

15: We Are Shadows

Henry of Navarre secured the throne of France by converting from Calvinism to Roman Catholicism, supposedly declaring that Paris is well worth a mass. Never a fanatic, though, in 1598 Henry decreed that faithful Calvinists, possibly as many as 10% of the 2 million strong French population, should be tolerated. Dependent entirely on the inclination of the French monarch, the Edict of Nantes was nevertheless unique in Europe for the time, indicating a way forward for different Christian denominations to live in the same country without massacring each other, as they had been doing.

That path was not taken far. In 1685 Louis XIV, the Sun King, cast a shadow over French Protestant households by revoking his grandfather's edict and billeting soldiers in their homes, a parasitic move threatening violence and despoilment. Scores of thousands of Huguenots, many of them town dwellers, well-educated, often highly skilled artisans, left France.

The English population gave these first refugees charity, and the first ever British government naturalised them. Here in Fournier Street, you are facing the Brick Lane Mosque, built as Le Neuve Eglise, the New Church, by Huguenots in 1743. The French refugees settled thickly in Spitalfields, and this was only one of their places of worship. In the streets around you many of their houses survive, featuring distinctive attic windows which gave them the whole day's light to work on fabric designs and weaving, as many did. A missionary group targeting Jews for conversion used the building for a short period during the Napoleonic Wars, part of the movement which led to the creation of the Jews' Free School. Then it was taken over by Methodists.

At the end of the 1800s, the amalgamation of two prior communities created the Supporters of the Law Synagogue, Machzike Hadath, a strictly observant shul in the Lithuanian tradition with its own shechita, slaughter of animals, and associated institutions for learning. Machzike Hadath, also known as the Spitalfields Great Synagogue, soon joined the Federation of Synagogues established by Samuel Montagu, known after ennoblement as Lord Swaythling.

In 1931 the community filled a vacancy created when Rav Kook left to be Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine 12 years before. The new Rav was Russian-born Rabbi Yehezkel Abramsky, possibly the greatest Jewish scholar to reside in England in modern times,

according to Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton, rather than in our own times of Sydney's Great Synagogue.

Just three years later, in a coup for the standing among frum (religious) Jews of the United Synagogue, Chief Rabbi Hertz appointed Rabbi Abramsky a Dayan of the London Beth Din. In the late 1930s Dayan Abramsky tightened the kashrut standards of butchers operating under London Board of Shechita supervision, and displayed ingenuity in other areas, utilising the conditional get, or divorce, for servicemen going to war.

Following World War II, Dayan Abramsky and the London Beth Din represented orthodox continuity for what was left of European Jewry, and arguably were less Anglo in their orientation, and were therefore well-placed to operate in a more varied post-war Anglo-Jewish community. Just over the road from the then-Rabbi Abramsky's pulpit, which was, in a sense, under the auspices of Lord Swaythling, were the Russian vapour baths, belonging to the Reverend B. Schewzik. This establishment gave a taste of home to those hankering for an old-country bathhouse schmeissing, or beating with raffia.

It is unlikely that Lord Swaythling came for a regular schmeissing here though, as he and Rev Schewzik disagreed publicly, through speeches and in the letters of the Jewish Chronicle, over the perennial question of the optimum size of a shul. But Rev Schewzik came into his own, leading Yamim Narayim services at the 5,000-capacity Great Assembly Hall in Mile End Road. In 1905, the JC reported that, "Here the United Synagogue held its largest holy-day services. The Rev B. Shevzik, owner of Brick Lane Baths, conducted them. Diane Asher Feldman gave the sermon. Lord Rothschild read Maftir Yonah."

Rev Schewzik's bathhouse was recently replaced by the brand-new building you can see in Brick Lane, right opposite the end of Fournier Street. The Galician Kravkova Synagogue, the Cutler Street Polish Synagogue, and the Austrian Jikova Synagogue in Dunk Street were all founding members of the Federation set up by Lord Swaythling, and, without merger or amalgamation, all are gone, in name and fact. The buildings are gone.

Dunk Street itself no longer exists. The Great Assembly Hall, where Rev Schewzik developed hopes for taking the pulpit at a grand shul big enough to accommodate the whole East End, even those already members of Federation shuls, that Great Assembly Hall too is gone. Destroyed by bombs in 1941, like the Great Synagogue. Also blown to

bits by enemy action that year was the London Beth Din building, where Dayan Abramski presided.

Look up to the sundial on the front of the mosque. The Latin inscription, “Umbra sumus”, translates as, “We are Shadow”. Like the Huguenots, the Jewish presence in the East End is now a pale shadow of what it was. The motto on this remarkable building, home successively to different communities, different religious traditions, could sum up the East End, not just the Jewish story here. But the motto has one more contribution to make. It is taken from the Roman poet Horace's statement, “Pulvis et umbra sumus”, “We are dust and shadow”. In Horace's own lifetime, the Roman Republic for which he had fought was superseded by imperial rule. This empire built those same walls at Londinium, beside which Jews buried their dead during our first sojourn in this land.

We, the Jews of London, did not win history, merely by outliving the Roman Empire and returning here, where some of us probably have roots a thousand years old. The Jewish cemetery by the Barbican appears to have been subject to despoilment or at least disinterment, and there is only sadness in that and the many trials and tragedies of our forebears. But we can and should draw confidence and faith in our Jewish future from the development of our challenges, as they have changed from physical survival, to combating poverty and ignorance, to deciding where and how to live, as everyone else does.

We live where we choose, study and work as we choose. Our community not only survives, though, but thrives. This is a credit to the freedoms of this country, but also to the immense dedication of our own people to enriching and embellishing life for their fellow Jews. Most have done so without fame. Our institutions have served us myriad charities, schools, shuls, soup kitchens. The US is proud to be a multifaceted part of this story, making available and enhancing our Jewish tradition in this country now for 150 years, and for the years before that of the old shuls before they became the United Synagogue.

It is no cliché to say that there has never been a better time than now to be in the story of London Jewry or involved in the contribution to that story made by the US. You are in that story, listening to this recording, and it should feel positive. There is no cliché, and there is optimism, because this is the best time to be here that we have had, the best time to be a London Jew. Please God, we should see another 150 years of transformative improvement, and Jewish growth and betterment for us all.