

# THE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION OF ANGLO-JEWRY 1883-1960

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**L**OOK BACK seventy-seven years to the date of my birth, 1883, and I realize that my childhood decade was a turning point in the development of the Anglo-Jewish community. The immigration from Eastern Europe, Russia and Rumania, was beginning, and in the next thirty years it transformed the economic and social structure. To the relatively small community of wealthy merchants, big and petty traders, and skilled artisans, with an uppercrust of 300 men in the liberal professions, and rapidly advancing in them, it brought a mass of poor manual workers from the Eastern ghetto seeking security and freedom. The newcomers formed little ghettos in East London and in the bigger industrial centres, e.g. Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow; they multiplied small synagogues, friendly societies, and Jewish night-schools (Heder and Talmud Torah), and they fostered a Yiddish literature and theatre. Before the outbreak of the First World War the East European immigrants had increased the size of the community fourfold, from 50,000 to 200,000. The eager and ambitious men and women among them were taking their place in the leadership of the community. The World War was a great instrument of integration of the Jewish community because most of the young men and many of the young women of all sections of the community were enrolled in the Forces, and mixed with the non-Jewish citizens.

Between the two world wars the Jewish population was increased again by a hundred thousand, about a third, mainly as the result of the admission of a mass of refugees from Nazi persecution in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. They were a very different element from the earlier immigrants, consisting in large part of intellectual middle-class families. They included many men and women distinguished in the medical and legal professions, in academic life and literature, and in all the arts. They included also a number of Jewish scholars devoted to

Judaism and what was called the *Juedische Wissenschaft*. Undoubtedly they raised the cultural level both in its general and in its Jewish aspects, and were a vitamin of the community.

Comparing the Anglo-Jewish community of today with that of the eighties of the last century, perhaps the most striking characteristic is its Conservatism. It is seven times the size, its demographic structure is radically different: it has no longer that primacy in the Jewish world which it enjoyed in the days of the Pax Britannica. Yet its fundamental institutions are substantially the same. In the ecclesiastical sphere the Chief Rabbi exercises authority over the congregations not only of the United Kingdom but of the British Commonwealth. In the lay and political sphere, the United Synagogue, the representative Board of Deputies of British Jews, and the non-democratic Anglo-Jewish Association, the three of them much enlarged, carry on the functions which they exercised seventy years ago. The United Synagogue, being originally a union of three congregations in the City of London and Whitechapel, has grown to an association of over one hundred in Greater London. The Board of Deputies, formed in 1760 of representatives of the Sephardim, from the Iberian Peninsula and Holland—then the premier and aristocratic community—and of the Ashkenazim, derived from Central Europe, for the purpose of presenting a loyal address of Anglo-Jewry to the new King George III, is today formed by a more or less democratic election by all sections of the community, and is recognized as the official channel of communication with the Government, both in domestic matters and in foreign affairs which concern the Jewish people. The Anglo-Jewish Association, created in 1871 during the Franco-Prussian war, is a nominated, self-coopting body of men and women, concerned particularly with the defence of Jewish rights and interests against attacks on grounds of religion, race, or politics. A major change in the two latter bodies, which reflects the social climate, is the inclusion of women delegates. The Board of Guardians and Trustees for the relief of the Jewish poor in London, over a hundred years old, is still the major charity of the community. *The Jewish Chronicle*, which is still older, remains the principal Press organ of communal affairs, and as a newspaper covers the whole Jewish world.

It is a symbol of the religious continuity that the Authorized Prayer-Book of the Conservative congregations of the British Empire has not been changed during the seventy years. With its English translation, made sixty years ago by the Reverend Simcon Singer, it is still the standard book of worship. It is another symbol of the Conservative continuity that the principal communal charities concerned with the Jews of the country are largely directed by members of the old-established aristocracy. The hereditary principle is strong in Anglo-Jewish as in English public life, and evokes a sense of responsibility in 'the hundred families'.

