

Jews, Antisemitism and Irish Politics: A Tale of Two Narratives¹

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Zusammenfassung

Im Artikel wird eine der größten Schwächen der Historiographie der irischen Judenheiten betrachtet: die fehlende Bestimmung des wahren Ausmaßes des Antisemitismus und dessen Auswirkungen auf die jüdische Gemeinschaft in Irland. Hierfür wird ein kurzer Überblick über einen Ausschnitt des irisch-jüdischen Narrativs gegeben: das jüdische Verhältnis zur nationalistischen Politik in Irland. Der Fokus liegt dabei auf der Notwendigkeit für einen neuartigen Umgang mit den Quellen und den vorliegenden Sachverhalten, um eine ganzheitliche, objektivere und inklusive Geschichte der irischen Judenheiten zu schreiben.

Abstract

This article considers one of the major weaknesses in the existing historiography of Irish Jewry, the failure to consider the true extent and impact of antisemitism on Ireland's Jewish community. This is illustrated through a brief survey of one small area of the Irish-Jewish narrative, the Jewish relationship with Irish nationalist politics. Throughout, the focus remains on the need for a fresh approach to the sources and the issues at hand, in order to create a more holistic, objective and inclusive history of the Jewish experience in Ireland.

Introduction

It has been written that: “There is a fanciful and entirely mythical connection of the Jews with Ireland, and there is a historical and actual connection.”² Although these words were penned in 1915 and refer to the wealth of fanciful

¹ I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Zuleika Rodgers, for her ongoing support and her assistance in preparing this article, and Professor Cormac Ó Gráda for his generosity in allowing me access to his research materials on Irish Jewry.

² Salmon, John: Jews in Ireland. Historical Review. In: Belfast Telegraph. 24.09.1915, p.6.

myths surrounding the origins of Irish Jewry,³ they might just as well apply to more contemporary interpretations of Irish-Jewish history. Due to a general lack of academic interest, the standards of methodology and critical analysis in this field have been condemned to lag well behind contemporary norms, allowing popular wisdom to reign supreme, virtually unchallenged and unscrutinised. The failure to recognise the role of communal narrative in dictating its overall agenda and presuppositions is the single-most problematic aspect of the existing historiography of Irish Jewry. Most of the current approaches view the Jewish experience in Ireland as a largely positive one, disregarding or relativising evidence of antisemitism, and ignoring the often marked ambivalence of the sources, creating a bizarre yet unacknowledged tension within the narrative. Although the “polite fiction”⁴ of denial pervades all aspects of the Irish-Jewish narrative, it is particularly discernible in considerations of the Jewish relationship with nationalist politics during the struggle for independence from Britain and the foundation of the Irish state, and this is what this article sets out to address.

Historiography

The publication of Dermot Keogh’s *Jews of Twentieth Century Ireland: Refugees, Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust* (Cork 1998), far from being the final word on Irish Jewry, as one observer had anticipated at the time,⁵ was more of an opening of the floodgates. Keogh, in fact, unleashed a deluge of memoirs, fiction, popular histories, academic studies and television and radio documentaries. Many of these efforts were clearly prompted by the impulse to document a severely depleted and rapidly shrinking community.⁶ For a peripheral, largely

³ On these legends, see also Shillman, Bernard: *A Short History of the Jews in Ireland*. Dublin 1945; Hyman, Louis: *The Jews of Ireland. From Earliest Times to the Year 1910*. Shannon 1972.

⁴ Moore, Gerald: *Anti-Semitism in Ireland*. Ph. D.: Ulster Polytechnic 1984, p. 6.

⁵ Tracy, Robert: *The Jews of Ireland*. In: *Judaism. A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*. (Summer 1999). <http://www.ucc.ie/icms/irishmigrationpolicy/Judaism%20The%20Jews%20of%20Ireland.htm> (downloaded 19.10.2011).

⁶ For recent assessments of the community’s current situation and prospects, see Piehler, Moritz: „Little Jerusalem“ auf der grünen Insel. In: *Das Jüdische Echo*. (Cheschwan 5770/Nov 2009) vol. 58, pp. 233–235; Traynor, Cian: *Young, Jewish and Irish*. In: *Irish Times Weekend Review*. 11.12.2010, p. 1.

insignificant Jewry, therefore, an amazing amount of secondary material and what might politely be termed “ephemera”⁷ exists. On the other hand, primary sources for the community’s foundation period (1875–1905),⁸ are relatively few and far-between, creating a ‘history’ that is all too illustrative of the pitfalls of an uncritical over-reliance on vicarious popular memory.⁹ The weaknesses in the existing historiography arise from the tendency of observers from both outside and within to classify Irish Jews as something of a “quaint hybrid”,¹⁰ a whimsical aberration or an oxymoron. This has encouraged scholars and amateur historians alike to accept communal narrative at face value, no matter how unlikely or tongue-in-cheek it may seem.¹¹ Marginal to mainstream history, whether Irish or Jewish, Ireland’s Jewish community has boasted little to interest most academics. As a result, there is a distinct absence of the healthy, critical and contextual type of analysis that is the norm elsewhere. Further shortfalls and imbalances have been created by the nature of existing scholarly work, which has not been sufficiently focused on the community in its own *Jewish* right, and has tended instead to treat Irish Jewry as an isolated anomaly as opposed to a piece of a larger Jewish jigsaw.¹² Those brave enough to challenge the received wisdom have made little impact on the overall historiography, especially when it comes to discussing the issue of antisemitism.¹³ Finally,

⁷ Bernstein, Mashey: *A Portrait of the Jews in Ireland*. Dublin 1971, pages unnumbered.

