

“Maid’s Day Off”: Leisured Domesticity in the
Mid-Twentieth-Century United States

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IN 1959, FOUR WOMEN in Brooklyn, New York, gathered in an apartment dinette for their Wednesday night ritual. Coffee steamed near a plate of Danish, but their attention was on a Chinese parlor game, mahjong, played with tiles stacked in the center of the table.¹ The quick “click-click” of plastic tiles being drawn and discarded sounded against the hard surface, a staccato background to the women’s voices. On this night, husbands watched sleeping children while the dinette was taken over by the “mahjong ladies.” Red lacquered fingernails clacked against the tiles as the players weighed in on the latest synagogue events, a toddler’s ailment, and fundraising efforts to plant trees in the new state of Israel. Betty Friedan later cast mahjong as a stifling symptom of trapped housewives. Philip Roth painted scenes such as this as a horror story of Jewish mothers’ self-absorption.² These oversimplified characterizations nonetheless reveal the pervasiveness

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¹ Mahjong, more commonly spelled “Mah Jongg” in the United States, is a game of skill played with tiles instead of cards. There are different ways of playing mahjong across the globe, but its historic Chinese rules form the basis of them all. On the faces of the tiles are markings based on Chinese symbols and characters that differentiate the groups of tiles from each other, similar to suits of cards. To play a game, four players begin by mixing, or “washing,” the tiles facedown in the center of a square table. The players then work together to quickly build a (rough) square, or “wall,” from the tiles. Each side of the wall is a double-decker stack of two facedown tiles from which each player draws thirteen tiles to begin play. Players then rotate taking and discarding one tile at a time, competing against each other to complete hands with prescribed combinations of tiles, much as in the card game gin rummy. Rules govern when tiles can be snatched from the discard pile and how winning hands are scored. In both Chinese and American standard forms, the goal is to complete a hand with a final draw, resulting in a winning combination of fourteen tiles. Under the classical Chinese rules, most winning hands involve sets of three or four tiles and a pair, and until the birth of the National Mah Jongg League in the late 1930s, most Americans played that way, too. The league established a more limited number of acceptable hands with more variations in combinations, which change on an annual basis.

² Betty Friedan, *The Second Stage* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 80; Philip Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint* (New York, 1969), 15, 43, 98, 120, 125.

of mahjong as a symbol of postwar domesticity and its specifically Jewish resonances. The game became a hallmark of post–World War II Jewish American culture, ritualized by women who made space and time for autonomous leisure in their family homes.

At the height of the postwar domestic revival, middle-class Jewish women created what can be considered forms of leisured domesticity, marked by temporary female-only recreational spaces in their otherwise family-centered homes. In contrast to school-hour kaffeeklatsches or couples' games of bridge, with mahjong second-generation Jewish women gained an entitlement to peer-oriented leisure in the very site of domestic labor, at a time when society expected mothers to be focused on their domestic roles when husbands and children were present. Although the culture of mahjong could reinforce their domestic roles as much as undermine them, the weekly mahjong ritual explicitly came at the expense of both household labor and their family members' comfort.

Understandings of postwar domestic culture have largely been shaped by a duality between what defined an idealized domesticity in theory (devoted mothers in family-centered middle-class homes) and the ways in which women resisted or were excluded from these norms. In the background loom one-dimensional stereotypes popularized by voices like Friedan's and Roth's. Thirty years ago, Linda Kerber called on historians to de-center questions of private versus public or oppression versus liberation, with particular attention to how women constructed their domestic lives—including shaping men's behavior—in homes as physical spaces with social meanings.³ An ideological binary of idealized domesticity versus women's resistance obscures more than it reveals. In contrast, the practices of leisured domesticity illuminate a multidimensional reality. Mahjong-playing mothers neither overthrew nor fully acquiesced to the powerful norms of postwar American "model" domesticity. This new recreational rhythm made domesticity more livable for women by enabling them to create patterns of leisure within it.

Mahjong was ubiquitous in the rituals and contours of mid-century Jewish life, but as women's daily lives are rarely recorded in archival records, the richest sources for this world have proved to be oral histories. Dozens of women who played mahjong and their now-adult children shared their memories with me, resulting in more than fifty interviews in varying geographic locations and from a range of class strata.⁴ Together, they revealed remarkably consistent patterns around mahjong. From Atlanta to Philadelphia, groups across the country played the same game, at parallel places and times, while noshing on similar snacks. These commonalities created a widely shared culture of domestic leisure that reached its height in the postwar years of upward mobility, experienced in particularly pronounced ways by Jewish Americans.

Early Cold War culture has carried special weight in shaping popular images of the American home. Americans have incorrectly viewed the iconic "June Cleaver" image as a return to the traditional family, when in fact the opposite was true: the generation that rushed into early marriage, child-rearing, and racially segregated suburban homes embarked on an aberrant family-building spree that disrupted a century of declining

³ Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 9–39, here 31.

⁴ The size of the sample set was important in making arguments about specific patterns to allow for variations in circumstance, memory, and reliability. In addition, I sought out accounts from women who did not play mahjong or who actively disliked it in order to mitigate the biases that emerge from those willing to discuss a given topic.



