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## **Mr Lewinstein goes to Parliament: rethinking the history and historiography of Jewish immigration**

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In a luminous essay published in 1992, Jonathan Frankel reflected on the influence of the Russian-Jewish school of history which, he suggested, had come to an end. Citing work authored by Simon Dubnov, the founding father of the tradition, as well by Raphael Mahler, Shmuel Ettinger and Ben-Zion Dinur, he observed that 'all the major books which seek to analyse the history of the Jews across the entire expanse of the modern world belong within that tradition.' A central feature of this paradigm has been the contrast between a traditional East European Jewry 'conscious of its own worth' and West European Jews 'characterised by self-negation'. According to this interpretation, the Jewish nation had survived in exile through its creativity and solidarity but in the nineteenth century it was threatened by modernity's forces of change. First in Western Europe and then in central Europe, emancipation and liberalism led to disintegration. The process of dissolution was arrested only after 1881 by nationalist movements which integrated new social and political forces so that the Jewish people would be strengthened and not fatally diminished.

Focussing on the historiography of the period between 1815 and 1881, Frankel proposed that at the end of the twentieth century this once dominant interpretation no longer shaped academic scholarship. Now, he suggested, historians were less dogmatic about the division of Jewish life between East and West and in place of a binary conflict between centrifugal

and centripetal tendencies in Jewish life they present ‘a multiplicity of conflicting forces interacting in unpredictable ways.’<sup>1</sup>

Two and half decades after Frankel’s essay appeared his *hesped* for the Russian-Jewish nationalist paradigm appears premature. The paradigm continues to shape the way historians have narrated and analysed the history of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe between 1881 and the First World War – decades that lie beyond the scope of Frankel’s essay. Two significant synthetic accounts of modern European Jewish history have been published in the decades since Frankel wrote. In 1999 there was David Vital’s door-step volume, *A People Apart*. Two years later Lloyd Gartner published a *History of the Jews in Modern Times*.<sup>2</sup> In their treatment of the mass migration of Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Vital and Gartner demonstrate the vitality of the Russian-Jewish nationalist paradigm as they deploy the well-worn contrast between Eastern and Western Jewries. According to Vital, at the end of the nineteenth century, at the same time as West European Jews enjoyed an unprecedented degree of economic security and comfort, their collective life as Jews was doomed by exogamy and a falling birth rate. In a section titled ‘West versus East’, he relates how East European Jewish migrants intruded on emancipated Jewries, carrying with them ‘outworn notions on the role and true nature of the Jewish people.’ With a handful of honourable exceptions, he proposes, Western Jews were concerned to preserve their own status and feared the immigrants would ‘revive the image

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Frankel, ‘Assimilation and the Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe: towards a new historiography’, in *Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth Century Europe*, ed Jonthan Frankel and Steven Zipperstein, Cambridge 1992, 1-31.

<sup>2</sup> David Vital, *A People Apart. The Jews in Europe, 1789-1933*, Oxford 1999; Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews in Modern Times*, Oxford 2001,

of the Jews as a people deeply and ineradicably alien to western society.’<sup>3</sup> Gartner too perceived an antinomy between Eastern and Western Jewry. The newcomers ‘invigorated west European Jewry’ and ‘brought a previously unknown enthusiasm, intensity and intellectualism into the rather pale Jewish life of their new countries.’<sup>4</sup>

It is not only in these syntheses that we find the continuing influence of the Russian-Jewish nationalist school over the narration and analysis of Jewish migration. We find something similar when we examine the historiography of Jewish immigration within specific national contexts: in France, Germany and the United States, for example.<sup>5</sup> The present essay will question these entrenched orthodoxies. In doing so, it will focus on the history and historiography of Jewish migration to London.

Between 1880 and 1914 between 120,000 and 150,000 East European Jews settled permanently in Great Britain between 1880 and 1914: many times more than this number stayed for a period of a few days or a few years. With remarkable consistency, we find this history narrated and analysed as the outcome of interaction between a familiar triad of forces: first, a population of immigrants whose vibrant religious practice and confrontational politics led to conflict with the established communal leaders and institutions, second, an acculturated and decadent community of British-born Jews and, third, a majority population liable to be hostile both to foreigners and Jews. This triad can be found in the work of historians such as Geoffrey Alderman, Eugene Black, David Cesarani, Todd Endelman as well as in my own writing on the subject, albeit with some differences of emphasis and sympathy

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<sup>3</sup> Such is Vital’s pessimistic assessment of modern Jewish life in Europe that, he asserts, even the immigrants’ children would assimilate to the underlying ‘decline’ and ‘entropy’. Vital, *A People Apart*, 310-24

<sup>4</sup> Gartner, *History of the Jews*, chapter 8

<sup>5</sup> See for example Jonathan D Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven, 2004); Jack Wertheimer, *Unwelcome Strangers: East European Jews in Imperial Germany* (Oxford, 1987); Nancy Green, ‘The Modern Jewish Diaspora: Eastern European Jews in New York, London and Paris’, In *European Migrants: Global and Local Perspectives* ed, Dirk Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch, (Boiston, 1996).

in each case. Cesarani and Alderman highlight the invertebrate response of the British Jewish elite to native traditions of intolerance.<sup>6</sup> Black and Endelman emphasise the divergent worlds of native Jews and the immigrants. The former argued that Anglo-Jewry's acquiescence in the British government's attempts to restrict immigration 'willy-nilly defined two British Jewish worlds: that of native Jews, generally English by birth or long residence, and that of the alien Jews of East European origin, more recently arrived in Britain, generally concentrated in *the London ghetto*.' [my emphasis] Endelman's account appears in a chapter titled symptomatically, 'Native Jews and Foreign Jews'.<sup>7</sup> Influenced by the development of history 'from below', William Fishman and Jerry White and the present author highlighted the autonomy of social relations and political movements within the Jewish East End.<sup>8</sup> It was only Bill Williams, in a path-breaking but neglected essay on Manchester Jewry, published in 1990, who sought to confront the conventional triadic framework of analysis and break from it.<sup>9</sup>

The most recent account by Susan Tananbaum cleaves to the well-worked model: immigrants 'cling to familiar East European customs of language, food, work and in many cases, religious and political beliefs', while British Jews vigorously promoted their anglicization and did so in the context of concern over their own 'residual outsider status.'