⁸ Although there has been a small and fluctuating Jewish presence in Ireland since the late seventeenth century, this has not always been organised along communal lines. The current community, founded in 1822, did not fully establish itself until Jews began to arrive in (relatively) significant numbers from the early 1880s onwards, primarily from Lithuania. The subsequent growth of the community was curtailed to a large degree by the introduction of the Aliens Act in 1906. The most thorough and authoritative historical survey of Jewish settlement in Ireland can be found in Hyman: *Jews*.

⁹ For example, on the impact of popular memory on narratives of Jewish arrival in Ireland, see Wynn, Natalie: *Received wisdom and Irish-Jewish ‘Historiography’*. Paper presented at Jews on the “Celtic Fringe” conference. Belfast, September 2011; Wynn, Natalie: *Irish-Jewish Constructs of Tsarist Eastern Europe*. Paper presented at Ireland: East and West conference. Zagreb, September 2011. Proceedings of both forthcoming.

¹⁰ Rivlin, Ray: *Shalom Ireland. A Social History of Jews in Modern Ireland*. Dublin 2003, p. x.

¹¹ This is the thrust of Diner, Hasia: *The Accidental Irish: Jewish Migration to an Unlikely Place*. Paper presented to the Davis Seminar, Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies, Princeton University, April 2003, 60 pp. (cited with kind permission of Professor Diner).

¹² For example, Diner demonstrates that, contrary to popular wisdom, Jewish arrival and settlement in Ireland can and should be firmly located in the historical mainstream of the mass emigration period; Diner: *Accidental Irish*, pp. 1–60.

¹³ For challenges to the standard view on antisemitism, see Lentin, Ronit; Robbie McVeigh: *After Optimism? Ireland, Racism and Globalisation*. Dublin 2006, pp. 115–24; Lentin, Ronit: “Who ever heard of an Irish Jew?” Racialising the intersection of “Irishness” and

“Irish-Jewish history” has never been explicitly recognised to be, principally, the narrative of the dominant group within Ireland’s foremost Jewish community, namely Dublin’s Litvak majority, which has been deemed normative due to the absence or scarcity of records for other communities and groups. In consequence, smaller, less influential communities as well as ethnic and social subgroups within the Irish-Jewish mainstream have, to a great extent, been ignored by communal history.

Antisemitism Reconsidered

While almost all commentators give antisemitism some degree of consideration, the predominant consensus is that Ireland has, on the whole, been good to her Jews, offering overall tolerance and acceptance as well as plentiful opportunities in the educational, professional and cultural arenas.¹⁴ The prevailing tendency is, therefore, to regard the widespread insidious and day-to-day forms of anti-Jewish prejudice as if they barely apply in the Irish context. Grateful for the relative tolerance and acceptance of Irish society and the social, professional and economic opportunities it bestowed, most Jews are only too happy to brush aside any negative experiences they may have had.¹⁵ A careful and comprehensive, and less conditioned reading reveals, on the contrary, a high degree of inner tension and self-censorship within the sources. These often display a significant undercurrent of prejudice, resentment, exclusion and strained relations, which stands in direct conflict with the somewhat thin veneer of over-eager denial. The unacknowledged subtext that results is every bit as ambivalent and bifurcated as that of any Jewry grappling for its place within its host society. Yet, few pause to consider the appropriateness of rejecting a persistent, and sometimes considerable, undertow of anti-Jewish sentiment, or the overall ramifications of this deliberate evasion for the Irish-Jewish narrative.

“Jewishness”. In: *Racism and Anti-Racism in Ireland*. Ed. by Ronit Lentin; Robbie McVeigh. Belfast 2002, pp. 153–164; Moore: *Anti-Semitism*.

¹⁴ Good examples of this approach are Rivlin: *Shalom Ireland*; Benson, Asher: *Jewish Dublin. Portraits of Life by the Liffey*. Dublin 2007.

¹⁵ E. g., Martin Simmons comments that Ireland was “a wonderful place, plenty of opportunity for someone prepared to work hard and take limited risks” and that the occasional negative sentiment he experienced was more down to “ignorance” than antisemitism; Martin Simmons to Natalie Wynn. Email from 24.02.2011.

Although polite antisemitism and glass ceilings barely register on the official radar,¹⁶ these were significant enough to lead to the establishment of separate Jewish golf and motoring clubs and, possibly, to persuade many Jewish medical professionals to emigrate in search of less circumscribed employment opportunities.¹⁷ On the popular level, social tensions are visible in accounts of the interactions of Jewish pedlars and moneylenders with their Christian customers¹⁸ and in descriptions of growing familiarity and burgeoning friendships between Jews and their Irish neighbours.¹⁹ The overwhelmingly pejorative use of the epithets “Jewman”, unique to Ireland, and “Jewtown” belie claims that these are merely linguistic quirks.²⁰ The pro-Jewish pronouncements of icons of Irish nationalism such as Daniel O’Connell and Michael Davitt conceal a degree of personal ambivalence.²¹ They do, however, provide a convenient counterpoint to the virulent antisemitism of another seminal nationalist,

¹⁶ Ó Gráda, one of the few commentators to bother discussing polite antisemitism to any degree, nevertheless discounts it as a largely insignificant aspect of a generally “mild” Irish antisemitism; Ó Gráda, Cormac: *Jewish Ireland in the Age of Joyce. A Socioeconomic History*. Princeton & Oxford 2006, pp. 181, 187.

¹⁷ For other observations on glass ceilings and polite antisemitism, see Solomons, Bethel: *One Doctor in His Time*. London 1956, pp. 160–161; Waterman, Stanley: *Dublin Jewry. Thirty-Five Years in Retrospect*. In: *Jewish Quarterly*, unreferenced proof, pages unnumbered. In: Asher Benson Papers: National Library of Ireland, Acc 5734 (unsorted); Tye, Larry: *Home Lands. Portraits of the New Jewish Diaspora*. New York 2001, p. 208. On the events that motivated Nathan Lepler to establish his “non-denominational” motoring club in 1921, c. f. Benson: *Portraits*, p. 19.

