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Towards a Cosmopolitan Account of Jewish Socialism

Class, Identity and Immigration in Edwardian London

Ben Gidley

This article reflects on the historiography of Jewish socialism in Britain by arguing that we cannot understand it without attending fully to both its local context and its transnational and specifically Jewish context. Although the article focuses on Edwardian Britain, the argument speaks equally to other times and places, and indeed for other comparable non-Jewish diasporic radicalisms. In anchoring my argument in Edwardian Britain, I will try to show that the particularities of British socialist intellectual culture, as well as the wider social, cultural and political context in which socialism developed here then, gave a particular shape and form to the varieties of socialism which flourished among Jewish immigrants in London, Leeds, Manchester, Glasgow, Dublin and other cities — but also that the particular cultural traditions and transnational networks in the (mainly Yiddish-speaking) Ashkenazi Jewish world gave them a particular content.

The historiography of Jewish socialism in Britain

There is a rich historiography of immigrant socialism and of working class Jews in Britain. This includes an earlier Yiddish-language historiography,¹ as well as a body of work emerging after the turn in the 1970s to a ‘history from below perspective’, which foregrounded previously neglected dimensions of the migrant experience and in particular the dimension of class.² There is also an important body of socialist history that has touched on the experiences of Jewish activists.³ However, much of this literature attends only to one of the two primary contexts, the national or the Jewish.

On one side, we find two varieties of *methodological nationalism*.⁴ First, when radicals are encountered in Anglo-Jewish history, they are framed as immigrant radicals shaped primarily by the immigrant experience in the East End. Although from the 1970s, social historians have importantly shown the extent of class conflict within Jewish communities (and ways

in which working class Jews sometimes adapted to but often contested or refused the institutions and values of the communal leadership), even this radical literature places them with a narrative of settlement and integration. For example, it has often emphasised how unions and mutual aid organisations enabled immigrants to survive the harsh conditions of the ghetto and provide access to social mobility out of it, or how socialism helped channel the acculturation and secularisation of immigrant Jews.

Much of this literature assumes the marginality of Jewish radicals. Sharman Kadish, for example, working within Anglo-Jewish history, carefully retrieves the stories of some of the radical groups I explore here, but she sees them as peripheral to the Jewish community proper: she talks about 'marginal elements on the far left' and 'the presence of a small, unrepresentative, but vociferous radical element in the East End'.⁵ Similarly, Jonathan Hyman's generally very perceptive discussion of war resistance reproduces the marginality of one war-time radical group, the Foreign Jews Protection Committee, in saying that 'many of the member organisations were of extreme politics' who campaigned 'in a subversive way by disrupting Jewish recruiting meetings'.⁶ Meanwhile, of two other war-time radical groups, the Committee of Delegates and the Russian Anti-Conscription League, whose memberships were heavily Jewish, he writes 'the shared opposition to the war was greater than the hostility some [Russian exiles] harboured towards Jews'.⁷ reproducing the notion of these groups as utterly unrelated to Jewish cultural space.

Second, however, and surprisingly similarly, within socialist (and also anarchist) historiography, Jewish radicals tend to be seen as interesting oddities within the wider socialist or labour movement, or as a primitive groping towards a true class consciousness that would enable Jews to throw off their sectional Jewish interest and dissolve into the 'real', i.e. national, working class movement. Marxist historians have tended to ignore the Jewish contexts (Jewish cultural traditions, Yiddish political spaces) in which Jewish migrant activists were embedded. In official Communist Party histories, such as those by Noreen Branson or James Klugmann, ethnicity is simply not an issue, and the involvement of Jewish socialist activists in a Yiddish as well as English-language socialist scene is completely ignored.⁸

Walter Kendall, David Burke and John Slatter, among others, have persuasively argued that the presence of Eastern European émigrés in London had a major impact on the development of British Marxism.⁹ However, their accounts have similarly downplayed the extent to which these migrants had any connection to the Jewish world. Paradoxically, such historians have often taken at face value the radicals' profession of an internationalism that

disavows any possibility of ethnic belonging, while at the same time they have been keen to portray the radicalism that they cherish as indigenous to English soil and not transplanted from foreign lands. Ultimately, this socialist historiography reproduces the common sense sociology of assimilation that pervades Anglo-Jewish historiography, with specifically Jewish themes seen as essentially belonging to another place and another time, back there in the old country.

Against these two forms of methodological nationalism, we can also identify a sort of ‘methodological *ethnicism*’ which attends instead to what was specifically Jewish about Jewish radicalism and radical Jews.¹⁰ Historians such as Brossat and Klingsberg (1983), Norah Levin (1978) or Nathan Weinstock (2001), for example, have carefully reconstructed the transnational Jewish labour movements that circulated through a dense web of routes criss-crossing continental Yiddishland and the Atlantic world. But in this work, there is no sense of the relationship with local labour movements in the diaspora or of why Jewish radicalism might have been articulated differently in Whitechapel than in Warsaw, the Marais, the Lower East Side or Buenos Aires’ Villa Crespo. The local context, including different national traditions of socialism in different receiving countries, simply disappears in this sort of work. In the next sections of this article, I will propose an alternative framing of immigrant radicalism which attends equally to the Jewish diasporic and contemporary English context. I will illustrate this first with the example of anti-militarism and then with free love, but I believe the same framing would illuminate other examples from the immigrant Jewish radical repertoire of the time, and indeed other immigrant radicalisms in other sites and moments.