Tananbaum, like Endelman, presents an account of acculturation that proceeds in stages. In

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<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Alderman, *Modern British Jewry* (Oxford, 1992); 'English Jews or Jews of the English persuasion? Reflections on the emancipation of Anglo-Jewry' in *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States and Citizenship* ed, Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (Princeton, 1995); David Cesarani, 'An alien concept? The continuity of anti-alienism in British society before 1940', *Immigrants and Minorities*, 11.3, 1992; David Cesarani, *The Jewish Chronicle and Anglo-Jewry, 1841-1991*, (Cambridge, 1994);

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Black, *The Social Politics of Anglo-Jewry 1880-1920*, (Oxford, 1988), pp.5-6; Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656-2000* (Berkeley, 2002), ch.4.

<sup>8</sup> David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Conflict, 1840-1914* (London, 1994), esp. ch.13. William J. Fishman, *East End Jewish Radical, 1875-1914* (London, 1975); Jerry White, *Rothschild Buildings. Life in an East End Tenement Block, 1887-1920* (London, 1980)

<sup>9</sup> Bill Williams, "East" and "West": Class and Community in Manchester Jewry, 1850-1914', in David Cesarani ed., *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry* (Oxford, 1990)

stage one ‘adults who arrived between 1880 and 1905 tended to cling to familiar East European customs of language, food, work and in many cases, religious and political beliefs.’ In stage two, between 1905 and the end of the First World War, ‘the children of immigrants entered a more integrated network of [Jewish] communal services and absorbed the lessons of the host community.’ The final stage took place in the inter-war years when old patterns had been disrupted by military service and the problem now was to arrest Anglicization, not to promote it, and to keep young Jews Jewish.<sup>10</sup> The predominant view, therefore, is that the history of Jewish immigration was shaped by the triangular relationship between British expectations of emancipated Jewry, British Jews’ attempts to satisfy those norms and the challenge presented by the influx of poor, Yiddish-speaking East Europeans after 1881. Acculturation is understood here as a sequential process carried forward by successive generations. These renditions of the history of Jewish immigration in Britain extend the historiographical tradition described by Frankel and fuse it with perspectives drawn from late-twentieth century social history.

These histories draw on vivid contemporary accounts which also depict stark lines dividing Jewish immigrants from British Jews, on one side, and from the native poor on the other. The largest number of Jewish immigrants in Britain settled in districts of east and south-east of the City of London - the East End as it was vaguely but ubiquitously called and which for the Jews came to be composed of Whitechapel, Spitalfields, Mile End, St George’s in the East and parts of Bethnal Green. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the East End had become a synonym for an impoverished and vicious underclass who would not work. Sensationally exposed in journalism, anatomised by social investigators and dramatized in slum fiction, the East End was represented as a Godless world in which drink,

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Tananbaum, *Jewish Immigrants in London, 1880-1939* (London, 2014), 15-19, 167-9.

cheap excitement and criminality endangered property and mocked civilization.<sup>11</sup> The social investigator Beatrice Potter played a significant role reinforcing this perception.

Respectability and culture have fled; the natural leaders of the working class have deserted their post; the lowest element sets the tone of East End existence...Alas! For the pitifulness of this ever-recurring drama of low life – this long chain of unknowing iniquity, children linked on to parents, friends to friends, ah, and lovers to lovers – bearing to that bottomless pit of decaying life.<sup>12</sup>

Non-Jewish and Jewish observers agreed that the conduct and inner life of Jewish immigrants were quite different from the behaviour and mores of the neighbouring poor. In this regard, Potter's writing set a template employed by many subsequent writers who followed in her footsteps, both literally and metaphorically.<sup>13</sup> According to Potter, Polish Jews possessed a superior intellect, trained by generations of talmudic study. Attention to the dietary and health regulations prescribed by Jewish law, had nurtured physical endurance among them. Home life had been perfected by social isolation. As a result, she argued, poverty did not de-moralize Jewish immigrants in East London as it did their Gentile neighbours. But alongside these virtues Jews carried corresponding vices. Persecution had 'forced the untiring energies' of the Hebrew race into low channels of parasitic economic activity, while the Jewish religion had not fostered spirituality: 'The Polish Jews have centred their thoughts and feelings in the literature of their race – in the Old Testament with its magnificent promises of universal dominion; in the Talmud with its minute instructions as to the means of getting it.' Inevitably, the foreign Jew had narrow sympathies and 'totally

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<sup>11</sup> The classic account remains Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (London, 1971)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 283-4

<sup>13</sup> For example, John A. Hobson, *Problems of Poverty* (London, 1891), 59; *Report on the Volume and Effects of Recent Immigration from Eastern Europe*, (London, 1894), .42; Barbara Drake, 'The West End tailoring trade' in *The Seasonal Trades* (ed), Arnold J. Freeman and Sidney Webb, (London, 1912), 77

ignores all social obligations other than keeping the law of the land, the maintenance of his own family and the charitable relief of co-religionists.' His moral and physical constitution allowed him to take advantage of the low barriers to petty entrepreneurship in the 'sweated' trades and behave as the incarnation of economic man, fulfilling David Ricardo's 'strange assumptions'.<sup>14</sup>

It followed from Potter's account that Jewish immigrants inhabited a world apart not only from the rest of the East End working class but also from their West End co-religionists. She noted, 'The Jewish settlement of the East End stands outside communal life...partly on account of its extreme poverty, and partly because of the foreign habits and customs of the vast majority of East End Jews'.<sup>15</sup> The cultural chasm perceived by many contemporaries between East European Jews and their Anglicized counterparts was projected on to the geographical distance between the area of immigrant settlement - the East End - and the affluent and middle-class areas in London's West End where English Jews resided.

