

INTRODUCTION

To embark upon research on the history of Russian Jewry in the 1970s, as I did, meant, inevitably, becoming a ‘revisionist’ . . . Any young scholar, therefore, was . . . making hypotheses that seemed to go against a century-old scholarly consensus . . .¹

This dissertation examines the evolution and internal life of Ireland’s Jewish community during its foundation period in the era of mass emigration (1881-1914). In order to do this, a comprehensive reassessment of Irish Jewish historiography has been necessary, and one which has focused closely on context. Although it should be obvious to any well-trained researcher that the history of any Jewry cannot accurately be written without first placing it within its proper historical setting, this has been far from obvious to most chroniclers of Irish Jewish history. However in adopting what is, in effect, a standard historiographical approach this work places itself in opposition to a communal narrative that has become embedded over a period of at least one hundred years, and is represented in a vast and varied corpus of material: scholarly, anecdotal and popular. Thus the reflections of John Klier (above) seem particularly apt.

One major weakness in Irish Jewish history as it stands is a common misperception that the sources that have survived are not sufficient to allow for any meaningful reconstruction of communal life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This study, which has been based on a variety of primary and secondary materials, shows that the many gaps that exist in the primary sources do not, in fact, preclude a critical reconstruction of communal life. Once the available sources are balanced with a nuanced understanding of context and supplemented by the relevant scholarship, it is possible to gain a fairly detailed understanding of many aspects of Irish Jewish history or, where this is not possible, to arrive at a set of informed assumptions. As the extant sources relate primarily to communal institutions, this has determined of necessity a focus on four main elements: context, historiography, community and charity.

Context is a constant refrain of this work. This is thoroughly validated by the findings, which consistently highlight the difference that a sound analytical approach

¹ John D. Klier, ‘Hans Rogger, 1923-2002’, *East European Jewish Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2002): 152.

can make to our understanding of the subject at hand. In this respect, Irish Jewry has been located within three primary settings which are outlined in Chapter One: the Russian empire, Anglo-Jewry, and the period of mass emigration. The first part of the chapter provides an overview of recent historiographical developments in the study of Russian Jewry. These have completely revolutionised scholarly perceptions of the discrimination and violence that form the backdrop to mass emigration. This has a knock-on effect for the self-understanding of communities that were formed or revitalised in this period. In the second half of the chapter, the focus shifts to outlining the processes of mass emigration itself, and to surveying the way in which this phenomenon affected the established and acculturated Jewries of the western world. Evolving notions of Jewish solidarity are examined, with a close eye to the tension that arose between the cultural politics of Jewish emancipation and the demands of mass emigration. The internal Jewish politics of this period, which revolve around issues of culture, solidarity and Jewish/non-Jewish relations, will be a recurrent and unifying theme of the latter part of the thesis. Chapter One concludes by reviewing the broader trends of mass emigration with respect to Ireland's most immediate context of Anglo-Jewry. This is perhaps the least explored of Ireland's Jewish settings.

The first basic contention of this thesis is that, as it stands, the history of Ireland's Jewish community has been disproportionately influenced by a collective memory that has been informed by traditional Jewish meta-narratives of *galut* (exile). What has hitherto been absent from most – if not all – considerations of the topic has been a critical Jewish dimension. On the occasions when Irish Jewish history has been approached in a scholarly manner this has almost always been from an external perspective, namely from that of disciplines and methodologies that have little or no reference point in an up-to-date Jewish Studies approach. This has left scholars ill-equipped to identify the problems with the existing historiography, to evaluate the communal narrative that has accrued over the last century, or to analyse either according to contemporary standards and methodologies. As a consequence, even what are regarded to be the most complete, sophisticated and conclusive histories of Irish Jewry uncritically regurgitate many of the well-worn clichés of communal narrative. These are the issues that are addressed in Chapter Two. This opens by reinforcing the importance of context to any meaningful assessment of the existing Irish Jewish historiography and the narrative that has driven it. Section 2.1 focuses in

particular on the arrival myths that are a favourite theme of popular anecdote, in an analysis that is indebted to the insights of contemporary Russian Jewish historiography. This allows us to identify the influence on Irish Jewish history of classic Jewish tropes of helplessness, victimhood and persecution, which have been privileged at the cost of a far more nuanced reality. The remainder of Chapter Two confronts another major weakness in the current Irish Jewish historiography: the failure adequately to address and analyse the nature of anti-Jewish sentiment in the Irish setting. Section 2.2 highlights the urgent need for a thorough, informed and up-to-date analysis of this phenomenon, by demonstrating the way in which all evaluations of Jewish life in Ireland are, to some degree, dependent upon varying individual perceptions of anti-Jewish sentiment. Section 2.3 looks specifically at Ireland's most notorious expression of anti-Jewish prejudice, the Limerick Boycott of 1904. The circumstances, narratives and counter-narratives of the Boycott are closely examined using a range of sources, from the well-known to the unfamiliar. This section seeks to address a gaping hole in the otherwise exhausted history of the Boycott, through the introduction of a desperately needed analytical perspective.

