or desirable.