Although the comparison drawn between the immigrants and the native working class was gratifying for British Jews to contemplate, their perceived distance from Anglo-Jewish habits and mores was not. The *Jewish Chronicle* advised Russian Jews 'to become less narrow and more cultured' and to replace 'the spectacles of the Talmud' with 'science' and 'common sense'.<sup>16</sup> Disquiet became more acute as the number of immigrants steadily increased. Nathan Joseph, the brother-in-law of the Chief Rabbi and a leading worker in the capital Jewish charities, in 1893 gave forthright expression to this anxiety: 'In ten or fifteen

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<sup>14</sup> The political economist, David Ricardo, as Potter's readers would have known, was born a Jew. Beatrice Potter, 'The Jewish Community' in *Life and Labour of the People of London* ed., Charles Booth (London, 1889), volume 1, 564-90.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 567

<sup>16</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 21 October 1881, 9.



years, the children of the refugees of today will be men and women, constituting in point of numbers, the great bulk of the Jews of England. They will drag down, submerge and disgrace our community if we leave them in their present state of neglect.’<sup>17</sup> It was this apprehension that lay behind a new policy – the so-called ‘new departure’ - that aimed to reform immigrant behaviour through a programme of home visits carried out by an army of female social workers and to return to Eastern Europe ‘all the indolent loafers and parasites.’<sup>18</sup>

The idea that the immigrants occupied a world apart from both the non-Jewish inhabitants of the East End and from British Jews rapidly became a received truth propounded from a wide variety of positions. George Sims, the prolific writer and slum journalist, reporting the scenes of new immigrants trudging from the docks to Whitechapel and seeking work in the street labour market there, declared, ‘I forget I am in London.’ William Evans Gordon, the leading campaigner for a law to restrict immigration asserted, ‘the Hebrew colony...forms a distinct block – a race apart, as it were, in an enduring island of extraneous thought and custom.’ For the Russian Jewish social scientist Jacob Lestchinsky, as well as for Sholem Aleichem’s fictional character Mottel Paysi, the poverty, food, language and dirt of Whitechapel were all reminiscent of conditions in the Pale of Settlement.<sup>19</sup>

This unanimity on the separateness of the Jewish East End is paradoxical. On one side it provides striking confirmation from contemporary sources of our received understanding of immigrant society in London: its radical separation from British society in

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<sup>17</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 3 February 1893, 16

<sup>18</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 3 February 1893, 16; Black, *Social Politics*, 92

<sup>19</sup> George Sims, ‘Sweated London’ in *Living London* ed., George Sim (London, 1901), 51; William Evans Gordon, *The Alien Immigrant* (1903) 7; Jacob Lestchinsky, *Der yidisher arbayter in London* (Vilna, 1907) 7; Sholem Aleichem, *Adventures of Mottel the Cantor’s Son*, translated by T. Kahana (London, 1958), 199

general and from British Jewry in particular. Yet, at the same time, the fact of this of consensus, which encompassed English observers, native Jews and East European Jews, runs contrary to the very point of interpretation on which all parties were agreed. Moreover, this consensus among contemporaries suggests that our received framework for analysis is itself one product of the history it is now employed to explain. This is the case, most obviously, with regard to the contemporary source materials which emphasise the separation of Jewish immigrants from the cockney poor and from West End Jews. However, it applies also to the historiography that is indebted to the nationalism of the Russian-Jewish school which itself emerged as one ideologically inflected response to the transformations of Jewish life in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.<sup>20</sup> Our interpretations of the history of Jewish migration run the danger of reproducing the past more than accounting for it. With this in mind the present essay explores the many aspects of the history of Jewish immigration to London which do not sit within the contrasts and oppositions which shape our current understanding.

Let us begin with demography and geography. The concentration of Jews in neighbourhoods to the east of the City of London was quickly established following the Jews' resettlement in the second half of the seventeenth century. By 1850 some 12-13,000 Jews, two-thirds of the total number of Jews living in London, were concentrated here. By 1882 the number had grown to just over 30,000, in part as a result of immigration from the Netherlands, Germany and Eastern Europe.<sup>21</sup> The Jewish immigrants who arrived in the decades after the pogroms of 1881-2, therefore, made their way in a district which had a

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<sup>20</sup> S.M. Dubnow, *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New Judaism* (ed.), K.S. Pinson (New York, 1970); Jonathan Frankel, 'S.M. Dubnov, historian and ideologist' in Sophie Dubnov Erlich (ed.), *The Life and Work of S.M. Dubnov* (Bloomington, 1991)

<sup>21</sup> Vivian D Lipman, *Social History of the Jews in England, 1850-1950* (London, 1954), 26-8

significant *local* population of English-born Jews as well as a pioneer generation of immigrants who, as we shall see, had already created a framework of associational life.

