

13: Come and be Anglicised: Educating Jewish Children

The Great Synagogue created a Talmud Torah in 1732 to provide a traditional religious education to a few boys of the Ashkenazi community. The Talmud Torah was likely the first Ashkenazi charity in English history. Even in the 1780s, attempts were made to reform the education on offer to make it more practical.

It was hoped that some of the many destitute Jewish children might be enabled to escape poverty. The Sephardim, it should be noted, already taught English reading, writing and arithmetic to a number of their children. Ashkenazi attempts to catch up were given a nudge in 1796 when police pioneer Patrick Colquhoun wrote from a position of some knowledge that what he called Dutch Jews must develop better educational opportunities since their present pursuits not only tend in an eminent degree to the corruption of morals but also to the commission of crimes.

Idleness and poverty were one thing, but the establishment saw great danger in allowing even the perception to be established that increasing numbers of Jewish youth had no prospects but to sell counterfeit coin or handle stolen goods.

The first Christian missionary free school, designed and operated to tempt Jewish children from their heritage with education but also with food and decent clothing, opened in 1807. Other such institutions followed, well-funded and fashionably patronised by the Duke of Kent, father of Princess Alexandrina, better known later as Queen Victoria.

The prospect of ignorant Jewish children turning Christian spurred communal action. In 1817 the Talmud Torah's English name was amended to Free School for German Jews. A new Hebrew title declared that Chinuch Yeladim, education of children, was a defined aim in addition to the traditional Talmud Torah.

The Jews' free school was officially an adjunct to the Talmud Torah with more than one old-style melamed (teacher) lingering on the staff, but in time the two would be joined. Hebrew and English were taught and Yiddish marginalised. Boys were taught to pronounce which and what as “uich” and “uot” rather than the foreign-sounding “vich” and “vot”.

The senior master was awarded bonuses for good academic results. Within a few months, more than 200 boys were enrolled. Ending its previously peripatetic existence,

the Jews' free school established its home here in Bell Lane, roughly on the site of the grey building before you, in 1821. The school remained here until destruction by enemy action 120 years later.

The small-scale, rudimentary teaching methods of the old countries faded. As early as 1883 the Jews' free school grew, the JC guessed, to become the largest educational institution of England, and probably in the world.

Many thousands of Jewish schoolchildren benefited from the triumph of Victorian municipal reform that were the London School Boards, attached neither to guilds nor to the church, and in whose areas of operation Jewish needs were often accommodated. According to its own records, the Christian Street Girls' School in Whitechapel opened in 1901 with great difficulty, almost entirely because the Jewish girls were unable to speak English and understand when spoken to. The headmaster of Dempsey Street Girls recorded at Shavuot in 1906 that Pentecost answerable for the loss of 346 attendances last week.

Here too, in 1912, English was given more time in the schedule, as it was being taught almost as a foreign language. Out of some 2,399 children who gained Technical Education Board and London County Council scholarships at 11 plus in Tower Hamlet schools between 1893 and 1914, over a thousand appear by their names to have been Jewish. Meanwhile, in 1908, a Russian-born JFS alumnus called Selig Brodetsky became Senior Wrangler at Trinity College, Cambridge. That is, the top undergraduate mathematician, sometimes referred to as the greatest intellectual achievement attainable in Britain. Brodetsky's life was one of contribution to Anglo Jewry and to Israel.

When looking at the achievements of the post-1881 immigrants in particular, we should remember the facilitation, goodwill, and work of native-born Jews and their allies in that generation and before, on behalf of the immigrants.

But if you've been told that your ancestors were mis-sold a ticket to New York and ended up in Whitechapel, or that their names were changed by a hostile immigration official at the London docks, then you should probably, with caution, discount these unlikely tales. Both the humbler and the greater achievements of the first Russian Jews to have access to a secularised education are testament to the perseverance and work of our forebears. They should get full credit, because from the moment they made the choice to leave Russia, in Selig Brodetsky's case, hiding and crossing a guarded border at night,

they took control of their destiny as much as they could. And our bubbe meise of their powerlessness, our folktales, are probably just that. We should not diminish whatever respect we have for them by denying them their agency.