¹⁸ See, for example, Wigoder, Myer Joel: *My Life*. Transl. by Louis E Wigoder. Ed. by Samuel Abel. Leeds 1935, p. 48. This is also a key (though exaggerated) theme of a controversial pulp novel which caused considerable embarrassment to the Jewish community on its publication; c. f. Edelstein, Joseph: *The Moneylender*. Dublin 1908.

¹⁹ C. f. Bloom, Jessie S.: *The Old Days in Dublin. Some Girlhood Recollections of the '90s*. In: *Commentary*. (July 1952) p. 30. Also, compare Berman, Hannah: *Berman Story*. Unpublished typescript, pp. 9–10. In: *American Jewish Archives*, with Berman, Hannah: *Recollections*. Unpublished typescript, p. 3. In: *American Jewish Archives*.

²⁰ For example, Ó Gráda notes that the “Irishism ‘Jewman’” was often used pejoratively and insultingly up to the 1950s, particularly as a synonym for moneylenders, even in the Dáil (Irish parliament); Ó Gráda: *Jewish Ireland*, pp. 180–181; 258 (n. 12). My own personal experience in 1990s Dublin shows that these associations have, in actual fact, lingered on well beyond the 1950s, among the older generation at least.

²¹ Regarding O’Connell, see Wheatcroft, Geoffrey: *Are we too green about Ireland?* In: *The Jewish Chronicle*, 17.03.2000, p. 33. Meanwhile, there does not appear to be any concrete evidence for widely held claims that Davitt’s distinction between economic (which he argued was acceptable) and racial (unacceptable) antisemitism, and his negative association of Jews with the Boer War, were finally overturned by events in Limerick; c. f., e. g., O’Riordan, Manus: *The Sinn Féin Tradition of Anti-Semitism. From Arthur Griffith to Sean South*. In: O’Riordan, Manus; Pat Feeley: *The Rise and Fall of Irish Anti-Semitism*. Dublin 1984, p. 19.

Arthur Griffith. Griffith played a key role in forging the cultural nationalism which constituted a hugely influential force in Irish society and politics until very recently, and the legacy of which is still being felt.²² This “spin” has allowed discordant interludes such as the Limerick Boycott²³ or the discriminatory official immigration policies of the 1930s and ’40s²⁴ to be neatly written off as isolated aberrations in an otherwise unblemished record,²⁵ then relativised by way of extreme and emotive comparisons to tsarist Russia and Nazi Germany or, less dramatically, to Irish sectarian politics.²⁶ The majority prefer instead to focus on more upbeat themes such as the putative common traits of the Jews and the Irish,²⁷ the supposedly disproportionate Jewish contribution to Irish culture, public life and politics,²⁸ or expressions of pride regarding their two-fold identity as Irish Jews.²⁹ This stance has been echoed by Keogh and Cormac

²² Griffith’s antisemitism is common knowledge; for examples of his writings, c. f., e. g., Keogh: *Jews*, pp. 22–23, 56. On the pivotal influence of Griffith (and his antisemitism) on nationalist politics, and the significance of his ideology in the foundation of the Irish state and its official definitions of ‘Irishness’, c. f. O’Riordan, *Manus: Anti-Semitism in Irish Politics*. In: O’Riordan, *Manus*; Pat Feeley: *The Rise and Fall of Irish Anti-Semitism*. Dublin 1984, p. 13; O’Riordan: *Sinn Féin*, pp. 18–21; Lentin; McVeigh: *After Optimism*, pp. 115–124; Lentin: *Who ever*, pp. 153–164; Moore: *Anti-Semitism*; Keogh: *Jews*, chapters 4–6. O’Riordan and Keogh, however, take a somewhat more optimistic stance overall regarding the legacy of cultural nationalism than Lentin and Moore.

²³ The boycott of Jewish pedlars and moneylenders in Limerick was initiated by the demagogic preaching of the Redemptorist Fr. John Creagh in January 1904, and caused considerable social and economic hardship to the city’s poorest Jewish families. While the story has often been rehashed, most versions are highly exaggerated, and there is a marked absence of any meaningful, contextual analysis. The most extensive yet, nevertheless, largely uncritical, treatment to date is Keogh, Dermot; Andrew McCarthy: *Limerick Boycott 1904. Anti-Semitism in Ireland*. Cork 2005.

²⁴ This is set out at length in Keogh: *Jews*, chapters 4–6.

²⁵ Typical of this is Fallon, Brian: *An Age of Innocence. Irish Culture 1930–1960*. Dublin 1999, pp. 223, 282 (n. 25).

²⁶ A good example of this approach is Ó Gráda: *Jewish Ireland*, pp. 178–203, as we will see below.

²⁷ C. f., e. g., Bernstein: *Portrait*; Tye: *Home Lands*, pp. 199–200.

²⁸ C. f., esp., Benson: *Portraits*; also Rivlin: *Shalom Ireland*; Keogh: *Jews*, pp. 238–241; Fallon: *Age of Innocence*, pp. 222–223, although Fallon does qualify his encomium to Irish-Jewish cultural achievement through a presumably unintentionally unflattering comparison to the brilliance of central European Jewry.

²⁹ This is particularly emphasised by luminaries such as Gerald Goldberg, Bethel Solomons, Robert Briscoe and Chaim Herzog; c. f., e. g., Goldberg, Gerald: *A Jew, an Irishman and Cork man*. Unpublished typescript, 1983. In: Carol Weinstock papers: National Library of Ireland, Acc 5734 (unsorted); Solomons, Bethel: *One Doctor*, p. 155.

