

A History of Irish Jewry

by Stuart Rosenblatt

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Ireland has had a Jewish presence for nearly 1000 years. There is a myth that the earliest Jewish inhabitants were from the lost tribe of Dan who settled in the south-west coast of Ireland, bringing with them the harp, Ireland's national symbol.

The *Annals of Innisfallen*, a chronicle of Ireland's medieval history written by the monks in 1079, notes that five Jews came over the sea with gifts for the King of Munster ... and promptly went back home.

Following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal in 1496 some Marrano Jews, who were merchants, made their way to the south coast of Ireland. In the town of Youghal in County Cork the first Jewish Marrano mayor, William Annyas, a soldier of fortune, was elected in 1555. Another Jew, William Annyas's uncle Francis (Francisco), was mayor there in 1569, 1576 and 1581

Almost 350 years later in 1898, Wormser Lewis Harris was elected as the first Jewish Lord Mayor of Dublin. Sadly, he died on the eve of his installation, and it was almost another 60 years before Robert Briscoe was elected Lord Mayor of Dublin in 1956 and again in 1961.

In 1655 Oliver Cromwell encouraged the Jews to resettle in the British Isles after 400 years in exile. He considered their supposed wealth and reputation for industry were likely to advance the country's commercial interests.

1660 saw the earliest recorded establishment of a synagogue by three Jews who practised in secret. It consisted of a prayer room in Dublin's Crane Lane leading from Dame Street to Wellington Quay. It took five years before they became known as Jewish, as up to then they behaved as Christians. They were *conversos* whose families had previously escaped the Spanish and Portuguese inquisition. Two or three families of Polish or German origin also settled in Dublin at about this time. The synagogue survived till about 1762. It is thought that

this may be one of the oldest Jewish communities formally formed in the British Isles.

The first rabbi of the community was Aaron be Moses, born at Novogrodek in Poland around 1635. He had worked in Lemna and in Vilna. In Dublin he combined the roles of rabbi, teacher, marriage-broker and scribe,



Crane Lane today

The oldest Jewish cemetery in Dublin officially dates from August 1784. It is situated in Ballybough [village of the poor] Clontarf, commonly known in 'the early days' as *The Jews Fields*. On 28 October 1718, Alexander Felix (David Penso), Jacob Do Porto, and David Machado Do Sequeira, on behalf of the Ashkenazim, leased from an Irish MP, Captain Chichester Phillips of Drumcondra Castle, the plot of land on which the graveyard was subsequently built. The first burial was Moses Jacob Cowan in February 1748 aged 65. The cemetery closed in 1910.

At the beginning of the 18th century the number of Jews had decreased to three families, increasing in the 1820s mainly from England, Germany and Poland. By 1881 over 450 Jews had settled in Dublin. They spoke English and were quite prosperous. By now there was a synagogue in Marys Abbey just north of the river Liffey.

The big influx happened following the infamous 'May Laws' of 1882. Boys from the age of 12 were to be conscripted into the Russian army for 25 years. The frequency of pogroms increased. An observer wrote "The entire people were herded by the conquering Cossacks into slavery. Children were taken from parents for slave labour in the mines and to labour camps of their Tsarist masters. This was a life sentence, and their parents preferred the ultimate risk of abandoning their children to the vagaries of an ocean voyage hoping they would eventually arrive in the United States."

The largest influx to Ireland was between 1882 and 1910 when approximately 3,000

arrived from eastern Europe and settled, mainly in Dublin, with smaller numbers going to Belfast, Cork and other smaller towns.

Ireland was chosen because it was regarded as a natural route westward for some to what they called 'England-Ireland' and then travel onwards to the United States. They hoped to earn enough money in Ireland to complete their journey. Many did and some ended in South Africa, but a sufficient number did stay in Ireland.

Many migrants were sold tickets to New York but short-changed by unscrupulous agents and captains. They were told they were in America when they were in Cork. Some say because of their broken English they believed that the cry "Cork, Cork" was taken as "New York, New York".

These newcomers settled south of Dublin's city centre in an area known as 'Little Jerusalem'. Many of the immigrants became door-to-door peddlers selling household goods and holy pictures. They were known as 'vickleymen' as their door-to-door rounds took a week. They also engaged in money lending, tailoring and small manufacturing enterprises. The second generation would eventually go on to become major producers of clothing and furniture.

In Dublin, from a high of 4,500 Jews in the 1950s, there are now about 170 in the Orthodox synagogue, about 180 in the Progressive synagogue. The Cork community is now closed. There are 60 in Belfast. The last census showed hundreds



Entrance to Ballybough cemetery

more professing Judaism but not members of any community.

Ireland produced many notable and famous Jews, most notably Chaim Herzog, who became president of Israel.