In the political institutions of the community, however, the new element had and has its full part. The young generation from Eastern Europe knocking at the door was symbolized in Professor Selig Brodet-sky, who came to London in the nineties as a child from Russia, the son of poor parents, made his way from the Jews Free school to Cambridge, distinguished himself there, and was appointed to a professorial chair at Leeds University. He quickly assumed the leadership of that third largest Jewish community in the Kingdom, and went on to be the President of the Board of Deputies and of the English Zionist Federation, following in the latter office Dr. Chaim Weizmann. The lead in the major financial instruments of the Jewish National Home, and later of the cause of Israel, was taken by dynamic men and women of the new generation, whose parents had been poor immigrants. Because of the need for larger contributions for the settlement of Jews migrating to Israel, on a scale never contemplated in the old communal charities, the direction soon passed to persons of great wealth; big giving and generosity, rather than birth and intellectual eminence, had to be the main qualifications.

At the beginning of the period the cultural level of the community in all Jewish aspects was low. Jewish learning was not held in great respect, and the few scholars who pursued it were almost all immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe. Unlike the communities in Germany, Austria and France, which maintained institutions devoted to the study of Judaism, Anglo-Jewry had no learned society and no learned review to encourage such studies. The Jews' College in London was purely for training rabbis and ministers, and most of its teachers and students also came from abroad. The situation, however, gradually changed with the stimulus of the growing foreign element. One naturalized scholar, Solomon Schechter, originally from Rumania and brought to England in 1882 by Dr. Claude Goldsmid Montefiore, a scion of two of the old families, to be his tutor in Rabbinics, was the moving mind and the spiritual force. He inspired a group, partly of English-born Jews, and partly of immigrants like himself, to a serious interest in Judaism, Jewish history and Jewish literature. Two of his disciples, Claude Montefiore and Israel Abrahams,—a native Anglo-Jewish scholar—founded and edited the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, which could compare with the best Continental periodicals of Jewish learning. Two other members of the group, Lucien Wolf and Joseph Jacobs, the latter being a native of Australia, formed the Jewish Historical Society of England, which was concentrated on the history of the Jews in this island in the Middle Ages and after the Resettlement in the seventeenth century. The Jubilee year of Queen Victoria, 1887, was marked by an Anglo-Jewish Exhibition, which recorded the achievements of 200 years, from the tiny beginnings. One of its permanent publications was an Anglo-Jewish Bibliography, which was supplemented 70 years later by Dr.

Cecil Roth, the premier English writer of this century on Jewish history, on the occasion of the three hundredth anniversary of the Resettlement of Jews in Britain.

In recent years there is certainly no lack of production of books by Jews about Jews and Judaism, or of Jewish periodicals. The learned *Jewish Quarterly Review*, indeed, passed to American hands at the beginning of this century. But another organ, the *Jewish Quarterly*, is concentrated on religious, philosophical and cultural aspects of the Renaissance, and a learned *Journal of Jewish Studies* and a Hebrew learned periodical are published. Two other monthly journals are issued: by the Association of Jewish Refugees (who crossed the North Sea from 1933 till the end of the World War) and by Dr. Wiener's Library, which is a remarkable collection of books and documents dealing with the Nazi Regime, and has become a permanent part of the historical archives of the Jewish people. The two journals are concerned particularly with the history and interests of the Continental accretion to the community which arrived after 1933. Most of the larger provincial communities maintain a weekly journal, and some of them more than one. The literary consciousness of Anglo-Jewry today has then become strong; and the Anglo-Jewish community in our time has taken the place which was held for two centuries by the community of Germany as the principal Jewish cultural centre of Europe.