Ó Gráda, who have produced what are unanimously considered to be the most significant and definitive studies of Irish Jewry to date.³⁰

Despite suggestions that anti-Jewish prejudice and feelings of Jewish “otherness” are disappearing apace with the growing acculturation and integration of Jews into Irish society,³¹ the weight of evidence indicates that these negative sentiments have certainly not disappeared. Surveys conducted by Mícheál Mac Gréil showed that, although Irish attitudes towards Jews had improved in many respects between the early 1970s and late 1980s, they nevertheless remained something of an anachronism.³² In 1986, the absence of adequate anti-incitement legislation had prevented the Irish authorities from taking decisive action against the use of Dublin as a base for the production and distribution of antisemitic and racist literature by a European fascist organisation.³³ In 1993, *The Jewish Voice* ran an article by Joe Briscoe of the Jewish Representative Council of Ireland asking Jews to keep their criticisms of negative media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict “in the Family” rather than airing them publicly.³⁴ A 1994 poll by the same magazine found that, although only ten per cent of respondents had been personally affected by antisemitism within the previous five years, 24% believed that antisemitism was on the rise in Ireland, while 48% felt that the Irish police and legislature were not sufficiently vigilant in dealing with it.³⁵ Finally, Lentin documents a number of contemporary instances of antisemitism, and argues that the disproportionate local interest (both positive and negative) in Ireland’s Jewish community and Middle Eastern affairs is a measure of the endemic antisemitism which she

³⁰ After a lengthy account of antisemitism in Irish political life in the first half of the twentieth century, Keogh ends by chronicling some positive developments in Irish society, and the Jewish contribution thereto, in the latter half of the century, leaving his conclusions open. Meanwhile, Ó Gráda, despite presenting somewhat nuanced evidence, insists that Irish antisemitism was “mild” and largely insignificant. Keogh: *Jews*, pp.224–243; Ó Gráda: *Jewish Ireland*, pp.178–203.

³¹ Hezser, Catherine: “Are You Protestant Jews or Roman Catholic Jews?” *Literary Representations of Being Jewish in Ireland*. In: *Modern Judaism* (May 2005) vol. 25, no. 2, pp.159–188; O’Riordan: *Sinn Féin*, pp.18–24.

³² Mac Gréil, Mícheál: *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ireland*. Kildare 1977, pp.333–347; Mac Gréil, Mícheál: *Prejudice in Ireland Revisited*. Kildare 1996, pp.210–218.

³³ Keena, Colm: *The Rising Fascist Tide*. In: *In Dublin*, 24.07.1986, pp.24–27. The legislation was only updated in 1989, at which point Jews still constituted one of the main minorities in the Irish state, bearing out Lentin’s observation that “Jews, and antisemitism, are simply irrelevant” to the Irish public consciousness; Lentin: *Who ever*, p.163.

³⁴ Briscoe, Joe: *Media in Focus*. In: *The Jewish Voice*. (Autumn 1993) vol. 1, no. 4, p.4.

³⁵ Cited in Lentin: *Who ever*, p.164.

believes to exist in Irish society, and which she blames for the increasing Jewish exodus of recent years.³⁶ Thus, it should come as no surprise to discover that, as recently as ten years ago, younger Irish Jews retained a sense of ‘otherness’ and, like their older counterparts, were aware of behaving differently inside and outside the home.³⁷

If feelings of ambivalence and marginalisation are visible among Irish Jews, they are clearer still among the children of interfaith marriages. June Levine recalls that, while growing up, she was made to feel more conscious of her difference among her Catholic rather than her Jewish peers, and only discovered a sense of belonging on joining the women’s movement in her forties. She remarks, “With a name like Levine I’ve always been conscious that people don’t think of you as a Dubliner, they think of you as a Jew. Even if generations before you have lived in Dublin ...”³⁸ Like Levine, Katrina Goldstone, brought up a Roman Catholic, comments that she has never felt more “Jewified” because of her surname than when she has lived in Ireland.³⁹

As well as being unconsciously influenced by this ostrich-like communal mentality, Keogh and Ó Gráda are impeded by a lack of expertise in Jewish Studies. Their unfamiliarity with scholarly discourses on antisemitism is evident from their failure to define the topic under consideration, and their consequent adoption of the vaguest and most fluid popular understandings of the term, which vacillate between religious, economic and racial nuances. Neither sufficiently interrogates his evidence, or satisfactorily addresses the ambivalence of his sources, creating narratives that merely mirror the ambiguity of their predecessors. Both follow the general lead of preventing the uncomfortable issues from dominating their analyses. Ó Gráda’s discussion of Irish antisemitism is particularly problematic; in emphasising the atmosphere of parochialness and sectarianism endemic to Irish society in the early twentieth century, he unintentionally downplays the significance of anti-Jewish preju-

³⁶ Lentin: *Who ever*, pp. 153–164; Lentin; McVeigh: *After Optimism*, pp. 115–125.

³⁷ Lentin, Ronit: Ireland’s other diaspora: Jewish-Irish within/Irish-Jewish without. In: *Golem. European-Jewish Magazine*. (2002), no. 3. <http://www.hagalil.com/golem/diaspora/ireland-e.htm> (downloaded 08.03.2006); Lentin: *Who ever*, p. 158; Lentin; McVeigh: *After Optimism*, pp. 122–123.

³⁸ Johnston, Máirín: *Dublin Belles. Conversations with Dublin Women*. Dublin 1988, pp. 104–111.