The worker has no homeland

There was excited gesticulatory talk in a strange language yesterday about Whitechapel, when the new law requiring the young Russians in this country either to return to their own country to fight or to join the British Army was discussed.

...In several little markets in Stepney and Whitechapel men left their stalls and barrows to gather in knots and talk with the ceaseless volubility of Petrograd revolutionary politics. In the dinner hour, when tailors, cabinet-makers, and slipper-workers came out of the factories, the little side streets of Whitechapel became discussion forums. If there had been any expectation that the new order would be received with enthusiasm, it would have been disappointed, for the bulk of the young Russian population of the East End is frankly and whole-heartedly undesirous

of accepting either of the two alternatives offered to it.

...They are very strong in their views, which are hostile to all governmental authority, and are extraordinarily clever and resourceful; and it is certain that every possible device of evasion will be brought into play.¹¹

War resistance during the Great War mobilised large numbers of Jewish migrant workers in East London. British-born Jews joined up voluntarily in disproportionate numbers ũ heeding the slogan displayed on a giant placard outside the offices of the *Jewish Chronicle* that ‘England has been all she could be to the Jews; the Jews will be all they can to England’.¹² However, migrant Jews signed up in low numbers; many actively resisted conscription.

Home Office files through this period contain several reports of the strength of anti-conscriptionism among the Russian Jews,¹³ and of work stoppages to attend anti-war meetings.¹⁴ The Yiddish-language anarchist *Arbayter Fraynd* (Worker’s Friend) group vigorously fought conscription. Milly Witkop, one of its key leaders, was imprisoned for anti-war activities. The *Arbayter Fraynd* newspaper and its social club at Jubilee Street were suppressed by the authorities. In April 1916, the anarchist Henry Sara was arrested as an army absentee, forced into the army, then imprisoned on the Isle of Wight for refusing discipline. New organisations formed to oppose the war: the East End Jewish Trade Union Emergency Committee in 1914, the Foreign Jews Protection Committee in 1916. Many were active in both East End anti-war campaigns and in national ones.¹⁵

This anti-war activism extended beyond socialist and anarchist activists. Sharman Kadish’s oral history interviews, conducted in the 1980s, led her to conclude that ‘The methods employed to evade service or gain exemption were manifold and inventive’.¹⁶ Louis Wallis (born in 1900 in Cracow and brought up in Stepney Green) recalled his friends making themselves ill, e.g. by eating a massive number of apples, to be listed as unfit for service. Jack Miller (born 1912) recalled stories of people eating toxic ingredients. Israel Renson (born in East London in 1906 and trained as a pharmacist) told her of two doctors, one Jewish (Dr Sammy Sacks) and one not (Dr Bishop) who generously certified young men as unfit—Dr Bishop actually being struck off for this. Others, such as Mr Renson’s older brother or the trade union militant Sam Elsbury, then living in Leeds, fled to Ireland. Elsbury purchased discharge papers from an Irish ex-soldier. He came to London and joined the Yiddish-speaking branch of the Union of Garment Workers as “John Dillon”, the Irish tailor with a Yorkshire accent.¹⁷

Two further anecdotes help us to start to think about this migrant anti-militarism. The well-known war poet Isaac Rosenberg, the son of Russian

migrants, joined up in October 1915. His religious family were distressed at his signing up, not least his father who had left Russia to avoid military service. Rosenberg later wrote from the trenches in a letter to a friend: 'write to my people for meà but don't say anything of my being away as my people are Tolstoyans and object to my being in khaki'¹⁸. Rosenberg's contemporary, the poet John Rodker, was also keen to join up, initially trying to join a Jewish Legion, as he describes in his 1932 memoirs:

A Foreign Legion was being enlisted and I liked the name which somehow kept it distinct from the British Army (it seemed exactly right for the foreigner I was) and I put my name down for it in a back room in Soho somewhere, surprised to see it all so very casual. But Kitchener did not want a Foreign Legion, so I was given a letter to the Fusiliers and they were full, and I didn't seem what they wanted, they had the pick in those days, and I was ashamed to have been turned down...and anyhow...all through my boyhood and adolescence I had been Socialist then Anarchist, and always anti-capitalist and so anti-militarist, and knew it would be and was, a bloody mess, and nothing but waste and despair could come of ità and I held off.¹⁹

These anecdotes illustrate the complexity of talking about anti-militarism and Jewish socialism in East London. Both Rosenberg and Rodker had been involved in the socialist and anarchist movements in the East End, yet both still attempted to sign up for military service despite their ambivalence.

Rodker's invocation of an anti-capitalist case against war points us to the most obvious sources of war resistance: the anarchist and socialist movements heavily active among the immigrant workers in East London. Within the socialist movement, the majority of the British Socialist Party followed its 'internationalist' wing (led by Hackney-based Zelda Kahan and Stepney-based Theodore Rothstein) in strong opposition to the war. As well as their work in the BSP, many of these East End Jewish activists were engaged in the Committee of Delegates of Russian Socialist Groups in London (CoDoRSGiL), which had public meetings in the East End, kept under the watchful eye of Special Branch. These groups worked closely with Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELF, later renamed the Workers Suffrage Federation and then Workers Socialist Federation), within which Jewish activists such as Minnie Lansbury were active.