The community of Great Britain now numbers about 450,000, a little less than one per cent of the total population. Of them a quarter of a million live in the area of Greater London. While the Jewish population in the metropolis has multiplied, there is no longer a Ghetto, a quarter of the poor, in East London, as there was 70 years ago. The Jewish population there, which in 1900 was reckoned at 125,000, had fallen in 1945 to 30,000; children of school-age are 3,000, while 60 years ago there were 30,000. The overwhelming proportion of the Jews live in the principal towns, and in particular quarters of them. In several boroughs of Greater London they form nearly one-third of the population. They flock also to certain holiday and seaside resorts, Brighton, Bournemouth, Margate, Blackpool. Many are happier in a Jewish society, and a growing tendency is manifest among the adults to establish their own athletic and social clubs. At the universities the ever-increasing number of Jewish students has brought a more intense Jewish cultural activity, particularly among those who are children or grandchildren of immigrant families. On the other hand, the wider distribution into smaller towns, which was started by the evacuation of families from London and the big industrial cities in the Second World War, has to an extent remained.

Another striking feature of the community in our day is the growth of the spirit of equality which, while characteristic of the general British society, has still more deeply affected the Jewish community. Broadly

the British Jews today are a middle class. The trend to intellectual occupations is steadily fostered. Jewish boys and girls seize in full measure the opportunity, given by the welfare state, for secondary and higher education. The proportion of Jewish students at the older and the younger universities is high, and one of the remarkable vocational changes has been the high proportion of Jews in academic appointments. They have risen, also, to the head of some liberal professions, particularly the medical and the legal. A few individuals, such as the first Lord Reading, Lord Samuel, Edwin Montagu, Emanuel Shinwell, have attained high political office.

No serious anti-Semitic movement has obtained a foothold in political life. Between the World Wars, in the period of the big economic depression of the thirties, Sir Oswald Mosley, an ambitious and restless politician, started a party of British Fascists which was openly modelled on Mussolini's Fascism and on Hitler's anti-Jewish Nationalist Socialism. Its followers wore black shirts, used violent methods against any questioners or hecklers at their meetings, and denounced the Jews as exploiters and the enemies of the people. For a few years it was a serious mischief locally in East London; but at the outbreak of the Second World War it was utterly discredited because of its pro-Nazi attitude. Its principal members, including Mosley himself, were interned during the war under a regulation for the security of the realm. The attempt to revive it under another name after the end of the war miscarried. For a little time Jewish and 'Left' opinion in East London was agitated again by meetings of the 'Unity Movement', but soon the excitement petered out. The failure does not mean that no anti-Semitism exists; but public opinion in its broad stream is tolerant. When early in 1960 there was a sudden outbreak or 'rash' of neo-Nazi attacks on the Jews and Judaism, the infection spread for a few weeks to a lunatic fringe in England. But at once responsible public opinion was marshalled to check it.

The national service, which has required young men to spend two years in the Forces, has been a powerful instrument for mingling the Jews with the rest of the population. At the same time, Jewish consciousness has been emphasized on both sides as a result of the Hitler persecution. While there is little or no feeling in Britain against the Jews as a minority, since differences of religion, race and nationality, and cultural attachment of minorities are accepted as normal in the multinational society, Jews like other national elements, the Welsh, the Scots, and the Irish, tend to hold to 'the sacred differences'. The danger of excessive assimilation, which was felt before the growth of the Zionist Movement, has been checked. Today, in fact, there appears to be sometimes the opposite danger of over-emphasizing separateness.

The communal organization is more comprehensive and more far-reaching than it was seventy-seven years ago. Each section is looked after by Jewish agencies in a way which was not conceived in the Victorian