Jewish migrants comprised a fecund population. In part this followed from the distribution of ages among them. In 1901 more than 70 per cent of the immigrants were aged between 15 and 45, whereas the equivalent figure for the overall population of England and Wales was just 48 per cent.<sup>22</sup> The impact of a high birth rate was magnified by the low rate of infant mortality, probably due to high standards of hygiene and the habit among Jewish mothers of breast-feeding. A survey of one Jewish populated area of the East End found a death rate of 58.5 per 1000 children whereas the figure was 90.9 per 1000 in the district as a whole.<sup>23</sup> The combined effect of the high birth rate and low rate of infant mortality was that the natural increase of the Jewish population in the East End was almost as significant a source of growth as immigration. In 1905 Simon Rosenbaum calculated that the Jewish population of East London was growing by 6.7 per cent each year, of which only 3.7 per cent was due to the influx from Eastern Europe. He estimated that 120,000 Jews lived in the East End but this was more than double the number of Russians and Russian Poles enumerated in the capital in the 1901 census.<sup>24</sup> Contrary to the widespread perception that the Jewish East End was dominated by Yiddish-speaking immigrants, the largest part of the population was predominantly English-born.

On occasion the spread of Jewish settlement in the East End was met with violent resistance. One witness told an investigating commission that Jews were not allowed into

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<sup>22</sup> Simon Rosenbaum, 'A contribution to the Study of Vital and Other Statistics of the Jews in the United Kingdom', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, September 1905, 535

<sup>23</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, London County Council, Housing of the Working Classes Committee, presented papers, case 65, Backchurch Lane (St George's in the East) area, report by SF Murphy, 27 March 1901; Lara Marks, *Model Mothers: Jewish Mothers and Maternity Provision in East London, 1870-1939* (Oxford, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Rosenbaum, 'A contribution', 540-1, 554

the southern part of St George's in the East: 'they will not have them there....They smash the windows and the doors in when the aliens get there and they soon clear out.'<sup>25</sup> Yet this was unusual. George Arkell, was commissioned by Toynbee Hall, a centre of philanthropy in the East End, to produce a map marking the streets in the East End in which Jews lived, as well as the density of the Jewish presence there. His work demonstrates that although some Jews lived in knots of streets with a dense Jewish population many lived in close proximity to non-Jewish neighbours. This was a by-product of the incremental expansion of the Jewish East End, as the commentary which accompanied the published map made clear.

From Whitechapel the flow has moved along the great highways, especially Whitechapel Road and Commercial Road, and into the streets immediately off these thoroughfares. In streets not directly connected with the main roads and not readily reached, the influx has been slow and comparatively recent. In some long streets directly connected with a main road a distinct difference may be noted between the near and far ends of the street. The same tendency to spread along the main thoroughfares is seen in the outlying portions.<sup>26</sup>

Jewish immigration transformed the demography and appearance of parts of East London but, notwithstanding the lively language of contemporaries and some historians, Jewish immigrants did not create a ghetto.

The choice of marital partners among immigrant Jews points to the significant connections between a minority of immigrants and Anglo-Jewry, as well as between the immigrants and other East Enders. The high rate of exogamy among the British-born Jewish

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<sup>25</sup> *Royal Commission on Alien Immigration*, (London, 1903), question 17,247.

<sup>26</sup> C.R. Russell and HS Lewis, *The Jew in London; A Study of Racial Character and Present Day Conditions* (London, 1900), xl.

male population, noted by Vital and others, meant that immigrant Jews provided a valuable addition to the pool of Jewish husbands available to wed English Jewish women. In 1911 the census recorded 22 per cent Russian-born men in London [which almost always indicated Jewish men] had non-Russian wives. Jewish immigrant men were marrying British Jewish women.<sup>27</sup> These marriages were not only demographic events; they necessarily built on existing patterns of interaction between native Jews and foreign Jews. Moreover, they were likely to foster further economic connections in the form of dowries, loans and partnerships, as well as new forms of familial sociability.

Exogamy was another way in which the bounds of the Jewish East End were porous, as oral histories indicate. Arthur Harding's recollections are peppered with exogamous Jews. Harding was a non-Jewish East Ender who made his living within the district's criminal underworld. He recalled a famous Jewish family out of Aldgate, the Narks: 'Bobby was fine a big fellow though he wasn't very brainy....He belonged to the Darby Sabini gang – that was made up of Jewish chaps and Italian chaps. He married an English lady.' Harding also remembered a Jewish boxing trainer and his brother who married a couple of English girls. Another pair of brothers married non-Jewish girls from 'the other end of Brick Lane'. 'Down Watney Street some of the Jews married the Irish and they produced some right terrors. Usually it was the Irishman who married the Jewess and the children inherited worst qualities of both.'<sup>28</sup>

Harding's memories suggest not only a largely uncharted pattern of exogamy but also a terrain of illegal enterprise shared between Jews and non-Jews in the East End. Before

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<sup>27</sup> B.A. Kosmin, 'Nuptiality and fertility patterns of British Jewry, 1850-1950': an immigrant transition', in *Demography of Immigrant Groups*, ed, D. Coleman (London, 1982) 257,

<sup>28</sup> Raphael Samuel, *East End Underworld. Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding* (London, 1981), 128, 130-134

the First World War the young Harding would steal watch chains and sell them to Leon Behren who always was to be found at the Warsaw Restaurant in Osborne Street, in the heart of Whitechapel: 'He used to wear a £5 piece on his gold watch and chain and he had an astrakhan collar and coat. He looked a proper Yid.'<sup>29</sup> Harding's 'special pal' was a Jew named Cosser Gilbert who, after a spell in prison, drifted into pimping and lived off the earnings of an English girl called Laura. He would rent a room from Jewish people who turned a blind eye.<sup>30</sup> Harding's memories throw light on a world of criminality that encompassed thievery and 'protection', illegal betting and boxing where Jews and non-Jews interacted in patterns of cooperation and conflict.

