

14: On the Move: Jewish movement out of the East End

Food aid, even previous soup kitchens for poor Jews, existed in London before 1854. But in that year, the soup kitchen for the Jewish poor was founded in Lehman Street, half a mile from here on the south side of the Whitechapel Road. The soup kitchen was evicted on rent grounds from later premises around the corner from this point, in what is now Broon Street, in Fashion Street in 1902.

The same year, the kitchen was re-established on this site in what was then Butler Street, under the auspices of the Jewish Board of Guardians. By 1905, the kitchen was looking after 8,000 people, serving 2,200 portions of soup a day to clients who had to traverse a maze of barriers within the building, allowing schools to queue at once off the street. Israel Zangwill fictionalised the scene at Fashion Street as a sort of cattle pen, into which the paupers crushed, awaiting amid discomfort and universal jabber in the divine moment.

By the 1970s though, the Jewish Chronicle described the kitchen as catering for the forgotten tribe of Anglo-Jewry, those who still lived in the East End of London, where rich, multi-faceted English, Iberian, Dutch, Russian, Polish, Galician, Lithuanian and other Jewish life had thrived and dominated from the 1880s. Now the Jews there were the people everyone else had forgotten. In 1971, the kitchen distributed bread and groceries rather than soup, to 250 families living below the poverty line every week.

But the urgency of Yiddish-speaking new arrivals, hungry children, families entering the country in dribs and drabs were long gone. Hyman Jay of Brick Lane, aged 78 in 1971, cared for his bedridden wife, bronchitis had forced him to retire from tailoring, and his children were not often seen in Hyman's home in Brick Lane. Retired dressmaker Bluma, born to parents from Vilna, said hers was a finster lebn, a dark life. Where had everyone gone? And why? The desirable trajectory was almost universally held to be away. The earliest Sephardim who could afford to do so moved to Kew or Hampstead.

So even before the First World War, the path of community infrastructure, especially synagogues, led East End Jews south to Brixton and beyond, but more often north to Highbury, Hackney and Stamford Hill. Or northwest along the Edgware Road to St John's Wood for the richest, or at least to Willesden and Kilburn within the orbit of avant-garde Hampstead and its famous choir.

Between the wars, the Metroline suburbs on the Northern Line, Golders Green, Hendon and Finchley, were convenient and attractive temptations for anyone able to afford escape from the dust and clamour of the East End. Some of the worst houses, thrown up in the first half of the 1800s, without foundations and unpaved roads, were by now a national scandal in themselves. Cheap mortar crumbled, so brick walls buckled, ceilings and floors sagged, tiles fell into narrow alleys and rodents swarmed, sewerage and plumbing were inadequate or absent, electricity was far from ubiquitous, even light and fresh air could not be taken for granted.

The Blitz, or more specifically the evacuations before the Blitz, were if not the end of the Jewish East End, then certainly the last time there was a healthy demographic balance here. In the five years after the end of hostilities in 1945, the economically depressed and physically shattered remnants of an already tired urban landscape was one big push factor. And those leaving could choose from Cockfosters, Ilford, Romford, all new communities where houses had telephone lines, gardens and garages. Or somewhere like High Wycombe. Some London Jews evacuated here, liked the place so much they never returned to London at all.

The Soup Kitchen closed its doors for the last time in 1992. The food disbursement had been replaced before the end by distribution of cash. But a Soup Kitchen client who lived alone, Leslie Simmons, said you can't talk to a pension. Perhaps the Jewish need was always just a conversation. As always though, the sources warn against letting romantic fog descend over history as it becomes more distant. Zangwill wrote convincingly that in his day; the majority were famished and shivering. So, we need not necessarily be so nostalgic for this place.