era. The provision for the young men and women is an example. In the early part of the century, when the idea of residential settlements of university men and women in the midst of the working-class quarters was pursued in the Jewish and the general community, three such Jewish centres were established in the East End of London. The first bore the name of Lewis House, after the Jewish social worker, Harry Lewis, who was for many years a resident in Toynbee Hall, the prototype of such settlements. Half a dozen young men from the British universities, including Sir Leon Simon, Harry Sacher, Dr. Mortimer Epstein, Jack Myers (son of a famous editor of *The Jewish Chronicle*), and the writer, lived there, and gave their evenings and weekends to cultural activities among the Jewish youth. A more permanent foundation was the Bernard Baron settlement and club, directed by (Sir) Basil Henriques and his wife, who have won a national and international reputation by their devoted half-century of youth work on a religious basis. The third centre in the same neighbourhood is the Brady Street settlement, associated with boys' and girls' clubs, and providing also for adults and old people. Today, when a large number of Jewish youth from East London and other workers' districts win their way to the Universities, the need of the service of such settlements is reduced. But other agencies are multiplied. Besides boys' and girls' clubs and the remaining residential settlements in the Jewish quarters of London and other big towns, the Association of Jewish Youth supervises scores of adult clubs and cultural societies. The clubs, the Jewish Lads' Brigade and the Athletic Societies today are in great measure managed by the young people themselves, who have become independent of the philanthropies and direction of other circles. The University students again, who today are counted in thousands, have organized for themselves an Inter-University Students Federation, which is engaged in cultural activities. And the International Order of B'nai B'rith has introduced into England an established institution of Jewish students in American universities, a Hillel House, that is designed to be a centre for religious and social activities, and a meeting place for Jewish students from many countries. British Jews in recent years have had an honourable place in national and international games. The largest of the Zionist youth bodies, the Maccabee, with 5,000 members, is part of a world organization devoted to sport. The British element has a full part in the athletic meetings of the Maccabead, held every few years in Israel, which are designed to be Jewish Olympic Games.

Another large group of Zionist youth is the Habonim (meaning the Builders) with 3,000 members, of whom a trickle passes each year to the Land of Israel. Other Socialist Zionist groups, one of them religious, prepare their members intensively in England for life in Israel. The Zionists conduct their own educational programme, stressing the knowledge of the living Hebrew and the geography and history of the

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Land of Israel, and above all, a pioneering spirit, with the aim of persuading boys and girls in the Commonwealth to be pioneers in Israel. They have in recent years founded a few day-schools, which give a Jewish and a general education, and also stress Hebrew and knowledge of Israel.

Paradoxically the Jewish community has established in this century institutions for the sick, to render services now borne by the State. The general Jewish hospitals in London, Manchester and Leeds, and convalescent homes for tubercular patients are a legacy from the last period of maximum effort of the community for the immigrants from Eastern Europe. The County Councils, which are the educational authority and provide the funds for primary and secondary education, make large grants to the Hebrew day-schools, and to the remaining Jewish denominational schools, and give facilities for religious instruction in the general secular schools. A Jewish higher education committee has been established in London to encourage boys and girls of secondary schools to pursue advanced Jewish studies and become Jewish teachers.

The refugees from the Continent who arrived during the last decades, though integrated into the British community and for the most part British citizens, still maintain their organizations for mutual help. They have brought a signal contribution of brains to the country which gave them refuge and to the community which helped them so generously. They take their full part in economic and social life and more than their share in artistic life. Their young generation, educated in British schools and universities, is likely to continue and enhance that contribution. One consequence of the influx has been to strengthen the element which holds to the full observance of the law and the study of Talmud and Rabbinical literature. This element established in 1927 a Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations which numbers a hundred synagogues distributed in all parts of the country. Their schools provide for 3,000 children, and they have established a Yeshiva, a higher Talmudic college, in Northern England at Gateshead. While the observance of the dietary laws in Jewish homes is not as strong as it was seventy years ago, it is enforced in Jewish public entertainment, partly through the influence of this element.

Another significant feature of communal life is the relation of British with American Jewry. By their numbers, their wealth and generosity, their political and economic influence, American Jews hold today a primacy among the communities outside Israel. With the Jews of Great Britain and the British Commonwealth they are the largest part of the dispersion, and they share a common language and to a great extent a common origin. Yet their relations with the British community is sometimes quered by misunderstanding; comparable with the occasional rift between the British and American governments on questions of world policy. In major issues, however, whether in relation

to Israel, the United Nations, or diplomatic representation on behalf of oppressed Jews and Jewries, the two 'Anglo-Saxon', or rather English-speaking communities, regularly cooperate with each other. The American Jewish Committee has a permanent representative and an office in London, and in all principal endeavours the two communities have developed a habit of cooperation. It has important consequences that English has in our day taken the place of Yiddish as the mother-tongue of the greatest part of the Jewish people.