³⁹ Goldstone, Katrina: Christianity, conversion and the tricky business of names. Images of Jews and Blacks in the nationalist Irish Catholic discourse. In: Lentin; McVeigh: *Racism and Anti-Racism*, p. 172.

dice in its own right from the very start. Ó Gráda fails to recognise the type of negative experiences that he outlines as a phenomenon that passes for antisemitism elsewhere, further relativising his subject by reference to the Holocaust. He insists that majority claims that Irish prejudice was “mild” should not be dismissed out of hand, without considering the other side of the coin raised by his own ambivalent sources. Finally, Ó Gráda’s assertion that Irish antisemitism climaxed in Limerick in 1904 had already been proven by Keogh to be untenable.⁴⁰ The inadequacy of such approaches underlines the need for an up-to-date, comprehensive, objective and informed survey into the significance of all forms of anti-Jewish prejudice in their *Irish* setting, in order to bring together and analyse all threads of the narrative.

Jews and Irish Nationalism

Although the effects of the underlying confusion and complexity of the sources are visible throughout the existing Irish-Jewish historiography, nowhere are they more pointed than in considerations of the Jewish relationship with Irish nationalism. Here, it should clearly be stated at the outset, though it rarely is, that the majority of the literature on this topic applies to southern Ireland. North of the border, sectarian and political conflict have so deeply marked the experience of Jews since the early twentieth century that Ireland’s second-largest Jewish community, Belfast, deserves consideration in its own right and context.⁴¹ Most accounts suggest that Irish Jews were sympathetic towards the nationalist cause, and that many were actively or passively involved on an individual level,⁴² on the basis of the much-vaunted activities of Robert Briscoe, Michael Noyk and Estella Solomons. Briscoe rose to the higher echelons of the IRA during the Irish struggle for independence, and remained a lifelong friend and colleague of Éamon de Valera, one of the most influential political and cultural ideologues of post-colonial Ireland. Elected to the Irish parliament

⁴⁰ Ó Gráda: *Jewish Ireland*, pp. 178–203; c. f. Keogh: *Jews*, chapters 3–6.

⁴¹ Wynn: *Received Wisdom*. The difference in political atmosphere north of the Irish border is well demonstrated in McIlveen, Pamela: “Indifferent to both Boyne and Rome”. The experience of Belfast’s Jewish community in the “Troubles” of 1920–1922. Paper presented at Jews on the “Celtic Fringe” conference. Belfast, September 2011. Proceedings forthcoming.

⁴² Typical are Tye: *Home Lands*, pp. 193–204; Rivlin: *Shalom Ireland*, pp. 191–196; O’Dwyer, Thomas: *Erin go bracha*. In: *The Jerusalem Post*, 17.03.1992.

in 1927, Briscoe also served two terms as lord mayor of Dublin, in 1956 and 1961.⁴³ Noyk, a close associate of leading Republicans Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith, acted as a legal representative to the nationalist Sinn Féin party during the Irish War of Independence (1918–1921) and was buried in the Jewish cemetery with full military honours in 1966.⁴⁴ Solomons, who hailed from one of the longest established Jewish families in Dublin, was a celebrated artist who served in the women’s auxiliary movement Cumann na mBan. Solomons sheltered IRA fugitives in her studio during the War of Independence, and concealed weapons under the pretence of gardening.⁴⁵ Isaac Herzog, chief rabbi of the Irish Free State from 1919 until his appointment as chief rabbi of Palestine in 1937, is also widely believed to have been a Republican sympathiser and a close friend and confidante of De Valera.⁴⁶

Following on from flimsy and rather debateable evidence, which draws on only a tiny fraction of the material concerning this period, Keogh suggests that the Jewish involvement in radical Irish nationalism may have been more extensive than hitherto realised, flagging it as an area meriting further research.⁴⁷ However, his reliability in this respect is somewhat compromised by his questionable interpretation of the sources. For example, he passes the bizarre pronouncement that David Marcus’s lightweight and blatantly apologetic novel, *A Land Not Theirs* (London 1987), constitutes a realistic portrayal of the Cork Jewish experience during the War of Independence.⁴⁸ Keogh’s judgement is

⁴³ Briscoe, Robert, with Alden Hatch: *For the Life of Me*. London 1959; Keogh: *Jews*, chapters 4–6; Tye: *Home Lands*, pp. 193–204; Benson: *Portraits*, p. 24. For a more nuanced analysis of Briscoe’s career, see Moore: *Anti-Semitism*, chapters 1, 5.

⁴⁴ For thumbnail sketches of Noyk’s life and career, c.f. Keogh: *Jews*, pp. 72–73; Benson: *Portraits*, p. 27. For Noyk’s own account of his Republican activities, see Noyk, Michael: *Statement Regarding 1910–1921 Period*. Undated typescript produced by Military History Bureau, Dublin. National Library of Ireland, MS 18,975.

⁴⁵ The most significant (brief) accounts of Solomons’ Republican involvement can be found in Solomons, Estella: *Portraits of Patriots. With a Biographical Sketch of the Artist* by Hilary Pyle. Dublin 1966, pp. 12–14, 22–23; Solomons: *One Doctor*, pp. 203–204; see also Benson: *Portraits*, p. 14.

⁴⁶ Keogh: *Jews*, pp. 76–77; Herzog, Chaim: *Living History. A Memoir*. London 1996, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Keogh: *Jews*, pp. 54–83.