Low-life was not the only sphere of quotidian interaction between Jew and non-Jew in the East End.<sup>31</sup> The economics of everyday life brought people together in diverse ways. The census recorded that 15 per cent of Jewish immigrants in East London were in 'trading and commercial' occupations.<sup>32</sup> Although some shops and stalls catered for the immigrants' particular needs, market activity brought Jews and non-Jews into regular contact. In Petticoat Lane, one observer noted, 'you pass from a clothier's stall to a butcher's, to tinware, crockery, toy, fruit, hat and cap stalls, confectioners stalls, boot stalls, more cheap jacks, more fish stalls, more clothiers and pretty well all of them are Jews...' But English, not Yiddish, was the *lingua franca* of the market. One salesman offered 'the champion lemon drink – a penny a glass. 'Av yer money back if yer don't like it!', and a gramophone played a comic song by a music hall star. Similarly on the Whitechapel Road, the majority of stalls and

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 134

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 130

<sup>31</sup> Tony Kushner has written a suggestive essay that argues along similar lines. 'Jew and non-Jew in the East End of London: towards an anthropology of "everyday" relations' in *Outsides and Outcasts: Essays in Honour of William J. Fishman* ed. Geoffrey Alderman and Colin Holmes (London, 1993)

<sup>32</sup> Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 163

shops were owned by Jews but it was a place where 'Jews and cockneys all mixed together'.<sup>33</sup>

Street markets not only brought together Jews and non-Jews as they transacted business, they also brought Jews into interaction with the police and local government. The Whitechapel and Spitalfields Costermongers Union, an organisation of stall holders was created in 1894, and quickly gathered between 400 and 500 members, among English and foreign Jews. The union mediated between the stall holders and the demands made by local officials, the police and shopkeepers, and, moreover, became a force in East End politics, first for the Liberal Party and then, after 1918, for the Labour Party. This was not an enclosed world.<sup>34</sup>

Domestic life and recreation also promoted interactions that crossed ethnic and religious lines. Jewish and non-Jewish children played together in the street. The more prosperous Jewish households were able pay the wives and widows of the local labourers to undertake tasks such as cleaning and heavy laundry. Observant Jewish families would employ a *shabbes goy* to have their gas turned on and off and their fires made up on Friday night and Saturday. The music hall and the cinema marked physical spaces and a commercialised culture in the East End, they were open to all and shared widely. The cinemas were notoriously noisy; the hubbub caused by the translation children provided for their immigrant parents.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> A St John Adcock , 'Sunday morning East and West' in G R Sims ed, *Living London* (London, 1901), 282; Samuel, *East End Underworld*, 127

<sup>34</sup> Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 249-50;

<sup>35</sup> Jerry White, *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East End Tenement Block, 1887-1920* (London, 1980), 138-44; Anna Davin, *Growing up Poor: Home, School, Street, 1870-1914* (London, 1996) 200

Influential accounts of economic life among Jewish immigrants have greatly reinforced the impression of the Jewish East End as a world apart. Lloyd Gartner, in his pioneer account of *The Jewish Immigrant in England*, emphasised the distinctiveness of economic activity in the Jewish East End. He underlined the point when he characterised the outlook of the immigrant worker; 'he preferred to work among his own people, apart from the British workman. He worked longer hours and his seasons were irregular. He did not regard himself as one endowed with a fixed station in life.'<sup>36</sup> This interpretation of the immigrants' economic life as enclosed and exceptional presents a partial truth. To be sure, the majority of Jewish immigrants in London were concentrated in a handful of trades in which production was scattered in hundreds of small workshops. In 1901 the largest portion, 44 per cent, worked in tailoring, mantle making and dress making. A further 11 per cent, a declining figure, worked as boot and shoe makers, while the number of cabinet makers had increased from 5 per cent to 9 per cent of the total over the previous decade.<sup>37</sup> Barriers to petty entrepreneurship were low and encouraged workers to take a chance at becoming their own masters. In tailoring the cost of investing in sewing machines and pressing irons could be minimised by hire purchase. A standard Singer sewing machine cost just 1s 6d per week.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike the English male craftsmen, who made garments from start to finish with the help of one or more female assistants, Jewish workshops made the garments by dividing the labour into a series of specialised tasks. One English skilled tailor was scornful: 'You would not employ a bricklayer to lay down gas pipes, and why should you employ an unskilled

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<sup>36</sup> Lloyd Gartner, *The Jewish Immigrant in England, 1870-1914* (London, 1973 edn), 66, 100

<sup>37</sup> Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 163

<sup>38</sup> Andrew Godley, 'Jewish soft loan societies in New York and London and immigrant entrepreneurship', *Business History*, 38.3, 1996, 104; Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 246.



worker to make a coat.<sup>39</sup> However, the easily acquired skills provided opportunities for new immigrants. This was an economic environment which generated relations which combined exploitation and benevolence. One employer related how 'masters...go to the market...and pick out foreigners that have just come over, that have practically no knowledge of the trade, and they promise to give them some work. Of course men as a rule are very glad to get some shelter and they employ them all week.'<sup>40</sup> From the immigrant's side this sort of relationship was perceived and experienced differently. One recounted how he pawned his suit which gave him money to pay a workshop owner to teach him how to work as a machinist. For four weeks he was not paid but subsisted on bread and herring.<sup>41</sup> Jewish immigrants made choices within a local economy shaped by an overstocked labour market and low barriers to entry as a small master. This much confirms some of the distinctive features of economic life among Jewish immigrants in East London, presented by Gartner and others.