FIGURE 1: Hilda Schaffer (center) hosts a mahjong game in her Bronx, New York, dinette in 1955. Schaffer was among tens of thousands of Jewish women who integrated mahjong into their domestic lives after World War II. At the time, she had two evening mahjong groups: one with older women and family members, the other with fellow young mothers in neighboring apartments. During the summers she also played daytime games at a Bronx beach club while the children played or napped. Elements visible here, including cigarettes, a cut-up pineapple, the plastic tiles with embossed Chinese designs, and the National Mah Jongg League rule cards in front of the players' tile racks, helped create the shared sensory and cultural experiences of mahjong groups. Author's personal collection, courtesy of Hilda Schaffer.

birthrates. As Elaine Tyler May has argued, the domestic culture they co-created and celebrated with the government and media was born of Cold War anxieties about the need to contain both communist infiltration and disruptive non-normative sexuality.⁵ American leadership, most famously Vice President Richard Nixon in his “kitchen debate” with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, promoted housewives as emblematic of the American promise of the good life, in contrast to ostensibly mannish Soviet workers. Yet this postwar version of the American dream echoed the longstanding hallmarks of domesticity that emerged in the industrializing United States of the mid-nineteenth century: a separation of home and work, middle-class comforts and material objects provided by a breadwinning father, with gentle patriarchal leadership and maternal care in a harmonious child-centered home. Central to the historical evolution of domestic ideology was the question of wifely labor, and specifically the reimagining of a housewife’s work from labor to love.⁶

A subset of women who fully participated in the culture of domesticity nonetheless claimed a unique space for leisure with their peers in the form of a weekly evening mahjong game. For the vast majority of mahjong players, husbands temporarily took over childcare duties (granted, often after the children were already asleep), in a move that went against longer-term historical processes dating from the early industrial era, when household technologies meant that men no longer had to labor around the home chopping wood, making shoes, or husking corn, but instead could turn to it as a haven and place of rest.⁷ In the twentieth century, middle-class fathers faced increasing expectations regarding their parental involvement, but clearly in terms of family togetherness or gender-specific fatherly roles, certainly not childcare in place of mothers.⁸ It remains to be seen whether similar overlooked traditions of leisured domesticity existed among other groups. Many individual non-Jewish women experienced community and recreation through other means, including games like bridge and canasta. However, there has yet to be evidence of another widely held *cultural norm* of women’s leisure involving a regular activity that required a temporary exemption from domestic work. That may speak more to the need for future research than to the uniqueness of Jewish women. Everyone experienced domesticity through the intersecting social and economic contexts they inhabited. Jewish women forged a particularly widespread and consistent set of rituals through mahjong; understanding their history may help reveal parallels in other times or milieus.

Jewish American women participated in the postwar domestic revival even as they broke the mold. In the 1950s, nearly two-thirds of young adult Jewish women worked outside the home, but for women of childbearing age, those rates dropped to only one in

⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1988). For examples that complicate generalizations about Cold War culture, see Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960* (Philadelphia, 1994).

⁶ For a comprehensive review of early foundational work examining home as analytic, see Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place.” For analysis of domestic labor, see especially Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York, 1990); and Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York, 2008). For more on the historiography of domesticity, see Kathryn Kish Sklar’s contribution to this roundtable.

⁷ Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York, 1983), chap. 3.

⁸ May, *Homeward Bound*, 138–141; Margaret Marsh, “Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870–1915,” *American Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (1988): 165–186.

five: half the national level of mothers with school-age children.⁹ Yet Jewish women also earned bachelor's degrees at nearly twice the rate of their non-Jewish counterparts, and they bore fewer children.¹⁰ Historians have charted the many ways in which Jewish women capitalized on their relatively high rates of education and small family size to engage in politics, philanthropy, and religious activities outside the home.¹¹ Many of these women also sought intellectual stimulation that they could integrate into their domestic lives, including through the competitive challenges of a game of skill like mahjong.

It was specifically young mothers who established the rhythms of a weekly mahjong game, which addressed their risk of isolation especially strongly. These game-playing groups helped women build female-focused networks in new family-focused communities. Along with living in new communities with young children, many women had recently left the workforce. They sought to create support networks and space for themselves while still fulfilling their domestic roles. They used the game to make their circumstances work for them, not to radically change those circumstances.

No other recreational activity was associated so specifically with Jewish women, but mahjong was representative of national leisure trends. Since World War I, leisure time had become increasingly accessible for the middle class and the middle-income working class. Hostesses could entertain friends without hired help by relying on prepared and purchased foods, and various card and board games surged in popularity.¹² Young people frequented dance halls, couples played bridge, and men played poker.¹³ The South American card game canasta swept the nation in the 1940s, and many Americans enthusiastically continued playing it into the 1950s—including Jewish American women who also played bridge and mahjong.¹⁴ “The normal social pattern,” according to game writer Albert Morehead, was for married couples to entertain each other with dinner and a card game, preferably a partnership game like bridge “so that husband and wife need not play against each other.” In his estimation, such routines increased once couples were reunited after the war. Visiting friends became easier with the end of gasoline rations, and rising prosperity along with economic policy meant that “[w]ives left the factories and returned to their kitchens.”¹⁵ In the 1950s, games of Scrabble were played in family rooms across the country, while living rooms were the site of informal bridge parties with friends.¹⁶ By the 1960s, the family room was a major feature of new subur-

⁹ However, nearly 40 percent of Jewish women older than forty-four were back in the workplace, as many reentered the workforce once their children were older. Riv-Ellen Prell, “Triumph, Accommodation, and Resistance: American Jewish Life from the End of World War II to the Six-Day War,” in Marc Lee Raphael, ed., *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America* (New York, 2008), 114–141, here 127. For national data on women's employment, see Susan M. Hartmann, “Women's Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years,” in Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 84–100.