Similarly, although some anarchists (such as Kropotkin) saw a fight against Prussian militarism as a just war, the majority of the movement, exemplified by Rudolf Rocker and the Worker's Friend group, were passionately involved

in anti-war activism. Alexander Schapiro, Rocker's close comrade and neighbour, wrote the official statement of the International Anarchist Bureau, signed by Emma Goldman and others, condemning Kropotkin's pro-war stance. The anarchist paper *Arbayter Fraynd* threw itself into criticism of the war effort. Younger generation members of the milieu, such as Nellie Ploschansky, also worked with the Freedom Group, based in Marsh House in Bloomsbury. From Home Office files containing reports by police spies, we know that Marsh House would host an anarchist anti-war conference in Easter 1916, at which Schapiro was one of the main speakers.²⁰ Reports of Home Office surveillance also show that Rose Witkop, Milly Witkop's sister and Guy Aldred's partner, was active among both Russian Jews and non-Jewish workers in building networks of resistance against conscription.²¹

The intellectual roots of socialist and anarchist anti-militarism are also well-known: the philosophy of internationalism that was a cornerstone in the First and Second Internationals; the insistence shared by Marxists and anarchists that the proletariat has no homeland, probably most eloquently expressed by Rosa Luxemburg:

What other fatherland is there for the great mass of working men and women? What other fatherland is there than the improvement of life, the improvement of morality, the improvement of the intellectual strength of the great mass which constitutes a people?²²

The anarchists and Marxists of the 1910s straightforwardly believed that British workers had more in common with Prussian workers than with the British ruling class. The anarchists published Yiddish translations of European internationalist and anti-militarist texts throughout the Edwardian period: the *Arbayter Fraynd* group published Augustin Hamon's 'Patriotism and Internationalism' in 1904, for example.

This kind of classical internationalist discourse pervaded the rhetoric of BSP, CoDoRSGiL, Freedom and Workers' Friend publications during the war. Just a couple of examples will suffice to illustrate this. In 1917, Pankhurst's *Worker's Dreadnought* published an article by the East London Russian Jewish Marxist John Lizerovitch:

We stand as exploited, not exploiters. Your capitalist class makes no distinction between robbing Jews and Gentiles. Jewish workers resident here, in common with those of British extraction, have no quarrel with the German people, neither of us have property to protect or interests to safeguard...²³

A resolution jointly adopted by CoDoRSGiL and the Executive of the Jewish Social Democratic Organisations in Great Britain in 1916 declared that:

The International Socialist proletarian movement, which is struggling against all war itself, against all the imperialist tendencies of the present capitalist regime and thereby against the foundations of that regime, is alone capable of fully disclosing the real significance and meaning of the plan of civilian compulsion, and of a completely consequent and thorough-going struggle against this danger.²⁴

Thus alongside the Jewish radicals engaged in war resistance, we can see non-Jewish activists alongside them: anarchist-communist Guy Aldred, for example, was arrested around the same time for not reporting for duty when called up and spent the next years in various camps and prisons.²⁵

War resistance from shtetl to ghetto

But does an understanding of the intellectual trajectory of these views within the socialist movement help us understand how these groups were able to mobilise so many East End Jewish migrant workers in resistance against war? Rosenberg's parents' 'Tolstoyan' views and memories of evading Russian conscription point us to another important source of anti-militarism among Jewish East Enders, which relate less to socialist tradition and more to the specificity of diasporic Jewish experience.

Rosenberg's father was one of many of the Jewish immigrants in the East End who had left Russia precisely to avoid the draft. In 1827, there had been an edict in Russia that each community had to provide a certain quota of soldiers to serve 25 years. Although 'cantonism', as the system was known, had been replaced with universal military service in 1874, there were strong folk memories of the '*kbapers*' or '*kbaperlekb*' ('snatchers' who kidnapped men and boys to fill the quotas, also known as 'lovchiki' in Russian – according to Yiddishist David Roskies, these words became the name of the wicked witch in children's stories and were the worst of insults among adults)²⁶ and of the divisions caused in communities. These memories were inscribed in folk songs, in the works of late nineteenth century popular folk-poets like Velvl Zbazher, Berl Broder and Elyokum Zunser who were the precursors of Yiddish modernism, and in the popular plays of authors like Abramovitch, known as Mendele.²⁷

I shall just give two snippets of Yiddish folk songs from this period,

originating in Russia but circulating in the song corpus of the diaspora, both of which I take from Roskies:

Beser tsu lernen kbumsh mit rashe
Eyde tsu esn di soldatske kashe.
 Better [even] to study Bible and Rashi
 Than [to eat] the soldiers' mush.²⁸

This lyric helps explain the sudden upsurge in young men ordained as rabbis by the small synagogues of the East End after conscription was introduced. Here is a second, which comments instead on how rabbis and communal leaders (*parneysim*) would collude with the Russian authorities in conscripting the children of the Jewish poor:

Undzere parneysim, undzere rabonim,
Hefn nokh optugebn zey [kleyne oyfelekh] far yevonim.
 Our bigshots, our rabbis
 Have given up our little children to be soldiers.²⁹

Roskies' rhyming translation reads:
 Our rabbis, our bigshots are in cahoots,
 teaching our kids to be recruits.