The most fundamental change, however, in the attitude of the Jewish community during the seventy-seven years has been in its outlook towards the Land of Israel. For centuries the Jews had to be satisfied with a 'portable Fatherland', the way of life, the tradition of the Bible and the Rabbis, the culture and the history through the ages. Now it has a permanent geographical Fatherland, which commands, not the political allegiance, but the sentimental attachment and the practical help of the great mass of Jewry. It provides, too, new cultural ties between all the scattered congregations. Zionism has become in the last seventy years the major ideal and the rallying point of the Jews dispersed throughout the world. And while the political congresses of the Zionist organization, now regularly held in Jerusalem, and the ceaseless collecting of funds for the building of the National Home, loom large in the workaday life of the Jewish communities, what matters more in the evolution of Judaism is the spiritual influence of the Home.

Herzl wrote, at the outset of his effort to make 'Israel a Nation': 'The return to Judaism must precede the return to the Jewish land.' In this conception he approached the standpoint of his contemporary, the spiritual Zionist Ahad-Haam, who strongly opposed his political activity. It was the lesson of Ahad-Haam that the essential task of the National Home was to revive Judaism rather than to save homeless Jews. In the land of Israel the prophetic ideal of justice must be fulfilled by the returning people.

In Israel Judaism is again a living civilization. And the Hebrew renaissance has made the Hebrew Bible a living book for the near two million Jews living there. In the words of the English Coronation Service, the books of the Law and the Prophets are 'the living oracles of God'. The influence of Israel on the Jewish communities, including Anglo-Jewry, is to strengthen this sense of Judaism as a civilization, and to awaken fresh interest in the Hebrew Bible. It tends also to make each community more conscious of its links with the whole congregation of Israel.

The liberal trend of the nineteenth century in the politically emancipated communities was to reduce the intense Judaism of the ghetto, and convert it into a matter of religious belief and practices, which was treated as a private affair. Equality of citizenship of Jew and Gentile was regarded as conditional on cultural conformity in all things except

these beliefs and practices. That tendency to de-nationalization has been reversed in the last decades. The influence of the Hebrew renaissance and the creation of the State of Israel make for the reconstruction of Jewish life in the free countries on religious-national lines. Jews are recognized to be not just a religious denomination, like the Methodists or Roman Catholics. They remain something unique; a religious nationality, the heirs of a civilization which it is for the good of humanity to preserve.

The love of the Bible, which has been a profound characteristic of Protestant Britain, and the desire to encourage commercial enterprise, which was vital to the island people, were the keys opening the doors to Jewish admission into Britain in the seventeenth century. They remained strong motives of the British partnership with the Jews of the world in the establishment of the Jewish National Home in Palestine. For the last seventy years the destinies of the Jews and the British people have been more and more interwoven. The prophecy that the Messianic era would come when the Jews were dispersed to the ends of the earth was believed by Cromwell's Puritan advisers to have its fulfilment in the readmission of Jews to Anglia, the angle or the end of the world. The close connexion or rather, the innate community of interest which was established between British Jews and Palestine, since the very beginning of the national movement, is reflected in the present relations of the Anglo-Jewish community to the State and people of Israel. By the working of Providence, England became, for thirty years, the governing Power in Palestine and the centre of the Zionist organization: and the Anglo-Jewish community was called upon to give the lead in the realization of the age-long hope of the Jewish people. Though British Jewry are less than one twentieth of the whole congregation of Israel, they counted in this period for much more than their numbers warrant. It may be said that leadership was thrust upon them; and the seventy years may be regarded as the British era of modern Jewish history.