¹⁰ Hasia Diner, Shira Kohn, and Rachel Kranson, “Introduction,” in Diner, Kohn, and Kranson, *A Jewish Feminine Mystique? Jewish Women in Postwar America* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2010), 1–12, here 3–4.

¹¹ Diner, Kohn, and Kranson, *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?*

¹² Donna R. Braden, *Leisure and Entertainment in America* (Dearborn, Mich., 1988).

¹³ Claude S. Fischer, “Changes in Leisure Activities, 1890–1940,” *Journal of Social History* 27, no. 3 (1994): 453–475.

¹⁴ Albert H. Morehead, “Bridge: Still Going Strong at 30,” *New York Times*, December 30, 1956; Morehead, “Games: Who Plays What and Why,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1957.

¹⁵ Albert H. Morehead, “Rummy from Argentina,” *New York Times*, August 28, 1949.

¹⁶ Braden, *Leisure and Entertainment in America*, 68, 103.

ban construction, marking the era’s emphasis on informal and family-centered recreation.¹⁷ Mahjong players participated in these dominant dynamics of the “normal social pattern,” but they also carved out new territory that was fundamentally different.

Because the home was a place of work, not of rest, for women, wives risked being seen as shirking their duties by engaging in a leisure activity that was disruptive to the household. The game became a socially accepted form of group recreation for Jewish women that did not rely on associations with “productivity.” Mahjong groups were not sewing circles, political meetings, or auxiliaries: they played a game. Mahjong could (and did) serve as a tool for fundraising and often overlapped with Jewish women’s volunteer organizations—the National Mah Jongg League has long advertised its role in charitable giving—but the widespread popularity of the game did not primarily rest upon associations with productivity; nor did weekly rituals focus on its philanthropic possibilities. Instead, it was about the female community that formed around mahjong and the pleasures of the game itself.¹⁸

Examining the many contingent factors that underwrote middle-class Jewish women’s leisured domesticity highlights the beliefs that enabled women’s—and specifically mothers’—labor to be understood not as work but instead as a natural and necessary expression of love. Domestic ideologies remained resilient in the face of challenges: leisured domesticity did not necessarily undermine larger constraints of gender and class. It is telling that mahjong players could be critiqued both as narcissistic mothers by Roth and as confined housewives by Friedan; they existed within domesticity and also temporarily subverted its key tenets of motherly devotion.

Despite their claims on autonomous domestic leisure, mahjong-playing women became emblematic of the trappings (and traps) of stereotypical postwar domesticity. As mahjong players established their strong cultural norms in the 1950s and 1960s, they were caught up in the evolving stereotype of the domineering Jewish mother.¹⁹ Roth’s scathing portrayal of middle-class Jewish life in his 1969 *Portnoy’s Complaint* indelibly linked a sharp critique of suburban culture with caricatured mothers who used mahjong to subjugate their homes and families. This new symbolism attached to mahjong as an emblem of social disease signaled the waning of both postwar domestic norms and the patterns of leisured domesticity that thrived within them, as economic changes and generational shifts transformed middle-class home life.

POSTWAR JEWISH WOMEN’S connection to mahjong dates back to the Jazz Age, when it was a national fad. Americans first learned of this Chinese game in the early 1920s, when marketers imported thousands of sets from Shanghai and advertised it as an ex-

¹⁷ Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 255; James A. Jacobs, “Social and Spatial Change in the Postwar Family Room,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 13, no. 1 (2006): 70–85, here 81; Laura J. Miller, “Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal,” *Sociological Forum* 10, no. 3 (1995): 393–418, here 394.

¹⁸ Steven M. Gelber, *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America* (New York, 1999); Cowan, *More Work for Mother*; Janice Brodsky, telephone interview by author, March 28, 2012.

¹⁹ Danny Davis, “Mah Jong Tea,” track A12 on *My Son the President*, Strand SL 1085, 1963, LP; Allan Sherman, “Shticks and Stones,” track B5 on *My Son, the Folk Singer*, Warner Bros. W 1475, 1962, LP; Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mother* (New York, 2007).

otic, sophisticated game that could compete with bridge. For a few years, mahjong rocketed across the American social scene, from Hollywood stages to New York galas and White House functions.²⁰ The fad had died by the mid-1920s, at which time the game became less of a mainstream pastime, although pockets of players remained.²¹ In the late 1930s, a group of Jewish women in New York established the National Mah Jongg League to revitalize what they believed was a wrongfully neglected game. The founding of the league was central to mahjong's subsequent identification with Jewish American women. Its members promoted the game among the broader American public, but it would be their specific ties to other Jewish women that would popularize their distinctive version of it.²² Through postwar social patterns and women's networks, mahjong quickly found its way to Jewish American neighborhoods across the country. The long-established Jewish women's organizations that were also a focus for women's energies facilitated its spread. In particular, Hadassah's postwar networks overlapped with the mahjong landscape, targeting young housewives to fill their ranks with energetic fundraisers and organizers, and offering educational talks and camaraderie.²³ On a broader group level, the game became rooted in Jewish women's recreational rhythms, philanthropic networks, and domestic spaces. Mahjong was part of a proliferation of cultural rather than theological markers of Jewishness that grew and changed in postwar America.