⁴⁸ Keogh: *Jews*, pp. 71–72. This novel is lambasted by Larry Elyan, born in Cork in 1902, as “bullshit”, “untrue ... and rubbish”. Elyan further remarks that “anyone who knew the Cork that he [Marcus] is talking about [knew that] it has absolutely no relation to the people who live there.” Although Elyan’s own reliability is questionable, given an obvious volatility and a distinct bitterness at having been criticised for having given the novel a favourable review, his comments are a forceful reminder of its decidedly fictional nature. C. f. Weinstock, Carol: *Interview with Larry Elyan*, July 1987. National Library of Ireland, Acc 5734 (unsorted).

particularly doubtful, however, when it turns to Herzog and De Valera, whose putative friendship constitutes one significant plank of his survey of the Irish diplomatic response to the Jewish refugee problem of 1933 to 1945.⁴⁹ Keogh's assumptions appear to be based primarily on the memoirs of Herzog's son Chaim, which have a somewhat apocryphal feel, and are infused with the sort of confusion and denial that are highlighted above.⁵⁰ On the authority of one oral source, Keogh relates that Isaac Herzog sheltered De Valera while the latter was on the run during the Irish Civil War (1922–1923), an anecdote which, tellingly, does not feature in Chaim Herzog's memoirs.⁵¹ Further anecdotal evidence leads him to claim that this presumed relationship was reflected in consultations regarding the wording of the Irish Constitution of 1937, which explicitly enshrines the legal position of Ireland's Jewish community. Yet, as Keogh himself observes, "Herzog's name is surprisingly absent from a comprehensive list of those [religious leaders] consulted [regarding the Constitution] in the de Valera papers".⁵² Finally, he makes no reference to the sort of personal correspondence that might be expected to have taken place between close and longstanding friends.⁵³ Taken in sum, this does not point to a close personal friendship but, rather, a warm, longstanding and mutually respectful – but primarily professional – relationship, governed to a large degree by respective political interests. This is, perhaps, further underlined by Chaim Herzog's somewhat paradoxical reflection that, "My father was absolutely fearless. When asked which side he was on, he would reply: 'Neither – Jewish.'" ⁵⁴

The association between De Valera and Briscoe is, however, perhaps the most significant element in the narrative of putative Irish-Jewish nationalism. Here, the tone is all-too-predictably set by Briscoe's autobiography, which barely alludes to the uncomfortable aspects of his career and exploits. The casual antisemitism endemic to Irish political life at the time, which Briscoe experienced personally on an ongoing basis over the years, barely figures in such as-

⁴⁹ Keogh: *Jews*, chapters 4–6.

⁵⁰ See Herzog: *Living History*, pp. 3–18.

⁵¹ Keogh: *Jews*, pp. 76–77.

⁵² Keogh: *Jews*, p. 110.

⁵³ The other bases for Keogh's assumptions are, instead, a series of telegrams exchanged between 1942 and 1944, in which Herzog requests De Valera's personal intervention on behalf of refugees threatened with deportation to an extermination camp, a meeting during De Valera's state visit to Israel in 1950 and two letters to De Valera from other members of the Herzog family. C. f. Keogh: *Jews*, pp. 174–192, 229, 230–232.

⁵⁴ Cited in Rothenberg, Ruth: *My Mother*. In: *The Jewish Chronicle*, 29.05.1992, p. 40.

sessments.⁵⁵ The resounding failure of his own party, most notably De Valera, to speak out on behalf of their colleague and friend when insulting comments were made is, likewise, deemed virtually irrelevant.⁵⁶ Briscoe's relative absence from the Irish nationalist pantheon and narrative is merely noted on occasion, but rarely interrogated.⁵⁷ Celebrations of his first appointment as lord mayor of Dublin disregard the antagonisms that accompanied his election,⁵⁸ and the official play on his Jewish background as a means of airbrushing Ireland's international reputation as a hotbed of sectarian prejudice.⁵⁹

Likewise, assessments of De Valera's attitude towards Irish Jewry, most notably Keogh's, concentrate on the "feelgood" factor. Keogh completely neglects to recognise and address the roots, expressions and influence of anti-Jewish prejudice in the context of Irish Catholic extremism, and its effects on the Irish political arena.⁶⁰ Emphasised, therefore, are De Valera's links with Briscoe and Herzog, as opposed to his friendship with the notorious antisemitic publicist Father Edward Cahill.⁶¹ De Valera's Constitutional nod to the community is, likewise, a somewhat more pleasant matter to dwell upon than his appoint-

⁵⁵ Robert Briscoe insists that Jews suffer "far less [prejudice in Ireland] even than in the United States of America"; Briscoe: *For the Life of Me*, pp. 258–259. However, for a shrewd appraisal of the political climate that Briscoe operated in, see Moore: *Anti-Semitism*, chapter 5; for examples of some individual recorded incidents of antisemitism experienced by Briscoe, c. f. pp. 6–7, 125, 166–167.

⁵⁶ Most notorious in this respect is the pro-Nazi rant by the radical Catholic representative Oliver Flanagan, in 1943. Although this occurred in the Dáil at the height of World War Two, it passed unremarked and unchallenged, and Flanagan did not apologise for many years. Flanagan declared, "There is one thing that Germany did and that was to rout the Jews out of their country. Until we rout the Jews out of this country it does not matter a hair's breadth what orders you make. Where the bees are there is the honey and where the Jews are there is the money." See Lentin: *Who ever*, p. 167; Lentin; McVeigh: *After Optimism*, p. 121; O'Riordan: *Sinn Féin*, p. 22; Keogh: *Jews*, pp. 172–173.

⁵⁷ Moore: *Anti-Semitism*, p. 7, citing Shillman, who makes the same observation regarding Noyk.

⁵⁸ Moore: *Anti-Semitism*, pp. 6–7.

⁵⁹ Briscoe's PR efforts in America on behalf of Ireland, which began with his first term as lord mayor, are set out in Peacock, Lukas: "Breaking down barriers": An insight into the political career of Robert Briscoe. M.A.: University College Dublin 2010, chapter 3; see also Tye: *Home Lands*, p. 204.

⁶⁰ Keogh: *Jews*, pp. 92–97, 105–110, 146–152; compare with Moore: *Anti-Semitism*.

