

12: Aliens have landed: Jews as mass immigrants

The Anglo-Jewish community is made up of different groups who arrived at different times. One group stands out. One time, one massive immigration. The scores of thousands of Jews who escaped Tsarist Russia. Nihilists assassinated the Tsar in 1881. The lumbering and cruel Russian autocracy warred against its Jews with persecutory laws and state-organised pogroms with the aim that one-third will die, one-third will leave the country, and the last third will be completely assimilated within the Russian people.

Forced into cities, Russian Jews were ripped away from fragile work and welfare networks and degraded into an impoverished urban proletariat. Hundreds of thousands left the country while they could.

The Jewish population of Britain in 1881 numbered around 60,000 mostly native-born souls. By 1914, fairly reliable figures suggest that there were 300,000 foreign-born Jews in Britain, of whom almost 150,000 lived in London. Most of these were Russian, and of those who stayed, most settled within the east end of London, an area merging into the public consciousness as a dangerous district of unemployment or casual, uncertain, and poorly paid work, diseases of water and poverty, where the poor crowded into jerry-built slum housing. Here, Jewish immigrants were drawn into the three classic sweated trades of tailoring, boot and shoemaking, and furniture making.

Concern for the wages and rents of natives could develop into a desire to restrict immigration. Protectionist Tory MP James Laufer said in the Commons that the tailoring trade is absolutely overrun by these destitute foreign immigrants, so that out of 18,000 or 20,000 persons engaged in the trade, only a few hundreds are of the Anglo-Saxon race. The ready-made clothing trade is falling almost entirely into foreign hands.

The Jewish establishment felt responsible for improving the material welfare of their brethren and for reducing hostility. Common resources buckled under the strain. There wasn't funding or scope to sponsor all incomers to continue their emigration to the Americas or to the colonies, or to push them out to cheaper suburbs, nor to educate all Jewish children in Jewish schools, or to take apprenticeships, nor to feed or heat all the destitute.

The immigrants helped themselves, establishing societies based on shuls, place of origin, or trade unions. The poor Jew's temporary shelter was the brainchild of Herman

Landau, the self-described Polish Jew, even though Poland was in one of its tragic periods of abeyance. Successful stockbroker and mine owner, and the tailor striker by 1889, limited garment workers to a mere 10 and a half hours a day.

The mediators, incidentally, were Nathan Lord Rothschild and the Liberal MP from Whitechapel, Liverpool-born banker Samuel Montagu. Rothschild also backed the 4% Dwelling Company, a profit-making endeavour which enabled many, mainly destitute Jews, to live in modern, plumbed, hygienic accommodation, protected from rapacious landlords. Another Rothschild, Constance, Lady Battersea, founded the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls, Women and Children, to combat the worst exploitation of vulnerable immigrants.

For his part, Samuel Montagu created and paid for the federation of synagogues to provide representation and organisation to the so-called foreign synagogues, Stieblitch, Chevras and Backyard Shuls, which are proliferating across the East End. These places, and the federation's structure, suited many religious immigrants for whom the East London Synagogue was, ironically, alienatingly the English. Which was how many in the established community wanted it.

Immigrant boys learned practical skills and how to be English at the Jewish Lad's Brigade, founded by Indian-born British Army Staff Officer Colonel Albert Goldschmidt, who studied matters Jewish with Dr Asher Asher, the first Secretary of the United Synagogue. Dr Asher was also involved in the United Synagogue's establishment of the East London Synagogue, the US' first own-brand building. The US also cited its Beth Din in Mulberry Street, E1, definitely East, rather than West London.

The thin ranks of Jewish aristocracy thickened with Montagu's ennoblement as the first Lord Swaythling in 1907, but neither his elevation, nor the availability of taxpayers' money to support the education of young Jews, should disguise the crucial involvement as donors, volunteers, organisers, and communal bureaucrats of the Jewish middle class. Without dismissing the decades of poverty, the hostility, exclusion, the short lives that many had here, nevertheless, the beer shops and filth of the East End were sunny features of the Garden of Eden, compared to anything in Sardom. Labour exploitation was combated by legal reforms.

The poor had numerous non-Jewish, and now Jewish, advocates in Parliament, as well as antagonists. The liberal press treated with seriousness the principles and practicalities of mass immigration by Jewish refugees. In short, England shifted to

accommodate Russian Jewry, and Russian Jewry shifted too. The story of the intervening century or so is the family story of most of us within the United Synagogue today.