For Jewish Americans as an upwardly mobile group, participating in the postwar domestic revival was a powerful symbol of their new levels of integration into the growing American middle class. In an era of widespread suburbanization, the Jewish suburban population doubled in the 1950s, as second- and third-generation Jewish Americans were four times more likely than their non-Jewish peers to move away from urban centers.²⁴ As antisemitism declined after World War II, economic mobility for Jewish men

²⁰ Annelise Heinz, "Performing Mahjong in the 1920s: White Women, Chinese Americans, and the Fear of Cultural Seduction," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 37, no. 1 (2016): 32–65.

²¹ Chinese Americans continued to play mahjong in both mixed and single-sex groups in patterns specific to their communities and ethnic history. However, women's games, which were played in homes and in workplaces such as garment factories, did not create parallel norms of leisured domesticity marked by a widely recognized entitlement to peer-oriented leisure in the home, with temporarily relieved childcare, etc.

²² Their variant, which they called the "National" style, instituted a new model that standardized the use of previously optional tiles called "flower" tiles, required a round of tile-swapping to begin the game, and eventually added "joker" tiles. In a major change, winning combinations of tiles were legitimate only if they completed a relatively small set of official hands. The league set forth roughly sixty acceptable hands that they distributed through rule cards. This number was in contrast to the hundreds of possibilities in the Chinese game and its 1920s offshoots.

²³ Rebecca Boim Wolf, "'It's Good Americanism to Join Hadassah': Selling Hadassah in the Postwar Era," in Diner, Kohn, and Kranson, *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?*, 65–86; Martha Lustbader, Arlene Revitz, and Stacey Revitz, interview by author, San Francisco, Calif., February 20, 2015; Alida Silverman, interview by author, San Francisco, Calif., October 11, 2014. For more on Jewish women's organizations, see Deborah Dash Moore, *B'nai B'rith and the Challenge of Ethnic Leadership* (Albany, N.Y., 1981); Prell, "Triumph, Accommodation, and Resistance"; Daniel Horowitz, "Jewish Women Remaking American Feminism/Women Remaking American Judaism: Reflections on the Life of Betty Friedan," in Diner, Kohn, and Kranson, *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?*, 235–256; Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: Jewish Women and the American Century* (New York, 1997); Jenna Weissman Joselit, "The Special Sphere of the Middle-Class American Jewish Woman: The Synagogue Sisterhood, 1890–1940," in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (New York, 1987), 206–230.

²⁴ The 1944 GI Bill's financial infrastructure created easy and affordable loans (though in practice not for African Americans) for homes built with the use of inexpensive new construction methods. Tax incentives for business outmigration from cities and widespread beliefs about the best environments in which to raise a family pulled residents to suburbia. Education funded in part by the GI Bill and fueled by long-

and national cultural norms led to the explosive growth of Jewish suburban domesticity, marked by a newly dominant middle-class ethos, increased affiliation with Conservative Judaism, and support for the new state of Israel after the traumas of the Holocaust. Divisions remained, particularly along lines of class and religion, but an overarching American Jewish culture emerged that was relevant even for those who did not participate in it. The Protestant piety that was a central component of nineteenth-century domesticity had largely expanded in mid-century to include the so-called white melting pot of “Protestant, Catholic, Jew.” Though these norms of idealized domesticity were racially exclusive and did little to accurately describe many Americans’ lives, they were prevailing aspirational models and were newly accessible to many Jewish Americans.²⁵

Many of the domestic trappings were indistinguishable from mainstream “Christian” norms, but mahjong was different. By the 1950s, Jewish Americans across the country recognized mahjong as “our game.”²⁶ In part it became known as “a Jewish game” because (thanks especially to the National Mah Jongg League) Jewish women were primarily the ones who were playing it—and teaching it to each other, meeting each other to play, and building communities around it.²⁷ Perhaps another game could have served these functions, but mahjong had a unique combination of qualities. In addition to its sensory appeal, including the beauty and feel of the tiles, it took skill and concentration, not just luck; it was played in an intimate setting with regular groups of four or five people; outside Asian American communities, it had already become a women’s game, not a game played by married couples; and—importantly—it also had a certain rhythm that facilitated communication and conversation. The tiles must be shuffled and stacked after each round of play, every fifteen to twenty minutes, creating pauses that last longer than it takes to shuffle a deck of cards. In those moments, women created social bonds. At

held Jewish cultural norms paired with a new majority of Jewish men employed in professional careers, resulting in increased access to the economic privileges of white Americans, including housing. Suburban developments further inscribed racial and economic segregation, and realtors often enforced religious and ethnic homogeneity as well, a practice that some new residents resisted and others welcomed. Prell, “Triumph, Accommodation, and Resistance,” 120; Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003); Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* (New York, 1994); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York, 1985).

²⁵ Will Herberg, *Protestant–Catholic–Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, N.Y., 1955); Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier: A Study of Group Survival in the Open Society* (New York, 1967); Joellyn Wallen Zollman, “Every Wise Woman Shoppeth for Her House: The Sisterhood Gift Shop and the American Jewish Home in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” in Simon J. Bronner, ed., *Jews at Home: The Domestication of Identity* (Portland, Ore., 2010), 75–104, here 78; Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004), 252; Jack Wertheimer, “The Conservative Synagogue,” in Wertheimer, *The American Synagogue*, 111–149; Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, N.J., 2006).