⁶¹ Keogh merely glosses over this doubtful association, claiming that De Valera's Fianna Fáil party ignored Cahill's antisemitism in favour of its purported liberal democratic philosophy. He fails to consider, on the other hand, the obvious fact that Briscoe's background appears to have been just as irrelevant to the philosophical outlook of De Valera and Fianna Fáil. Keogh: *Jews*, p. 95.

ment of Charles Bewley, an open fan of National Socialism with a poor diplomatic record, as Irish consul to Germany in the lead-up to World War Two. This merits a mere footnote, while Bewley's inauspicious term in Berlin receives a detailed exposé.⁶² Keogh, furthermore, unconsciously rationalises alike De Valera's failure to appoint Briscoe to a senior cabinet post and his infamous official condolences to the German consul on Hitler's suicide, as features of a well-meaning but overly cautious, highly conservative and morally rigid and blinkered diplomacy.⁶³ Thus, Keogh's advances, in terms of raising many important, uncomfortable and previously neglected aspects of the Irish-Jewish relationship, are seriously undermined by a repeatedly unsatisfactory analysis.

Ó Gráda's findings that the Jews of Dublin and Belfast were initially pro-British out of gratitude for the tolerance granted them under British rule,⁶⁴ is borne out by the sources. The majority of early memoirs either openly profess loyalty and/or gratitude to the British Crown or show their disinterest in Republican politics through a resounding silence on the topic.⁶⁵ Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee in 1897 was commemorated in synagogues in Dublin, Belfast and Cork, while the royal visits to Dublin in 1900 and 1911, by Victoria and George V respectively, were marked by illuminated addresses and professions of loyalty and affection.⁶⁶ The community also actively supported the war effort during 1914 to 1918,⁶⁷ and letters of condolence or congratulation were

⁶² Keogh: *Jews*, pp. 101–103, 132–138; compare with p. 268 (n. 66).

⁶³ Keogh: *Jews*, pp. 89, 199–200.

⁶⁴ Ó Gráda: *Jewish Ireland*, pp. 188–189.

⁶⁵ Wigoder, for example, openly professes his loyalty to the British monarchy, and his only reference to the 1916 Rebellion concerns the difficulty it created in obtaining matzah during Passover; Wigoder: *My Life*, pp. 73, 91, 99. His grandson Geoffrey writes, "Briscoe was indeed the exception. My grandfather was far more typical." Wigoder: *Dublin's Fair City*, p. 15. Bloom, additionally, paints a detailed picture of the pitfalls involved for younger Jews in navigating Dublin's sectarian divides at this time; Bloom: *Memoir*, pp. 103–111, 143–180.

⁶⁶ Ó Gráda: *Jewish Ireland*, p. 189. See also Minutes of the Dublin Hebrew Congregation, 09.04.1911, and Annual Report of the Dublin Hebrew Congregation, 1911 regarding arrangements for the visit of George V; the latter records that the synagogue wardens "had the honour" of presenting their illuminated address in person to the king. For personal accounts of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee and her visit to Dublin, see Bloom: *Memoir*, pp. 98–106.

⁶⁷ Duffy: *Dublin's Jewish Community*, p. 124 (n. 41); Shillman, Bernard: *The Dublin Jewish Board of Guardians. A Short Historical Survey. Part I – 1889 to 1924*. Dublin Jewish Board of Guardians Diamond Jubilee brochure (1952), pages unnumbered. The certificate awarded by the Red Cross in recognition of Rosa Solomons' war work can be found in the Estella Solomons papers, Trinity College Dublin: MS 4632/509e.

sent to the local ruling powers in Dublin Castle as circumstances arose.⁶⁸ The Belfast community appears to have been similarly keen to demonstrate its loyalty to the monarchy before Irish partition.⁶⁹ Subsequently, as Ulster's sectarian politics became increasingly bellicose and violent, the community made a determined effort to be seen to avoid taking sides, a position that is favoured up to the present day.⁷⁰

However, Ó Gráda takes his observation that Irish Jews gradually aligned with the nationalist mainstream a little too far, by implying that they became active supporters of the Republican cause on the basis of virtually no evidence.⁷¹ On the strength of Larry Elyan's assertions, Ó Gráda suggests that the Jews of Cork (known colloquially as "the Rebel County") had nationalist leanings from early on, even though this notion is rejected by Elyan's contemporary Esther Hesselberg in an interview with the same researcher.⁷² Ó Gráda cites, as a further example of growing Jewish support for Irish nationalism, the Judaeo-Irish Home Rule Association in 1908 which, as he recognises, was extremely short-lived, and unrepresentative of the communal majority.⁷³ He is also rather optimistic in viewing Jewish electoral support for Briscoe in this light, as there is a strong likelihood that this was more a measure of Briscoe's Jewishness than a growing Jewish identification with the politics he represented.⁷⁴ These assumptions, moreover, contradict Ó Gráda's overall findings that

⁶⁸ For example, letters of condolence were sent to the Home Secretary on the death of Edward VII in 1910 and to the chief public health officer, Sir Charles Cameron, on the occasion of a personal bereavement, while a letter of congratulation was sent to Sir Matthew Nathan on his appointment as Under-secretary for Ireland. C.f. Minutes of the Dublin Hebrew Congregation, 29.05.1910; 22.02.1913; 11.10.1914, respectively.

⁶⁹ Ó Gráda: *Jewish Ireland*, p. 189.

⁷⁰ I am grateful to Pamela McIlveen for emphasising this to me; c.f. also McIlveen: *Indifferent to Boyne and Rome*.

⁷¹ Ó Gráda: *Jewish Ireland*, pp. 188–191.

⁷² Elyan commented that his "first seeds of [Irish] nationalism" were sown through the songs he learned in the Jewish school in Cork. However, Ó Gráda does not consider the significance of the likelihood that Elyan's teachers would have been members of the Catholic nationalist majority. Ó Gráda: *Jewish Ireland*, pp. 188–189. On the other hand, Esther Hesselberg, born in 1896, recalled little interest among Cork Jews for the nationalist cause during the so-called "Troubles"; Weinstock, Carol: *Interview with Esther Hesselberg*, 01.07.1985. National Library of Ireland, Acc 5734 (unsorted).