The word '*yevonim*' literally means Ionians or Greeks, a code word for Russian soldiers in Yiddish folk culture.

If we look at Yiddish language anti-war literature in East London we see echoes of this sort of language, as in a 1916 pamphlet of the Jewish social democrats attacking the Anglo-Jewish communal leadership for its stigmatisation of migrant Jews who avoided conscription, in which the communal leaders are referred to as '*undzere parneysim*'.³⁰

This tradition also explains how family structures helped sustain war resistance. Rosenberg had to defy his family in order to serve, while those who refused to serve were actively supported by their wives, mothers and fathers. Active support was also provided by (mainly immigrant) rabbis and synagogues in the East End. Rav Kook, head of the ultra-Orthodox Makhzike Hadass Synagogue on Brick Lane ordained a high number of his yeshiva students in order for them to evade conscription.³¹ The Chief Rabbi, Dr Hertz, actually complained to the Home Office in Autumn 1917 about the high number of bogus rabbis emerging. The Home Office notes on their meeting, at which Anglo-Jewish dignitaries Claude Montefiore and

Lionel Rothschild were present, are quite revealing of West End antagonism to the East End's refusal to assimilate.

Broadly speaking there are four distinct Jewish religious bodies in this country: (a) The Spanish Portuguese Community,³² (b) the Liberal Synagogue (c) the Reformed Synagogues (or the Synagogue of British Jews) and (d) the remainder of the Jewish Community under the Chief Rabbi [i.e. the United and Federation synagogues, the latter being small East End shuls].

No cases of disputed military liability are likely to arise in regard to persons belonging to the first three of these communities³³

The minutes continue that the Chief Rabbi insist that only those certified by him personally should be considered exempt ù i.e. none certified by Rav Kook or any other East End rabbi. Then another official (J. Peddar) adds: 'There is no doubt of a wide-spread attempt ù including ad hoc creations of ministers ù among Russian Jews to obtain exemption from the Convention.' Another adds:

Many applicants to such certificates³⁴ are not full-time ministers, but only lay readers who are, or have been until quite recently, actively engaged in another occupation. A goodly number are theological students between the ages of 17 and 21; or even men who till a few months ago, were never engaged in any religious work...As their one object is the evasion of military service, they persist in their claim that they are ministers...they produce documents from 'foreign' rabbis; or legal Agreements entered into with so-called congregations, which are mere Prayer Meetings; or certificates from Theological colleges which have no right to issue such certificates³⁴All those who are familiar with the conditions of the problem are agreed that the Chief Rabbi is the one authority that can be safely appealed to for this expert advice.³⁴

The resistance by the immigrant congregations of the East End and the exemptions provided by the East End rabbis might also testify to the presence of Eastern European traditions of specifically Jewish religious pacifism, which resonated with the politically motivated opposition of secular radicals. This religious pacifism, and its intimacy with the secular radicalism of ghetto leftists, is exemplified by Jacob Meir Salkind (Yankev Meyer Zalkind in Yiddish). Salkind was a trained rabbi and active Zionist before the war. At the start of the War, he became active in East End politics. He was a founder

member of the FJPC and began to shift away from Zionism, especially when Jabotinsky was proposing the formation of a Jewish army. After the war, he was the editor of the revived *Arbayter Fraynd* but nonetheless remained very pious and studious. As Morris Goldwasser writes,

The most unusual aspect of Zalkind's multifaceted personality was the combination of anarchism with traditional Rabbinical scholarship and piety which he embodied. He hoped to create a truly 'free society' in which the Talmudic ethic would form the basis of the political philosophy.³⁵

Indeed, his main activity in the inter-war years was the huge project of translating the Talmud into Yiddish. Salkind's position, between Jewish nationalism and libertarianism, between modernist humanism and religious faith, captures nicely the interstitial position of ghetto radicalism in general at this time: as a site of translation between the specifically Jewish and the radicalism that existed in the receiving context.

Free love

With every great revolutionary movement the question of 'free love' comes in to the foreground.³⁶

Carl Levy (2010) lists anti-militarism and free schools alongside free sexual unions among the countercultural currents that linked anarchists of this period with artistic 'bohemias' such as those that flourished in Greenwich Village, Schwabing, Montmartre or Fitzrovia. It is to free sexual unions that I turn for my second example.

Many of the members of the Yiddish anarchist milieu in Edwardian East London practised such unions. For instance, three of the Witkop sisters, brought up in a very religious Ukrainian Jewish household, chose to live in 'gemisht' (mixed) free companionship with non-Jewish radicals: Milly with the German Rudolf Rocker, Polly with another German, Ernst Simmerling, Rose with the English Guy Aldred.³⁷ Their close associate, the younger anarchist militant Nellie Ploschansky, similarly lived in an unmarried relationship with an English non-Jew, Jim Dick.³⁸

Milly Witkop and Rudolf Rocker met at anarchist meetings in the East End in 1895, shortly after her arrival from Zlatopol in Ukraine. In 1898, they decided to emigrate to the US. When they booked tickets, they registered as a married couple, in order to share a cabin. However, immigration officials at Ellis Island asked to see their marriage certificate. Rocker said

that their bond was one of ‘free agreement’ a purely private matter [that] needs no confirmation from the law’.³⁹ A female official asked how Milly, as a woman, could consent to that, to which Millie replied it was not dignified, as a woman or as a human being, to keep a man who did not love her. The official was shocked: ‘That’s free love!’ Milly replied that ‘Love is always free’ When love ceases to be free it is prostitution.’ Given the choice between marriage and not entering the US, the couple chose the latter. They returned to the UK on the same ship on its return journey.⁴⁰