²⁶ Charles Kraus, interview by author, Lake Forest Park, Wash., February 14, 2012; Alida Silverman, interview by author, San Francisco, Calif., September 14, 2014. Similar characterizations were expressed by Beth Lean, telephone interview by author, June 25, 2014; Judy Kanfer, telephone interview by author, February 29, 2012; Susan Shields, telephone interview by author, May 1, 2013; Alan H. Rosenberg, director, producer, and writer, *Mah Jongg Mavens and Memories* (Alan H. Rosenberg, 1997), VHS.

²⁷ The history of the game interwove with American ethnicity in ways beyond the scope of discussion here, but mahjong may have proved particularly appealing for Jewish American women because it was both an insider and an outsider game: an American fad with echoes of the established white elite, yet steeped in an exotic aesthetic and non-Christian cultural context. The Chinese designs on the tiles and the adapted Chinese words used in mahjong play meant that the game retained strong material associations with its origins.

mahjong, one player explained, women would “let their hair down” in ways they did not during other games.²⁸

Groups could develop a rare intimacy over many years, something that was deeply valued by those who experienced it. Many felt that “we needed a support group because we were going in untested waters with young children that we had to find the patience for and the right answers for. And this was our support: ‘Don’t worry about it, it’s okay, I went through this already, it’ll be fine.’”²⁹ Their children later remembered their mothers laughing late into the night. When meeting with the same group every week for multiple years, players often grew close in unexpected ways, supporting each other through births, bar and bat mitzvahs, deaths, and divorces. A great many women found mahjong to be a lifeline amidst the ambivalence of postwar domesticity, with its unfamiliar territory of new families and new neighborhoods and the limitations women faced. More than one player described her mahjong group as “therapy.”³⁰ Another remembered that it “was more than a game, it was like life itself.”³¹ Their words capture not only the centrality of these relationships, but how these women’s mahjong groups were intertwined with the rhythms of their lives.

Although other American variants of the game, most notably a version played by Air Force officers’ wives, developed their own pockets of followers, none would approach the scale of the version popularized by the National Mah Jongg League, nor develop the same culture of domestic leisure with reallocated household labor. The league’s non-Jewish members, including Catholic neighbors in white ethnic suburbs, constituted a distinct minority, but they were joining majority-Jewish groups, invited into a shared environment to play what had become a predominantly Jewish game.³²

Jewish women first cultivated patterns of leisured domesticity in the context of vacation landscapes after World War II, where women ran seasonal households while enjoying reduced domestic obligations. The Catskill Mountains region in particular was a place for upwardly striving Jewish Americans to grab hold of the American good life in a distinctly Jewish environment. The “Borscht Belt,” as it was commonly known, was not only the largest Jewish resort area, but also the world’s largest community of contiguous resorts.³³ The core of the “Jewish Alps” covered 250 square miles of hills and farmland about 100 miles northwest of New York City. Having evolved in the first half of the twentieth century, the Catskills region hosted an unprecedented efflorescence of Jewish leisure culture after World War II. At its peak in the 1950s and 1960s, vacationing communities dotted the landscape, with hundreds of options for lodging available,

²⁸ Sylvia Leeds, telephone interview by author, August 8, 2014.

²⁹ Spoken memory from the soundscape by Timothy Nohe for the exhibition *Project Mah Jongg*, 2010–2011, 2016–2017, Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, New York, N.Y.

³⁰ Rita Rappoport Greenstein, interview by author, Manhattan, N.Y., May 21, 2012; Sylvia Leeds interview, August 8, 2014.

³¹ Bari Pearlman and Phyllis Heller, *Mah-Jongg: The Tiles That Bind*, documentary film (BTG Productions, 1998), VHS.

³² Angelina “Ann” Speranza, interview by author, Hartsdale, N.Y., May 29, 2012; Diana Gregory, telephone interview by author, June 12, 2014; Marjorie Meyerson Troum, interview by author, Los Angeles, August 21, 2012; Rita Rappoport Greenstein interview, May 21, 2012; Toby Salk, interview by author, Berkeley, Calif., August 1, 2012.

³³ Phil Brown, “A Movable Community in the Catskills,” in Avi Y. Decter and Melissa Martens, eds., *The Other Promised Land: Vacationing, Identity, and the Jewish American Dream* (Baltimore, 2005), 62–75.

from cramped rooming houses to cozy bungalow colonies to luxurious hotels. From the war years through the early 1960s, the middle-class milieu of bungalow colonies created a venue for female leisure with its daily rhythms of eased domesticity.³⁴

One family’s story maps the patterns of these vacation communities. For over a decade, the Feinsein family joined thousands of other mostly middle-class Jewish families on an annual summer migration to the Catskills. After traveling a couple of hours north by car with her husband, Martin, and their two children from their home in Queens, Gloria Feinsein set up their cottage, one of a group of twenty-four bungalows, where she would spend the summer with the children, away from the sweltering heat of the city. Martin Feinsein then went back to Queens, continuing his work as an attorney during the week and returning to the cottage to join his family on the weekends. With her husband away and her children at day camp, Gloria’s household responsibilities relaxed. Meals became simpler. She could assume that her children were safe and entertained. She was surrounded by acquaintances whom she saw only at the bungalow colony, all following their own similar rhythms. Although there were constraints—the twenty-four bungalows shared one washing machine—domestic expectations were lower there than at home. In the afternoons, circulating games at mahjong tables filled the small patches of lawn between the cottages. The clicking of mahjong tiles was one of the sounds of summer. Gloria’s daughter Barbara later remembered women playing mahjong “all the time. Really all the time”—except, however, when the husbands returned. “When the men were there,” Barbara recalled, the wives “were there for their men.” This would be an important difference from how mahjong functioned in the home.³⁵