⁷³ Ó Gráda: *Jewish Ireland*, p. 190.

⁷⁴ Ó Gráda: *Jewish Ireland*, p. 190; compare to Tye's characterisation of Briscoe as the communal "go-to-guy" or, as Benson more tactfully puts it, a "bridge" between Irish Jews and their non-Jewish compatriots; Tye: *Home Lands*, p. 203; Benson: *Portraits*, p. 24. My own recollection, from growing up in Dublin in the politically turbulent 1980s, is that members of the Jewish

Irish Jews shared little common social or cultural ground with the Catholic majority in this period.

While communal attitudes did indeed change over time, as indicated by the subsequent eagerness to prove “nationalist” credentials, it is simply untenable to regard this as any significant adoption of the nationalist cause. Instead, it is better understood as a reflection of the changing political narrative of the host society to which Jews were gradually acculturating. Allegations of a general and active support for Irish nationalism are, in fact, almost always vague and generic.⁷⁵ Concrete information is thin on the ground, and prone to exaggeration and embellishment.⁷⁶ I have uncovered only three definite stories of ordinary members of the Jewish community assisting the IRA; two are somewhat far-fetched,⁷⁷ while the way in which the third has been misrepresented merits closer consideration. This relates that a underground Republican newspaper was produced in secret in Leon Spiro’s printing works by his foreman, who was reputed to have been the well-known IRA volunteer Oscar Traynor. Whether or not Spiro was aware of this is unclear and, if so, whether he approved or, rather, considered it wise to ignore what was going on.⁷⁸ Jessie Spiro Bloom, however, sets the record straight in an unpublished memoir. She recalls that

community chose to vote for Jewish politicians because they believed it was important to have Jews in parliament, regardless of political affiliation. Some, therefore, voted for Robert Briscoe’s son Ben at the time, even though they were completely opposed to the policies and ethos of the Fianna Fáil party to which he, like his father, belonged.

⁷⁵ For example, without citing any names, dates or places, Rivlin claims that Jewish pedlars carried weapons for the IRA and Jews voluntarily sheltered fugitives; Rivlin: *Shalom Ireland*, pp. 191–192. Meanwhile, Chaim Herzog and Melisande Zlotover assert that the community as a whole were actively sympathetic and supportive; cited in Keogh: *Jews*, pp. 70, 77.

⁷⁶ For the extension of Estella Solomons’ Republican leanings to her entire family, including her pro-British parents, c. f. Fallon, Brian: *Portrait of a lady*. In: *The Irish Times*, 09.11.1999, p. 11; compare to Solomons: *One Doctor*, p. 18; Duffy: *Dublin’s Jewish Community*, p. 124.

⁷⁷ The more extravagant of these tales claims that Rev. Gudansky, the minister of the Adelaide Road synagogue, assisted a disguised Michael Collins to evade police cordons in 1920, an anecdote handed down to Sybil Fishman by her father. She had apparently doubted its veracity for many years until unnamed circumstances had caused her to change her mind; Frazer, Jenny: *Diary*. In: *The Jewish Chronicle*, 06.12.1996. The second anecdote tells of a lady from Longwood Avenue who reportedly sheltered an IRA man overnight. Some versions, clearly embellished, claim that the fugitive was allowed to get into the lady’s bed in order to pose as her husband. Weinstock, Carol: *Interview with Chaim Herzog*, July 1987. National Library of Ireland, Acc 5734 (unsorted); compare to Weinstock: *Interview with Hesselberg*. Although Herzog does question the authenticity of the story he goes on to state, on the other hand, that “nobody ever denied it”.

⁷⁸ Ó Gráda: *Jewish Ireland*, p. 261 (n. 60); Rivlin: *Shalom Ireland*, pp. 191–192; Benson: *Portraits*, p. 27.

her father's foreman (unnamed) commandeered his printing press to print IRA orders during the Civil War, while he was forcibly detained in his office. Leon Spiro went unharmed as he and his foreman were on the best of terms, but was unhappy about the misuse of his property.⁷⁹

Conclusions

In sum, like all other areas of the Irish-Jewish communal narrative, the Jewish relationship with Irish nationalism has hitherto been presented in a simplistic and apologetic manner, which has received little or no critical scrutiny. This article has argued that this is a symptom of an overall reluctance to admit to, and deal objectively with, the existence of anti-Jewish sentiment in Ireland. This evasion barely conceals a jarring and complex subtext of chronically “hyphenated” identity,⁸⁰ and social and cultural marginalisation and marginality. Especially ambivalent are the reflections of members of the subgroups located on the periphery of the mainstream “Irish-Jewish” narrative, such as the children of interfaith marriages and the Jews of Ulster. The true extent of the uncomfortable realities which they, in particular, represent, and of the effect of these unacknowledged issues on the wider community, have yet to be fully investigated as part of the extensive, objective and contextual reflection and re-evaluation that is so desperately needed.

⁷⁹ Bloom: *Memoir*, p. 180. I am grateful to David Lenten for providing me with his tabulated version of the 1911 census data, which confirms the forename of Bloom's father and thus indicates that she is referring to the same events as Ó Gráda, Rivlin and Benson. It is also significant that Ó Gráda and Rivlin name Spiro as Abraham rather than Leon.

⁸⁰ The term “hyphenation” is coined in the title of David Marcus's first memoir, and forms an underlying thread throughout the book and, indeed, his other “Jewish” writings; Marcus, David: *Oughtobiography. Leaves from the Diary of a Hyphenated Jew*. Dublin 2001; see also Marcus, David: *Buried Memories*. Cork 2004; Marcus, David: *To Next Year in Jerusalem*. London 1954; Marcus: *A Land Not Theirs*.