After this, Milly and Rudolf edited the anarchist magazine *Arbajter Fraynd* together and the cultural journal *Germinal*.⁴¹ Along with their comrades, notably Abraham Frumkin and Max Hershman, they translated and published several texts by international freethinkers and avante-garde aesthetes, such as the Germans Ludwig and Georg Büchner, Dutchman Eduard Douwes Dekker, Norwegian Knut Hamsun, American Robert Ingersoll, Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck, Frenchman Octave Mirbeau, and Irishman Oscar Wilde. In this light, we can see them as part of an Edwardian radical bohemian current, pushing against conventional English morality, and free love as a central element in this counterculturalism. This is even more clearly the case with the younger Rose Witcop, who went on to play a major role in the development of British feminism and specifically in the birth control movement.

Rose Witcop and Guy Aldred met at the Yiddish anarchist Jubilee Street Club in 1907 when they were both in their teens. Aldred had been introduced to the Yiddish scene by the non-Jewish East London working class syndicalist John Turner, a close friend of Milly and Rudolf. Guy and Rose both wrote for the syndicalist *Voice of Labour* (Witcop’s first article an attack on the suffrage movement for ignoring the concerns of working class women) and Rose began attending meetings of the Discussion Group, which met in Guy’s mother’s basement. The couple moved into together early in 1908, having their first child in 1909 (characteristically, they were on the annual workers’ May Day march when Rose went into labour). That August, Guy was arrested for printing the banned anti-colonialist paper *The Indian Sociologist*. Rose, as a ‘criminal associate’, was refused permission to visit him in prison. Charles Voysey, a freethinker with more connections in the respectable world, appealed for her, and it was ruled that she could only visit if she signed the Visitors’ Form as Mrs Aldred; Rose refused and the prison governor capitulated.⁴²

Aldred described marriage as ‘legal prostitution’ and ‘rape by contract’; the status of married women, he argued, was ‘serfdom’ or that of ‘chattel’; he advocated ‘a pure and simple form of free love’. Witcop saw the woman

in the household as a slave as the waged worker was in the factory. She defined free love as a form of 'staunch friendship, unsullied by obligations and duties, ties and certificates'.⁴³

Aldred and Witcop well illustrate Levy's point about the proximity of an anarchist counterculturalism with the bohemian avante-garde of the time, and their commitment to free love clearly exemplifies one of the dominant strands of thinking within the Edwardian socialist movement. One of Aldred's first pamphlets, dedicated to Witcop, was about sex, and quoted heavily from the sexological work of Annie Besant, who herself moved between East End socialism, Bradlaughite radical secularism and the proto-feminist spiritualist and theosophist movements. Rose and Guy were soon contributors to *The Freewoman*, a pre-war feminist journal edited by Dora Marsden. Other contributors included socialist and radical suffragist Ada Neild Chew, a still-teenaged Rebecca West, Fabian novelist H. G. Wells, libertarian socialist and gay rights activist Edward Carpenter, and socialist feminist Stella Browne.⁴⁴

The Aldred-Witcops were also associated with birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger who stayed with them in London in 1914. They were associated too with Dora Black. Black was born in London in 1894, met Bertrand Russell in 1916 and soon afterwards he asked her to marry him. Dora's feminism included a belief in sexual freedom and although she was willing to live with Bertrand, she rejected his proposal of marriage. Dora saw marriage as a restriction on women's liberty, and although Bertrand accepted her philosophical argument on the subject, he wanted a son and legitimate heir to the family title. Like Guy and Rose, Dora and Bertrand campaigned against military conscription during the war. Like Aldred, Russell was in Brixton Prison for his role in the struggle against the Military Service Act. After giving birth to her first child, Dora became involved in the birth control movement. In 1923 Dora, along with Maynard Keynes, paid for the legal costs to obtain the freedom of Aldred and Witcop after they had been found guilty of obscenity for their publication of a cheap UK edition of Margaret Sanger's *Family Limitation*.⁴⁵

Although Rose went on to devote more and more time to feminist and birth control causes, Guy was suspicious of this sort of politics from a class perspective. As he wrote in a 1962 letter to a historian of family planning on Sanger, 'Her work was very important but I believed that she liked to be patronised too much by the great and the rich. I had no time for that sort of thing.'⁴⁶ Caldwell writes that 'This birth control activity increased the strains between Rose and Guy. Rose wanted them to develop a full-time commitment to the establishment of a Birth Control Clinic in London while Guy

was it as an issue that only socialism could ultimately solve'.⁴⁷ Guy moved to Glasgow without her and soon developed a relationship with another activist, Jenny Patrick.

Historian Lesley Hall (2000) places this moment in relation to a longer British tradition of utopian sexual reform and critique of conventional marriage, as well as to then highly contemporary debates about free love and population control. She argues that sexual liberation was just one facet of their much wider vision of social transformation. Ginger Frost has carefully described the importance of free love in the anarchist movement at that time, using Milly and Rose to illustrate her points.