In the bungalow colonies, women could socialize without forgoing their domestic duties, which in turn helped naturalize what became more of an active carving-out of rare time and space inside the home—when husbands and children were present, but women were temporarily not there for their men. It would be the difference between leisure outside the home, in a female-dominated landscape essentially separate from everyday life, and leisure within marital life and domesticity. The key conditions in the Catskills and other vacation destinations that facilitated the development of leisured domesticity included female-oriented communities, a disrupted and slowed pace, and lowered domestic expectations. Women’s culture flourished during the hours when children attended day camps. Bungalow colonies were not the only places women learned mahjong (and not all mahjong players went to bungalow colonies), but they contributed to the development of a template for leisured domesticity. Mahjong would become a key element in transferring those patterns of women’s leisure to more circumscribed times and spaces within the home.³⁶

³⁴ Phil Brown, *Catskills Culture: A Mountain Rat’s Memories of the Great Jewish Resort Area* (Philadelphia, 1998); Irwin Richman, *Borscht Belt Bungalows: Memories of Catskill Summers* (Philadelphia, 1998); Stefan Kanfer, *A Summer World: The Attempt to Build a Jewish Eden in the Catskills, from the Days of the Ghetto to the Rise and Decline of the Borscht Belt* (New York, 1989); David Stradling, *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (Seattle, Wash., 2007); Arthur Tanney, “Bungalow Life,” *Mountain Memoirs and Historical Essays*, The Catskills Institute, https://www.brown.edu/Research/Catskills_Institute/tanney/tanneyindex.shtml; M.S., “A Bungalow in the Hills,” *New York Times*, June 10, 1956.

³⁵ Barbara Dellon, telephone interview by author, June 25, 2014.

³⁶ Audrey Abel [pseud.] and Helen Halper, interview by author, New York City, May 24, 2012; Elaine Sandberg, interview by author, Los Angeles, March 15, 2012; Ruth Unger, telephone interview by author,



FIGURE 2: An outdoor mahjong game at Green's Lakeside, a hotel in Port Jervis, New York, in 1955. The players were among the many friends who met and vacationed every summer at Green's, a bungalow colony near the influential Catskills region. Husbands worked in the city and came up for weekends, while wives and children stayed at Green's for the eight-week summer vacation, establishing a tempo of leisured domesticity. Bungalow colonies in other locations shared strongly similar rhythms. Photograph by Ted Freudy. Courtesy of Lorna Drake, Freudy Photos Archives, LLC.

The space that mahjong games occupied in homes was a physical manifestation of how the game functioned both within and outside domesticity. The dynamics of domesticity, from finances to leisure time, were not just metaphysical or ideological; they were concretized in homes of brick and wood. Spaces in the home marked as female were oriented to domestic work, not leisure. During mahjong play, however, normally family-oriented workspaces like kitchens could become no-children zones. And this remapping did not occur only in classically suburban tracts. Square mahjong tables occupied entryways in Philadelphia row houses, dinettes in Bronx apartments, and living rooms in Atlanta homes.

Space for women's leisure was not designed into homes; it had to be marked out.

June 1, 2012; Rochelle "Shelley" Schreiber, telephone interview by author, August 25, 2011; Edy Berman-Peterson and Beverly Green, interview by author, Manhattan, N.Y., May 21, 2012; Jeffrey S. Gurock, interview by author, Riverdale, Bronx, N.Y., May 30, 2012; Linda Feinstein, interview by author, Manhattan, N.Y., May 21, 2012; Nancy Kraus, interview by author, Brooklyn, N.Y., May 22, 2012; "New Way of Life: The Beach Clubs," *New York Times*, August 19, 1959.



FIGURE 3: A 1962 mahjong group enjoys a game in Valdosta, a small city in southern Georgia. From left to right, they are Ida Broomberg, Lillian Miller, Annie Lee Esterman, and Frieda Spieler. Core hosting rituals and game play remained strongly consistent across the country. Although the candelabra is unusual, many hosts would put out the "good dishes." The formal table setting is belied by Spieler's casual bare feet. Courtesy of the Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum.

Mahjong players claimed territory through the game table, the clatter of the tiles, the rules and phrases of game play that were unknown to male members of the household, and the accompanying rituals of food and hosting. This space made possible a certain time away from family duties. Mahjong hostesses temporarily reallocated their energy when it was their turn to host the weekly group. Food that was normally prepared or purchased for family consumption was held apart for the players. Some players taught their daughters or nieces to play, but often mothers "exacted" silence from family members, and others sent their children—and their husbands—to their rooms after an early

supper. One woman temporarily abandoned her role as nurse to her husband with acute pneumonia while she held a particularly advantageous position in a round of mahjong.³⁷

It mattered, too, that women left their own homes to play at others'. Although postwar Jewish women differed from the previous immigrant generation, the more conservative of whom rarely left the house without their husbands, their independent time outside the home was often circumscribed by purpose, time of day, and location. As one daughter remembered, even her lower-middle-class mother who worked full-time as a bookkeeper never left the house at night without her husband "for *anything* other than mahjong."³⁸