Yet the economic life of Jews in the East End was not an autonomous sphere. It was powerfully shaped by connections with Anglo-Jewry and with the wider metropolitan economy as well. Most crucially, the passage into entrepreneurship was facilitated and sustained in thousands of cases by a loan from the principal Anglo-Jewish charity in London, the Jewish Board of Guardians. Established in 1859, the Board introduced a loan department in 1866. Between 1880 and 1906 it distributed £183,013 in the form of 34,346 loans. In current terms this was equivalent to an infusion of more than £182,000,000.<sup>42</sup> This

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<sup>39</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, London County Council, Special committee on contracts, presented papers, 12 December 1890, 15

<sup>40</sup> *Select Committee on the Sweating System*, (London, 1888) question 5280

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, question 2832

<sup>42</sup>

<https://www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare/relativevalue.php?use%5B%5D=CPI&use%5B%5D=NOMINALE>

was a huge sum, without parallel elsewhere in late nineteenth and early twentieth century London. The mean size of a loan was £5 6s, equivalent to wages for three or four weeks that could be earned by a skilled worker in the tailoring trade.<sup>43</sup> In myriad cases, the immigrants' passage to entrepreneurial activity was eased by assistance from their English co-religionists. Much more than the personality or culture of the putative 'Jewish worker' invoked by Potter and Gartner, this flow of capital from West to East London suggests why so many Jewish workers did not see themselves as having 'a fixed station in life'.<sup>44</sup>

Trade unionism established a different set of connections: in this case between the immigrants and the English labouring poor. Immigrant workers were employed in Jewish workshops and used methods disdained by English artisans but the markets they supplied generated competition and cooperation with English workers. East End workshops had begun by supplying the market for cheap ready to wear clothes but as early as the 1880s some workshops competed for bespoke orders. This trend grew over the next decades so that by the First World War the quality of the garments made in Jewish workshops was indistinguishable from those produced by English journeymen.<sup>45</sup> In the case of cabinet making there was a similar development while in boot and shoe finishing, the least skilled of all the trades, Jewish immigrants competed directly with native labour.<sup>46</sup>

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[ARN&year\\_early=1906&pound71=183000&shilling71=0&pence71=0&amount=183000&year\\_source=1906&year\\_result=2017](#)

[The measure used here is the 'economic power' of the total sum loaned: the amount relative to the output of the economy.](#)

<sup>43</sup> On wages see Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 205-6

<sup>44</sup> Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 246; Godley, 'Jewish soft loans societies', 106

<sup>45</sup> Richard Tawney, *Minimum Wage Rates in the Tailoring Industry under the Trade Boards Act of 1909* (London, 1915), 5, 9

<sup>46</sup> *Report on the Volume and Recent Effects of Recent Immigration from Eastern Europe*, Parliamentary Papers, 1894, LXVII, 71

English trade unions, therefore, had a strong interest in integrating and organising the immigrants.<sup>47</sup> The briefly successful general strike of Jewish tailors in 1889 received vital financial and organisational assistance from the English trade union, the Amalgamated Society of Tailors. The strike of Jewish boot finishers and lasters in 1890 was the result of a coalition of forces constructed by the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives. In the case of the cabinet makers the Jewish trade union joined as a branch of the Alliance Cabinet Makers Association in 1893: 1000 copies of the latter organisations rule book were printed in Yiddish.<sup>48</sup>

The gains won by striking workers in 1889 and 1890 were quickly overturned by employers. In defeat cooperation turned to conflict and division. Some of the English trade unions, notably the boot and shoe operatives, now called for legislation to restrict immigration: if the immigrant workers could not be organised then they should be excluded. For their part, Jewish unions in all three trades broke away from their English partners and, in several instances, they divided further, rising dramatically and then falling away.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the project of cooperation and amalgamation among trade unions became stronger over time. In the case of cabinet making Jewish and non-Jewish unions came together in 1907 and in 1918 the Jewish and non-Jewish branches actually merged.<sup>50</sup> In 1912 Jewish tailors in the East End voted unanimously for a general strike in support of 1500 West End tailors. This was followed in 1915 by the creation of the United Garment Workers

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<sup>47</sup> Anne Kershen points out, 'Gartner omits all reference to the common features of English and Jewish trade union activity during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors. Trade Unionism amongst the Tailors of London and Leeds* (Ilford, 1995), xvii

<sup>48</sup> Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 221-3; Leonard Smith, 'Greeners and sweaters: Jewish immigrants and the cabinet making trade in East London, 1880-1914', *Jewish Historical Studies*, 39, 2004, 116

<sup>49</sup> On Tailoring see Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors*; Smith, 'Greeners and sweaters'; Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 224-7

<sup>50</sup> Smith, 'Greeners and sweaters'

Trade Union, a national trade union in which London East End Jewish workers played a role through the participation of the London Tailors', Machinists, and Pressers' Union.<sup>51</sup>

Although divisions and breakaways continued through the 1920s, the tendency towards greater integration with British trade unions is clear. After 1918 the Labour Party provided a further and still more effective institutional connection between Jews and non-Jews in East London. Delegates from most Jewish trade unions were present at the inaugural meeting of Stepney Labour Party in June 1918.<sup>52</sup>

The most resilient form of associational life among Jews in the East End of London comprised the small synagogues and mutual aid societies. Here too we find a history that does not conform to the conventional division between native Jews and immigrants. The small synagogues and benefit societies began to proliferate in the 1860s and 1870s. By 1870 there were more than 20 small synagogues, many created by East European Jews who migrated to London before the pogroms of 1881-2, with more than 2500 seat holders.<sup>53</sup> In 1887 Beatrice Potter described these *chevras* as 'self-creating, self-supporting and self-governing communities, small enough to stimulate charity, worship and study by example.'<sup>54</sup> Many benefit societies were attached to a synagogue but a growing number were not. By 1911 there were 300 in London as a whole with a combined membership of

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<sup>51</sup> The Ladies Tailors Trade Union in London maintained its independence. Ladies tailoring was a branch of the industry that Jews had developed from the 1890s and so, unlike men's tailoring, did not bring Jewish and immigrant workers into cooperation or conflict with the English trade unions. Other splits in the 1920s reflected organisational and ideological disputes between the Leeds headquarters of the UGWTU and its London branches. Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors*, ch.6; Katrina Honeyman, *Well Suited: A History of the Leeds Clothing Industry, 1850-1990*, 157-166; Shirley Lerner, *Breakaway Unions and Small Trade Unions* (London, 1961)

<sup>52</sup> Elaine Smith, 'Jews and politics in East London', 150 in D. Cesarani ed *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry* (Oxford, 1990),150; Julia Bush, *Behind the Lines: East London Labour 1914-1919* (London, 1984), 185-190

<sup>53</sup> V.D. Lipman, *Social History of Jews in England, 1850-1950* (London, 1954), ??