Free love in the Jewish enlightenment

However, an account of the culture of free love in the *Arbayter Fraynd* milieu which stresses only this dimension would miss other dimensions which can only be explained in light of the specifically Jewish context in East London. To start with, despite the countercultural nature of free love, these practitioners of it remained culturally and personally embedded in the Yiddish-speaking world. Fermin Rocker, the son of Milly Witkop and Rudolf Rocker, would later describe the annual Passover seder, at which the staunchly secular and atheist daughters and their partners followed the rituals:

The fact that not one of the guests was religious, that not one of the three couples was legally married, that not one of the spouses was a Jew, seemed to matter not at all. We were simply members of the family and that was all that counted.⁴⁸

Fermin also describes Rudolf's particular closeness to Milly's family: 'Not only could he speak their language, but he also had a rather extensive knowledge of the Jewish mores and customs, gained in the course of his activities in the East End'.⁴⁹

Similarly, their bohemian lifestyles should not distract us from the fact that they remained economically embedded in the Yiddish proletarian world too, Milly and Polly continuing to work as dressmakers in garment sweatshops for most of this period (Polly continued working in a tailor's workshop until she was eighty). Ernst, an expert cabinet maker, worked in a furniture factory, a predominantly Jewish trade in East London at that time, and Rudolf learnt to typeset with Hebrew rather than Latin characters, at Narodiczky's on Mile End Road.⁵⁰

But the Yiddish anarchists' commitment to free love can also be seen as a development of specific trajectories within Yiddishland, and in particular of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment Haskalah (the *haskole*, as it was called in Yiddish). The Haskalah emerged from the salons of Enlightenment Germany in which bourgeois Jewish women played a key role; a feminist current flowed through the movement from the beginning. As it moved into Eastern Europe, the rejection of arranged marriages and child marriages became a defining feature of the popular Haskalah. Maskilic literature, including in Yiddish, stressed the importance of *love* to relationships, a concern which became central to Yiddish and then English-language Jewish literature in both Europe (e.g. Ansky's *The Dybbuk*) and in the migration west Abraham Cahan's *The Love of his Youth* and *Yentl* and of Zangwill's *The Melting Pot*.⁵¹ Werner Sollors traces this lineage, showing how the principle of *consent*—a relationship chosen and based on love—rather than that of *descent*—a relationship arranged between families—structured this literature:

The Melting Pot sacralizes loving consent as the abolition of prejudices of descent. Not merely their specific relationship but also the abstract principle of fidelity to the beloved is idealized to the same degree that loyalties to parents, kin, class, and religion are weakened.⁵²

The same issues were staged in Yiddish popular theatre, from the early plays of Avrom Goldfaden in the 1880s.⁵³ These themes circulated across the Yiddish diaspora. Zangwill's *Melting Point*, written in English for the New York stage and portraying the oppressiveness of arranged marriage, was performed in Yiddish in London's East End in 1912.⁵⁴ When the Yiddish film industry emerged, this circulation continued: for example, *Der Yid*, an inter-ethnic love-story set in Poland, was screened at the Paliseum on Commercial Road in East London just before World War I.⁵⁵

This post-Haskalah critique of arranged marriage was the immediate context for the emphasis on the critique of marriage in Jewish radical spaces in the migration west: a progression from the rejection to arranged marriage in the name of love to opposition to marriage itself in the name of love. Thus for instance, like resistance to conscription, free love became a theme not only in Yiddish literature but also in the Yiddish folk song corpus.⁵⁶ Such ideas were widely disseminated among the mobile Jewish proletariat, far beyond a bohemian underground set, making it easier to see how the Witkop sisters could remain embedded in their religious families despite their radical politics, and perhaps also why the cycles of industrial militancy

in the East End which they led were able to engage rather than alienate so many traditionally-minded Jewish workers.⁵⁷

In other words, the Witkops and other Yiddish-speaking radicals would have already been exposed to ideas about free love before they encountered English-language countercultural activists. In Rocker's case, he shared a workshop with the playwright Ansky in Paris (both were working as bookbinders) and it was Ansky who introduced him to Yiddish anarchist circles there: it was the atmosphere of equality between the sexes that made pulled him towards this milieu. Thus attempting to frame the Jewish radicals' commitment to free love solely through the utopian currents of Edwardian socialism misses out a specifically Jewish history which helps explain the particular forms taken by feminist politics amongst Jewish migrant radicals.

Conclusion

This article has focused on two examples, free love and anti-militarism. A similar approach might illuminate other examples: for instance, the Yiddish free schools started by Jewish anarchists in London and North America, drawing on *both* the movement for workers' self-education circulating in the Edwardian labour movement *and* on the Haskalah's critique of traditional modes of pedagogy; or the campaign for a Jewish army led by left-wing Zionists during the First World War, echoing *both* similar campaigns among Britain's colonised nations in Africa and the Caribbean *and* debates in the transnational Jewish public sphere on masculinity.

But the two examples in this article, we can see Jewish radicals as engaged in a bilingual *culture of translation*. Most straightforwardly, Rudolf Rocker learnt to typeset with a Ukrainian religious Zionist, Israel Narodiczky, in order to publish Yiddish translations of anarchist texts and world literature. But at a deeper level, this is emblematic of the sense in which the Jewish radicals of the East End sought to translate the content of the international and English socialism into a specifically Jewish form.