In order for women to feel entitled to temporarily set aside their domestic duties, it was necessary to reallocate household labor. Unlike daytime television, mahjong games were not something that women could enjoy while also giving their attention to household tasks.³⁹ Both non-Jewish and Jewish women met for daytime coffee or cards, and husbands were involved in nighttime couples' games of bridge.⁴⁰ In contrast, until the 1970s, mahjong groups nearly always met at night. When the weekly mahjong gatherings drew mothers to other homes, childcare was required. The late hour made it easier for fathers to look after the children, creating a generation of memories for those who fell asleep to the "clickety-clack" of tiles. It also allowed working women to participate after hours, enabling those who worked part-time and full-time as bookkeepers, teachers, and keypunch operators to join housewives at the table.⁴¹ The labor dynamics of women's relaxation versus domestic work could be explicit. In one New Jersey suburb, Thursdays were mahjong nights—or as the locals called it, "the maid's day off." It was the night that husbands agreed to be home so that their wives (humorously but revealingly referred to as servants) "could fly the coop."⁴² As mahjong and its claim on women's time became a cultural norm, it was not as subject to individual marital negotiations.

In the postwar era, mahjong had cultural legitimacy not in opposition to Jewish American households, but as part of them—part, that is, because mahjong did not challenge the fundamental underpinnings of domestic life and obligation. As Jewish feminists would later point out, families accepted mahjong as a wife's weekly—but only temporary—break from household duties. Marjorie Meyerson Troum had grown up watching mahjong games; her mother helped found the National Mah Jongg League. After her own marriage in 1949, Troum played with friends "once a week. That was the

³⁷ Wright, *Building the Dream*, 254–257; Toby Weiss, interview by author, Riverdale, Bronx, N.Y., May 30, 2012; David Unger, interview by author, Manhattan, N.Y., May 31, 2012; Jane Civins-Mills, letter to the editor, *Ms.*, May 1977, 4–5; Rosenberg, *Mah Jongg Mavens and Memories*.

³⁸ Dorene Beller, interview by author, Manhattan, N.Y., May 23, 2012, emphasis in the original. Echoed by Marjorie Meyerson Troum, interview, August 21, 2012. For memories of housebound immigrant grandmothers, see Hilda Schaffer, telephone interview by author, November 11, 2010.

³⁹ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago, 1992), chap. 3.

⁴⁰ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, N.J., 2001); Bennett M. Berger, *Working-Class Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia* (Berkeley, Calif., 1960), 69–71; Reva Salk, interview by author, Floral Park, Long Island, N.Y., May 22, 2012.

⁴¹ Nancy Kraus interview, May 22, 2012; Dorene Beller interview, May 23, 2012; Zelda Lubart, interview by author, Manhattan, N.Y., May 23, 2012; Ethel Shapiro et al., interview by author, Brooklyn, N.Y., May 22, 2012; Hilda Schaffer, interview by author, Hartsdale, N.Y., May 29, 2012; Rita Rappoport Greenstein, telephone interview by author, February 3, 2010; Barbara Dellon interview, June 25, 2014; Natalie Cohen, telephone interview by author, May 15, 2013.

⁴² Marjorie Meyerson Troum interview, August 21, 2012.

limit, once a week.”⁴³ That cap was set by her husband, who liked to have dinner on the table when he came home; he was fine with one mahjong night a week, but no more than that. The cultural acceptance of a night off was notable, but did not negate the strength of the expectations that surrounded it.

In an era when being middle-class and being Jewish in America became newly and deeply linked, mahjong helped reinforce Jewish Americans’ participation in creating the consensus culture of Cold War America.⁴⁴ Not all Jewish women played mahjong—and some did so only grudgingly, as a social obligation. Although class lines could be blurred, they provided the most common fault lines for dissent. Some among the working class or lower middle class felt excluded from the dominant upwardly mobile milieu; wealthy women sometimes felt that mahjong smacked of middle-class strivers. The strong cultural rhythms that players built were part of why the game would come to symbolize postwar domestic femininity and its limitations.

BY THE LATE 1960s, mahjong was part of an emerging harsh critique of the excesses of postwar culture: the ever-consuming, overbearing Jewish mother. This stereotype co-evolved with the spread and solidification of Jewish women’s mahjong-centered patterns of leisured domesticity. The caricatured Jewish mother found broad cultural resonance because she effectively combined class, ethnic, and gender elements to symbolize an exaggerated provincial and upwardly striving Jewish domesticity. Within Jewish circles, she built on longer-standing tropes, while for the broader American public, the image resonated with established stereotypes that associated Jews with insular acquisitiveness. As Joyce Antler and Riv-Ellen Prell have established, Jewish mothers faced a double bind: pressured to perpetuate their families’ upward mobility, and scapegoated for Jewish Americans’ concerns about assimilation and materialism.⁴⁵ At the same time, the dominant American culture also broadcast contradictory messages about prototypical mothers. Women faced significant pressure to serve their families above all else, yet they were also blamed for “smothering” their children, particularly their sons.⁴⁶ In an era of mother-blaming in popular psychology, the overall positive image of white Protestant domesticity contrasted with the parodied Jewish mother.

When Philip Roth popularized a version of the negative Jewish mother stereotype in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, he painted a portrait of an aggressively overbearing and manipulative mahjong-playing mother. The novel mocks Sophie Portnoy and her friends not only for embodying suburban family life, but also for daring to proclaim themselves the center of it. References to mahjong are scattered throughout the text, including a misogynistic screed by the narrator, Alexander Portnoy, against “these Jewish women who raised us up as children,” who would be better described as “cows, who have been given the twin miracles of speech and mah-jongg.”⁴⁷ In Alexander’s retelling, women’s speech, particularly at the mahjong table, was illegitimate and reinforced inappropriate

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, chaps. 6 and 7.