Chapters Three and Four are constructed largely on the basis of a variety of primary sources: memoirs, minutes, correspondence and contemporary newspaper coverage. Some of these materials have been cited so widely in the secondary literature – and frequently out of context – that their original meaning has become distorted. Others, principally the *Jewish Chronicle* and the records of the Dublin Hebrew Congregation (DHC), have been completely neglected by communal chroniclers. Those who have consulted these sources have generally failed, through a lack of expertise in Jewish historiography, to recognise their overall significance. The *Jewish Chronicle* was lampooned in 1908 by a London reader for its assiduous attention to the *minutiae* of Anglo-Jewish provincial life.² This is precisely what makes it the single greatest fount of detail on many aspects of Ireland's communal life for which no formal records survive. As many of its reports were penned by local correspondents, the *Chronicle* has much to reveal regarding the aspirations, day-to-day life and internal relationships of the community. It also sheds light on the links that existed between the principal Irish communities and the Anglo-Jewish 'centre' in London, and on the overall situation of these communities as 'provincial' British

² *Jewish Chronicle*, 30 October 1908.

Jewries. When taken together with the DHC archive, the *Jewish Chronicle* allows for the writing back of the pre-existing, so-called ‘native’ community into communal history. This is a particular focus of Chapters Three and Four.

Chapter Three details the reconstruction and reorientation of Irish Jewry as a consequence of mass emigration. Due to the nature of the extant sources the main focus of the chapter necessarily rests on Dublin, however the other principal communities are, wherever possible, investigated in their own right. Section 3.1 examines the character of the ‘native’ community and the response of the established leadership to the range of challenges that were posed by largescale east European immigration. Section 3.2 looks more closely at the immigrant community from both internal and external perspectives, exploring the impact of external negative stereotyping on the communal self-image. In the latter half of the section, the internal relationships of the immigrant community are examined in greater detail. A central point of the analysis, and of the chapter as a whole, is the intra-communal conflict for which all British immigrant communities were notorious. This dissertation contends that a close study of internal discord is integral to a proper understanding of these communities, both in the long and in the short term. Chapter Four surveys Ireland’s Jewish communal institutions in order to interrogate the nature of Jewish philanthropy and solidarity in the Irish context, with respect to the broader trends of the mass emigration period and to the specific backdrop of Anglo-Jewry.

Chapters Three and Four resume a number of the themes that are raised in Chapter One, with respect to the politics of accelerated Jewish migration. Both chapters examine the way in which the mainstream social and cultural processes of the mass emigration period relate to the Irish context. Thus it finally becomes possible to explore in detail the ways in which Irish Jewry was affected by the experience of east European immigration, and to judge with greater equity the response of the pre-existing ‘native’ community. Current understandings are, in contrast, based either on the one-dimensional communal narrative or on ill-judged, simplistic or presumptuous transplantations onto Ireland of the social and cultural patterns that relate primarily to mainland Britain. These chapters pinpoint important points of comparability and distinctiveness between the British and Irish contexts in terms of acculturation, class and politics, both internal and external. This highlights the importance of evaluating each individual British provincial community in its own right. In this vein, it is argued that the smaller Irish communities should be

appreciated in their own right, insofar as is possible, rather than being assumed to be mirror images of their Dublin counterpart.

This leads on to another important purpose of this thesis, which is to add to the growing body of scholarship that rejects the dismissive assumption of some mainstream historians, that the study of smaller Jewish communities has little of value to contribute to the historical record of world Jewry.³ The next key argument of this work is that the history of these communities has much to disclose in terms of broader historiographical and cultural patterns. It fleshes out the bigger picture – in this case of Anglo-Jewry – by illustrating the way in which broader processes and trends were played out on the local level. It reveals the character of Jewish interactions at a variety of different levels: national, international, internal and external. Without such information, patterns of comparability and distinctiveness, which are otherwise recognised to be an important element of Jewish history as a whole, remain unacknowledged and effectively erased from the historical record.

This point is particularly pertinent when it comes to the small, outlying and parochial Jewry of Ireland. When not being consigned to the dustbin of history, Ireland's Jewish community has been treated by both external and internal commentators in a cavalier and condescending manner that does no justice either to its complexity or to its potential relevance to broader historical trends. Differences in size, atmosphere, outlook, political and cultural setting with respect to the former mother community in Britain have been ignored. This study shows that Irish Jewish history does not precisely replicate the patterns of its Anglo-Jewish counterpart as has, in effect, been argued in the past. While British models can be useful in interpreting the internal processes of Irish Jewry as is shown in Chapter Three, they must be taken with a degree of caution.

The history of individual small communities, wherever they are located, is not just relevant to understanding these communities themselves. In studying them, we gain a better understanding of the mechanics and internal politics of small communities in general. This allows us to identify underlying historical patterns relating to issues such as the nature of internal and external relationships, communal self-image and narrative, and philanthropy and other forms of internal problem-

³ On the 'triple marginality' of local Jewish Studies within Jewish and national historiographies in general, see Tony Kushner, *Anglo-Jewry since 1066: Place, Locality and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 42ff.

solving. This adds colour, depth and detail to the bigger picture that has hitherto been absent within Jewish Studies.