More speculatively, the stories in this article about free love and war resistance might show something of the deep ambivalence about religion that seems to have characterized ghetto radicalism in general:⁵⁸ an explicit hostility towards a Judaism defined in terms of rabbinic authority and Talmudic pedantry, side by side with—and belied by—*û* a deep rooting in Jewish tradition and idiom. They also show something of the role that kinship had in cementing political solidarity in the immigrant quarter, so that lines of solidarity crossed formal ideological divides. In other words,

we can discern a sense in which the ghetto, the immigrant quarter, acted as a moral community in a way that complicates the notion (common in the socialist historiography) that these were radicals who simply happened to be Jewish and the notion (common in the Anglo-Jewish historiography) that the radicals were marginal to or outside the Jewish community.

These insights have two important methodological implications for thinking of migrant radicalism in general. First, understanding these sorts of phenomena requires historians to bring an understanding of local and national traditions of socialist thought and action to an analysis of socialisms in immigrant communities and an understanding of the transnational (and particularly diasporic) memories and forms of articulation expressed in these socialisms as well as the transnational (and again particularly diasporic) circuits of mobilisation which carried them. This is a challenge for historians because it requires multi-sited and multi-lingual methodologies—which may call for collaborative rather than solo approaches to research.

Second, getting a better sense of precisely which features of immigrant socialisms are rooted in the receiving context (in the local and national political opportunity structures in which migrant socialists are active), and precisely which features are drawn from a more geographically dispersed diasporic context, calls for a rigorously comparative mode of research. That is, not only do we need to set Jewish migrant socialism in London alongside Jewish migrant socialism in Glasgow, New York, Vilna, Paris and Sao Paolo, but we also need to set Jewish migrant socialism in London alongside Irish migrant socialism in London, Italian migrant socialism, Catalan migrant socialism and so on; as Carl Levy has written in his call for a social history of anarchism in this period, we need ‘larger mental maps’ to situate radical ideologies and repertoires of political action in wider global formations.

Notes and References

1. For example, Melech Epstein, *Di geshikhte fun arbeter-klas in Amerike* (New York, 1935).
2. For example, William J. Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals* (London, 1975); Anne J. Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors* (Ilford, 1995).
3. For example, Janine Booth, *Guilty and Proud of it: Poplar's Rebel Councillors and Guardians 1919–25* (London, 2009); Raymond Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism* (London, 1977), Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900–21: The Origins of British Communism* (London, 1969).
4. I take this term from Ulrich Beck, ‘The cosmopolitan perspective: sociology of the second age of modernity’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 51(1) (2000), H. Martins, ‘Time and theory in sociology’, in J. Rex (ed.), *Approaches to Sociology*:

- An Introduction to Major Trends in British Sociology* (1974) and A. Wimmer, and N. Glick Schiller, 'Methodological nationalism and beyond nation-state building, migration and the social sciences', *Global Networks*, 2(4) (2002).
- 5 . Sharman Kadish, *Bolsheviks and British Jews* (London, 1992) pp.196–7.
 - 6 . Jonathan Hyman, 'Jews in Britain During the Great War', *Working Papers in Economic and Social History*, no.51 (2001), p.27.
 7. Hyman, 'Jews in Britain During the Great War', p.28.
 8. For example, Noreen Branson, *Poplarism, 1919–1925* (London, 1979) or James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain Vol 1: Formative and Early Years 1919–1924* (London, 1980).
 9. Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement*, David Burke and Fred Lindop, 'Theodore Rothstein and the Origins of the British Communist Party', *Socialist History* 15 (1999), John Slatter, *From the other Shore: Russian Political Emigrants in Britain, 1880–1917* (London, 1984).
 10. Compare Nina Glick Schiller et al., 'Beyond the ethnic lens: locality, globality, and born-again incorporation', *American Ethnologist*, 33, 4 (2006), pp.612–33, arguing against the 'ethnic lens' constraining migration studies and preventing an adequate comparative theorisation of the local.
 11. *Daily Mail*, 21 July 1917.
 12. David Cesarani, *The Jewish Chronicle and Anglo-Jewry, 1841–1991* (Cambridge, 1994), p.115.
 13. NA HO/45/10818/317810
 14. NA HO/45/10821/318095/347.
 15. To give just one example from Special Branch surveillance reports, a Mrs. Goldberg, whose husband was in Wormwood Scrubs prison as a conscientious objector, was active in both the East London-based Jewish Anarchists' Federation and the national No-Conscription Fellowship (Report by Inspector Thomas MacNamara, Special Branch, September 1916, in NA HO/45/10822/318095/525).
 16. Kadish, *Bolsheviks and British Jews*, p.206.
 17. Kadish, *Bolsheviks and British Jews*, pp.206–7. Dr Sacks was the Honorary Vice President of the Russian Women's Protection Committee, formed in November 1918 (NA HO/45/10823/31089/661a).
 18. Gordon Bottomley and Denys Harding (eds), *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg* (London, 1937), p.349; Joseph Cohen, *Journey to the Trenches: The Life of Isaac Rosenberg 1890–1918* (London, 1975); p.125.
 19. John Rodker, *Memoirs of Other Fronts* (London, 1932), pp.110–11.
 20. NA HO/45/10822/318095/525
 21. Report by Inspector Thomas MacNamara and Superintendent Quinn, Special Branch, September 1916, in NA HO/45/10822/318095/529
 22. Robert S. Wistrich, *Revolutionary Jews: From Marx to Trotsky* (London, 1976), pp.18–19.
 23. *Worker's Dreadnought*, 8 September 1917.
 24. Resolution adopted 18/12/1916, in NA HO/45/10820/31805/198.