⁴⁵ Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write!*; Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston, 1999).

⁴⁶ Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (Chicago, 2010).

⁴⁷ Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint*, 98.

parenting. “From my bed,” he describes, “I hear her babbling about her problems to the women around the mah-jongg game.”⁴⁸ In Roth’s influential picture, mahjong became a weapon used by domineering women to take even more control within the home, and to force their sons to undertake feminizing supportive domestic labor.⁴⁹ Sophie Portnoy is characterized as a sore loser, a tableside gossip, a status-oriented poseur, and a nightmare mother. After the success of Roth’s book, mainstream media references to mahjong increased, but nearly always in the context of Sophie Portnoy’s egregious behavior.⁵⁰

By the time that *Portnoy’s Complaint* became required reading, the children of those who had created this rich mahjong culture had come to reject it and the domestic sphere it represented as part of their politicized youthful rebellion. In the late 1960s, the bungalow colonies and Catskills milieu declined in the face of generational change, increasing air travel, and residential air conditioning. Jewish sons and daughters disproportionately led a growing cultural critique of the 1950s suburban scene.⁵¹ Hailing from the same neighborhood as Philip Roth, Stephanie Grossman remembered that when she was going through “that rebellious stage when I wanted to do anything but be a Jewish housewife, the things I avoided were a) going to Miami and b) playing mahjong.”⁵² With the emergence of second-wave feminism and Jewish feminism, commentators debated whether mahjong helped Jewish women socialize “as self-willed, self-sufficient individualists,” or whether, as Betty Friedan recalled in 1981, “endless games of bridge and mah-jongg” were symptomatic of women’s trapped energies and simmering discontent.⁵³

Some described feminist inspiration, as mahjong nights encouraged children to view their mothers as individuals with their own desires for companionship outside the family circle. “I loved what Mah-Jongg did for my mother,” author and Yonkers native Rolaine Hochstein wrote in *Ms. Magazine* in 1977, prompting another woman to recall the unique place of mahjong in creating a community on “a woman-to woman basis,” without husbands and children.⁵⁴ In a later feminist interpretation, however, the fleeting claim of space for a female community that ended with an evening’s round of mahjong actually acculturated women to a circumscribed domestic world.⁵⁵

FEMINIST CRITICS WERE NOT WRONG to link mahjong to domestic culture, but they oversimplified its role. What they missed was that domestic spaces were not simply flattened on

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁹ Indeed, another young man commits suicide and leaves as his last note a phone message for his mother from her mahjong group. *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁰ “The Mah-Jongg Craze,” *Newsweek*, February 24, 1969, 15; Kingsley Amis, “Waxing Wroth,” book review, *Harper’s Magazine*, April 1, 1969, 104–107.

⁵¹ Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write!*, 8–9; Joyce Antler, “‘We Were Ready to Turn the World Upside Down’: Radical Feminism and Jewish Women,” in Diner, Kohn, and Kranson, *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?*, 210–234.

⁵² Stephanie Grossman, telephone interview by author, April 23, 2013.

⁵³ Gwen Gibson Schwartz and Barbara Wyden, *The Jewish Wife* (New York, 1969), 211; Friedan, *The Second Stage*, 80.

⁵⁴ Rolaine Hochstein, “Mah-Jongg Returns—One Bam, Two Crack, How about a Little Snack?,” *Ms. Magazine*, January 1977, 14–18; Civins-Mills, letter to the editor.

⁵⁵ Dorothy Stern, “Tiles and Tribulations,” *Lilith* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 20–23.

an ideological binary of oppression or resistance; their meaning had to be produced and reproduced by the people who lived in them. Similarly, for historians, the practices of leisured domesticity not only demonstrate that domesticity and gender are both socially constructed relationships of power, but also show *how* individuals and groups produce them, and how, in doing so, they create disruptions and instabilities as well.

Jewish women experienced the domestic revival of the early Cold War in particularly pronounced ways. The push toward increasingly suburban housing and widely shared entrance into full-time domesticity created a need for ways to overcome young mothers’ potential isolation. Middle-class Jewish women also had the unique resource of culturally specific patterns of vacation communities to build upon. They were able to use the rhythms forged in bungalow colonies to claim time and space for themselves, not just for productive work (as in philanthropic or community groups), and not just during daytime or with husbands, but—crucially—in ways that reimagined domesticity itself. Historians have long recognized the centrality of labor to the forging of domestic ideologies and experiences of life and work. The patterns of leisured domesticity underscore the importance of labor, while revealing the possibility of men’s gender-bending domestic labor—looking after children, not mowing the lawn—in certain circumstances.

Jewish American women harnessed mahjong to enact new possibilities of leisured domesticity. By creating a community marker, they also shaped what it meant to be a middle-class Jewish woman in Cold War America. The culture of the game reinforced middle-class American domesticity, to which Jewish Americans had unprecedented access, while simultaneously establishing a broader norm—albeit limited—of autonomous female leisure. When the postwar domestic norms that supported and necessitated patterns of leisured domesticity crumbled in the late 1960s, the mocking stereotype popularized in *Portnoy’s Complaint* helped obscure the legacies and possibilities that mahjong-playing women created. Yet its caricature reveals the powerful disruptions that reallocating domestic labor and space could cause, and how remarkable it remains that for two decades at the height of Cold War culture, Jewish American families integrated mothers’ leisure into domestic expectations.

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