

10: Soup and coal: philanthropic changes

The Evening Standard reported on poor Jews in November 1866 as follows, “If we refer to the census return of 1861, we find that there were in Whitechapel and St. George’s in the East End 3,443 Germans, 910 Prussians, 2,273 Hollanders and 894 Poles.” It is reasonable to suppose that the greater part of them were Jews.

It is impossible to walk a step without observing the extent of this immigration. This was no mere survey. There was judgement. The standard continued, the immigrants come over in a wretched state. They have no knowledge of the language and are often without a trade. In a few days, or at the most in a few weeks, their scanty means are all spent, and they have no resource but to appeal to the tender mercies of their own countrymen, Jews, who, having passed through the same ordeal, know its misery.

Most negatively of all, the standard linked poverty to crime. In common with many English, they deal in a variety of goods, which are not always obtained from legitimate sources. The Jewish establishment was concerned about such views being accurate, and their becoming commonly accepted.

As early as 1770, policing pioneer John Fielding had testified before a House of Commons committee that burglars took their loot to Jewish receivers. The response of the Great Synagogue was to offer a reward in the newspapers for the detection of persons buying stolen goods. Not all was fearful. The compassion of impoverished Jews was praised by the Standard, “In more than one case, we saw poor Jews taking charge of their poor relations, and as soon as he can afford to do so, the Jew takes an interest in the welfare of his poorer brethren.”

The Jew had to take an interest. Immigrant Jews had no parish of origin, so unlike the native-born, in the 18th century they could not claim relief under the English Poor Law. Worse than mere poverty, the 1834 Poor Law required recipients of public charity to reside in a workhouse, usually an unsuitable habitat for observant Jewish life, and a threat to the minds and bodies of any inmate. Preceding the formation of the United Synagogue by 11 years then and consolidating various separate and inadequate alms-giving funds, in 1859, the Great, the Hambro and the New Synagogues established the Board of Guardians for the Relief of the Jewish Poor at Aldgate.

Cheltenham-born philanthropist Ephraim Alex, United Synagogue council member, was the leading light. At the first meeting of the Board of Guardians at the Great Synagogue

on 16th March 1859, the Board committed itself to new, rationed methods, saying that, the teachings of religion, the impulses of humanity, and the doctrines of social sciences alike concur in recommending and consecrating an enlarged and expansive charity and distinguishing it from mere almsgiving.

The pub before you, a modern, business-like Victorian edifice, was the headquarters of the Board of Guardians from 1896 until the 1950s. As far back as the 1800s, Jewish welfare and education charities in the United Kingdom have accepted help from national and local government. This should not obscure the tremendous efforts of Jews at all levels of society, since the readmission, to assist each other.

Not only successful businessmen such as Ephraim Alex, the pages of the 19th century Jewish Chronicle are barnacled with lists of contributors to myriad Jewish causes, recording donations great and very small. For instance, contributions to St Moses Montefiore's appeal to relieve distress in Jerusalem in 1870 included £5 from Lionel L. Cohen Esquire, as it happens a founder of both the Board and the United Synagogue. As well as £2 from Chief Rabbi Adler, but also £1 from a working man Brighton, 52 uncredited offerings of 10 shillings and 56 of just 5 shillings. And this is just what was published.

Nor should the inadequacy of the Jewish community's attempts to provide for every need of its own poor detract from our respect for the imagination of those involved in the work. The Board of Guardians in the 1850s and 60s distributed funds for food and fuel, and even tefillin, to Jews resident in Britain for at least six months.

Remember that this was a semblance of a modern charity, not an unsophisticated giver of alms. Typical of the scaling up from almsgiving to modernity was the Apprentice Scheme, which in 1863 had one applicant, 85 in 1873, and in 1908, a generation to the mass immigration to Britain of Russian Jews, 371 applicants, on whom the Board spent over £3,000, around a quarter of a million pounds today, but with greatly more purchasing power.

The greatest testament to the community's self-reliance is perhaps the reflection of whatever success the community has been blessed with onto our charities. The Evening Standard reported on Jewish charities again in 2002, this time saying that Jewish Care receives more than £15 million in donations, putting it comfortably in the major league of British charities. Jewish Care was formed in the 1990s from a number of communal

organisations and charities, the largest of which was the Board of Guardians for the Relief of the Jewish Poor. We really do seem to care.