25. John Taylor Cardwell, *Come Dungeons Dark: The Life and Times of Guy Aldred, Glasgow Anarchist* (Ayrshire, 1988), pp.118, 170.
26. David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, 1984), p.57.
27. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, pp.57–8, David Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophes* (Philadelphia, 1988), pp.115–21, Joel Berkowitz, ‘Shtetl and Shtot in Yiddish Haskole Drama’, paper at The Shtetl Annual UCL Jewish Studies Conference, London, 20 June 2001.
28. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, p.59.
29. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, p.59 (my translation).
30. Ben Gidley, ‘Diasporic Memory and the Call to Identity: Yiddish migrants in early twentieth century East London’, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 34, 6, pp.650–64.
31. Kadish, *Bolsheviks and British Jews*, p.207.
32. This erasure was in the Home Office minutes. The reference here is to the Sephardic community, known generally as ‘Spanish and Portuguese’.
33. NA HO/45/10822/318095/497.
34. NA HO/45/10822/318095/497.
35. Morris Goldwasser, ‘*Termini Technici* in Y. M. Zalkind’s Yiddish Translation of the Talmud’ [English summary of Goldvaser 1975] in Dov Noy and Essacher Ben-Ami (eds), *Studies in the Cultural Life of the Jews in England*, Jerusalem: Hebrew University Institute of Folklore Studies (1975), [Folklore Research Centre Studies V].
36. Frederick Engels, ‘The Book of Revelation’, *Progress*, 2 (August, 1883), p.113.
37. The sisters, originally with the surname Vitkopski, spelled their family name differently in English: Milly as Witkop, Rose as Witcop. The stories of the oldest and youngest sisters, Milly and Rose, is told by Ginger Frost, “‘Love is Always Free’: Anarchism, Free Unions and Utopianism in Edwardian England”, *Anarchist Studies*, 17 (2009), pp.63–94.
38. Jim Dick and Nellie Ploschansky married to avoid his conscription in 1916 when the Military Service Act was passed, see John Pether, ‘Conversation with Nellie Dick’, *The Raven* 2, 2 (1989). Rose Witcop and Guy Aldred married in 1926, after they separated as a couple, also for legal reasons, probably to prevent Witcop’s deportation, see Albert Meltzer, ‘A Rebel Spirit’, *Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library* 4 (1993), pp.1–4, Frost 20XX). Milly and Rudolf would eventually marry in 1933, when they fled Nazi Germany for the US, knowing they would not be able to enter America if they did not.
39. Rudolf Rocker, *The London Years* (London, 1956).
40. Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals* (London, 1975), pp.237–8,
41. Milly would later be a pioneer of socialist feminism, as one of the founders in Germany in 1921 of the Syndikalistische Frauenbund, the Syndicalist Women’s Union; she argued that women were exploited by men as workers were by capital, their domestic labour analogous to wage slavery.
42. John Taylor Caldwell, *Come Dungeons Dark*, pp.95–100.

43. Frost, 'Love is Always Free', pp.80–1.
44. Lucy Bland, 'Heterosexuality, Feminism and *The Freewoman* Journal in Early Twentieth-century England' in *Women's History Review*, Vol.4, No.1 (1995).
45. Bland, 'Heterosexuality, Feminism and *The Freewoman* Journal', John Taylor Caldwell, *Come Dungeons Dark*, p.207.
46. In the Family Planning Association archives: Guy Aldred, 4 March 1962 to John Peel.
47. Caldwell, *Come Dungeons Dark*, p.207.
48. Fermin Rocker, *The East End Years: A Stepney Childhood* (London, 1998), p.65.
49. Rocker, *The East End Years*, p.65. These recollections refute Frost's claim that the sisters had to endure the alienation of their parents for their choices (Frost, 'Love is Always Free', pp.81–2).
50. Marion Aптоот (ed.), *Jewish Books in Whitechapel: A Bibliography of Narodiczky's Press* (London, 1991), Joseph Leftwich, 'Introduction' in Rudolf Rocker, *The London Years* (London, 1956), pp.29–33, Leonard Prager, *Yiddish Culture in Britain: A Guide* (Frankfurt, 1990), p.171, Rocker, *The London Years*, pp.144–7.
51. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York, 1986) The Dybbuk was published in Yiddish in East London in 1916 (Prager, *Yiddish Culture in Britain*, p.122).
52. Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, pp.72–4.
53. Joel Berkowitz, 'The Zionist Impulse in the Dramas of Avrom Goldfaden', *Nationalism, Zionism and Ethnic Mobilisation Conference*, UCL, London, 13–15 June 2000.
54. Prager, *Yiddish Culture in Britain*, p.118.
55. Prager, *Yiddish Culture in Britain*, p.327.
56. Ruth Rubin, *Voices of a People: Yiddish Folk Song* (New York, 1963), pp.69–94.
57. Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals*.
58. Ben Gidley, *Citizenship and Belonging: East London Jewish Radicals 1903–1918* (London, 2003).