<sup>54</sup> Beatrice Potter, 'The Jewish Community' in Booth ed., *Life and Labour*, 1st series, vol iii, 172

39,000.<sup>55</sup> These societies required a weekly or quarterly subscription and in return offered sickness and death benefit. Both Gartner, in *The Jewish Immigrant in England*, and the present author in *Englishmen and Jews*, have emphasised the way in which this milieu contributed to the separateness of the Jewish East End. Gartner wrote 'Each of these associations filled a small world of its own, furnishing members not only with a modicum of personal security, but with a sense of belonging and of participation in affairs...Christian Englishmen were reluctant to be convivial with immigrant workmen'.<sup>56</sup>

Yet this milieu was not severed from the surrounding non-Jewish environment and from Jewish society beyond the East End. Some benefit societies met in public houses and many used public houses as their address for official correspondence.<sup>57</sup> More important, perhaps, many of these societies borrowed from English associational culture and adopted masonic trappings of regalia, passwords, handshakes and a plethora of honorific offices and titles. In 1926 one member of the Achei Ameth recalled how 'in the early days...members were initiated in the dark, with the officials masked, with long beards, etc. At the crucial moment a lucifer was struck and Moishe arise!'<sup>58</sup> In 1896 the Hebrew Order of Druids was named after 'the earliest known spiritual guides of the country.' Some societies identified themselves with British institutions and individuals: Queen Victoria, Prince George and Baden Powell were some of the personages honoured to have a Jewish society named after them.<sup>59</sup> Others named themselves after eminent members of the Anglo-Jewish elite.

Moreover, as Jews left the East End new lodges and branches were established in the

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<sup>55</sup> Some individuals were members of more than one society but in 1901 this figure was estimated to be as low as 3,600. Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 314; Raymond Kalman, 'The Jewish Friendly Societies of London, 1793-1993', *Jewish Historical Studies*, 33, 1992-4, 156.

<sup>56</sup> Gartner, *The Jewish Immigrant*, 180; Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 315-28

<sup>57</sup> The benefit societies had to enlist at the Registry of Friendly Societies. Their records can be found in the National Archives series FS.

<sup>58</sup> *Jewish Friendly Societies Magazine*, October 1926, 4

<sup>59</sup> *Jewish Friendly Societies Magazine*, August 1926, 4

suburbs of north and west London, as well as among the Jewish workers in Soho. The Jewish East End generated an associational web that spread across the metropolis.

In significant ways these synagogues and benefit societies developed in co-operation with elements of the Anglo-Jewish elite. The leadership of Anglo-Jewry was divided and conflict led to alliances that spanned East End and West End, immigrant and English-born Jews. There were two main sources of division within the elite. One was between those members, generally supporters of the Conservative Party, who favoured legislation to restrict immigration from Eastern Europe, and those, generally supporters of the Liberal Party, who did not. The other line of division was between those who enjoyed the relaxed religious orthodoxy commonplace among acculturated English Jews and a significant minority who welcomed the immigrants' more stringent practice.<sup>60</sup> Often these lines of division ran parallel. Most significantly they did so in the case of Samuel Montagu. Montagu was a banker, whose firm, Samuel Montagu and Co. specialised in the foreign exchange and silver markets. An ardent supporter of William Gladstone and the Liberal Party, he was elected Member of Parliament for Whitechapel in 1885. In 1900 he was succeeded by his nephew Stuart Samuel who held the seat until he retired from politics in 1916. Their electoral majorities were built on solid support among Jewish voters in the constituency.<sup>61</sup>

The Federation of Synagogues, an umbrella body created in 1887 by a combination of synagogues and chevras in the East End was sustained by Montagu's benevolence.<sup>62</sup> In the face of this new organisation, the United Synagogues – the dominant association of

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<sup>60</sup> On Jews supporting restriction see Black, *Social Politics*, 264, 285-291; On the elite more generally see Daniel Gutwein, *The Divided Elite: Economics, Politics and Anglo-Jewry, 1882-1917* (1992)

<sup>61</sup> *East London Observer*, 13 March 1886, 2

<sup>62</sup> Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 160

Anglo-Jewish synagogues – aimed to protect its monopoly of communal power. It refused the Federation a share in the proceeds yielded by the communal tax on meat certified as kosher by the Board of Shechita and allowed the Federation no more than token representation at a conference convened to elect a new Chief Rabbi in 1890. These conflicts over funds, authority and who was qualified to represent and uphold orthodox Judaism were widely represented as struggles between the East End and West End Jews. It was in these terms, for example, that in 1902 a public meeting in the East End protested against the appointment of two young Englishmen as Dayanim: ‘men in whom the East End has, and can have, no confidence whatever.’<sup>63</sup> Yet the opposition of East to West was only partial. It was Samuel Montagu’s intercession which led to the invitation issued to the Federation’s religious authority, Moishe Avigdor Chaikin, to participate in the work of the Beth Din, and so resolve the furore in 1902. Previously, among other gifts and loans, Montagu had donated annually to the Federation the sum it would have received had it been allowed a share of the bounty from the Board of Shechita.<sup>64</sup> Montagu was not alone and other affluent West End Jews such as Hermann Landau, a wealthy stockbroker, and Harry Kosky, a successful businessman who lived in Knightsbridge, in south-west London, also took an active part in the governance of the Federation of Synagogues and, in Kosky’s case, East End Liberal politics.<sup>65</sup> The Federation’s conflict with the United Synagogue was widely characterized as a struggle between East End and West End, immigrant and native, but this way of representing their quarrel paid little heed to the way it was sustained by relationships and patronage that reached across the metropolis. Moreover, the Federation itself, broke the bounds of the East End as immigrants and their children migrated across

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<sup>63</sup> *Jewish Chronicle* 22 July 1898, 25; Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 149

<sup>64</sup> Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 149; Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 324.

<sup>65</sup> On Landau see Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 116; On Kosky see Smith, ‘Jews and politics’, 147

the capital. By 1911 the organisation encompassed synagogues to the North at Stoke Newington, South Hackney, Tottenham and Walthamstow, to the east at Limehouse, Canning Town and Bow, and to the far south east of London at Woolwich and Plumstead.

West End political leadership for causes rooted in the East End extended to secular politics. In 1911 the British government introduced a path-breaking system of health insurance. Wage earners were to contribute 4d per week to finance health benefits, their employers would provide 3d per week and the state 2d. These were small amounts: 4d per week was lower than the standard subscription to a benefit society or trade union. Unnaturalized immigrants were to be excluded from full membership of the scheme. The government minister responsible, Reginald McKenna, explained, 'I do think we are entitled to ask that he [an alien] should become a British subject before he receives the special assistance that the state offers'.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, however, naturalization as a British subject had become more difficult to acquire. The procedure now demanded not only payment of a £7 fee – roughly equivalent to three weeks' wages for a well-paid worker - but also that applicants demonstrate they had 'identified with the life and habits of this country'.<sup>67</sup> The new insurance legislation threatened to exclude and discriminate against Jewish immigrants.

In a remarkable turn of events the Jewish benefit societies managed to get the new legislation changed so that immigrants who had been in the country for five years were eligible for state support whether or not they had naturalized as British subjects. This was achieved by persistent lobbying of politicians and the senior civil servants responsible for

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<sup>66</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, 5<sup>th</sup> series, volume XXX, (London, 1911), column 1093,

<sup>67</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, Jewish Board of Deputies, C13/1/6, Minute book of the Law and Parliamentary Committee, 5 April 1905; National Archives, HO 45/10687/226279/6, applicants for naturalization and knowledge of English, 27 December 1912.



drafting the legislation. As they mobilised to achieve their goal, the benefit societies rejected the assistance offered by the Board of Deputies of British Jews – the Anglo-Jewish communal body. The Board appeared an unreliable ally and likely to impose its own assessment of the immigrants' interests and how they should be defended.<sup>68</sup> Yet this did not mean the benefit societies spurned the help of all wealthy, English Jews. They approached Stuart Samuel, now the MP for Whitechapel, whose prestige ran high, not least due to his record of staunch opposition to state restrictions on immigration. Samuel's support was energetic and vital in getting ministers and civil servants to make changes. At a huge public meeting in the East End, at the Great Assembly Hall, Samuel argued the case for the inclusion of unnaturalised immigrants in the National Insurance Scheme. He did so alongside Adolf Lewinstein, President of the Achei Ameth Benefit Society, who addressed the meeting in Yiddish and set out the obstacles that now faced immigrants seeking to naturalise as British subjects.<sup>69</sup> Samuel's connections and reputation enabled him to arrange the meetings at which he and leading members of the Jewish benefit societies made their arguments. He invited the same representative, including Lewinstein, to the Houses of Parliament where they were able to lobby members from all main political parties.<sup>70</sup>

The campaign over the National Insurance Bill highlights some of the interconnections between Jewish immigrants, sections of Anglo-Jewish elite and the British state. Lewinstein's presence was emblematic. He was a Yiddish speaker who had played a leading role as the Jewish benefit societies had prepared and presented their case. In 1911 he went to Parliament not merely to admire its façade but to engage in the political and

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<sup>68</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 14 July 1911, 21

<sup>69</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 21 July 1911, 11; *der yidisher zhurnal*, 18 July 1911, 1

<sup>70</sup> Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 374-7; On Samuel's role see the retrospective account in *Jewish Friendly Societies Magazine*, June 1926, 5

legislative process. The role played by Lewinsein provides one vivid instance of how social relations and political conflicts spilled beyond the dichotomies drawn so often between Englishmen and Jews, immigrants and natives, East End and West End. To be sure, these oppositions capture some facets of social and political relations. Moreover, when invoked by contemporaries they had tangible effects. They were used, for example, to call for legislation to restrict Jewish immigration, to mobilise Jews in defence of their understanding of Judaism, and they were also called upon to shape the 'new departure' in Anglo-Jewish social policy in the early 1890s. What is extraordinary is not that these dichotomies feature in the historiography but that they dominate it almost entirely.

Taken together the patterns of social interaction, civil society and political conflict excavated in this essay suggest a new perspective on processes of Jewish integration and acculturation in London. These processes do not resonate with deep-rooted historiographical orthodoxies that contrast East and West European Jewries. Neither did wait upon a well-ordered sequence of generational change or lessons dispensed from Anglo-Jewry or British society. Integration and acculturation proceeded, in part, from the agency of immigrants in marriage markets and street markets, in music halls and cinemas; it also followed from social relations that placed immigrants in the orbit of English trade unions and of some of the wealthiest and most powerful English Jews, and from the processes of negotiation to which these dealings gave rise. In acknowledging the significance of these sorts of relationships and practices sort we can work towards a new history of Jewish immigration not only in London but also more widely.