



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“The Jews of Ireland”

by James Ryan

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For my major project, I wanted to choose a topic that I could really identify with. Soon I realized that I could identify more with something Jewish that would also always be a unique part of me for the rest of my life. In this case, that was my heritage. With one half of my family being Irish Catholic and the other being Eastern European Jewish, I figured that I might want to research something that brought the two cultures together. Thus I chose a topic that I could really relate to: the Jews of Ireland.

Normally, when most people think of Ireland, Judaism is not the first thing that comes to mind, since the country is predominantly Roman Catholic. However, over the past few hundred years, Jews have established major communities in different parts of Ireland. While many Jews came to Ireland at different times, they all have a history of becoming assimilated into Irish culture, yet at the same time, adding their own beliefs, religion, and culture into the history of Ireland. There is even an Irish-Jewish Museum in Dublin dedicated to the contributions and achievements of Jews in Irish society.

As part of my research, I interviewed some primary sources, Irish Jews, about their experiences growing up as Jews in Ireland, including what their religious observance and their communities were like, and their views on the state of Judaism in Ireland today. Also, to research this project, I contacted Valerie Ganley, the director of a film called *Shalom Ireland*, about obtaining a screening copy. Ms. Ganley, an American Jew of Eastern European descent, married an Irish-American Catholic, and discovered, on a trip to Ireland with her husband, that her great-grandparents were the first Jewish couple to be married in the city of Waterford. After learning about the history of Jews in Ireland, she was intrigued enough to research the subject and create a movie about it. A copy, which came to me as a bar mitzvah present, really helped me to obtain a greater understanding of Jews in Ireland. The film is a wonderful documentary, and is an essential teaching tool.

When I started my research, I learned that the story of the Jews in Ireland was a broad history that stretched over centuries. I eventually decided that the best way to approach such a large topic was to research four main points: how Jews arrived in Ireland, the Jewish experience in Ireland, Irish Jews today, and the future of Irish Jews.

For starters, how did the Jews ever get to Ireland, anyway? There are several theories as to their arrival, all ranging in timeframes from 1000 CE to the 19th century.

Jews are first mentioned as arriving in Ireland in 1079, as a small band of five people who, “. . . Came from over sea with gifts for Toirdelbach (The king of Munster), and they were sent back again over the sea.” According to legend, these Jews came from Normandy, and were presenting gifts to Toirdelbach, the grandson of Irish King Brian Boru.

Records show that by 1232 there was a Jewish community in Ireland. Several records kept under King Henry III of Britain refer to “Jews and their keepings of all cultures touching the king.” However, it was not until the turn of the 16th century that a strong and sustainable Jewish community had embedded itself in Ireland. The Jews who settled there were Sephardic Jews who had fled from the Inquisition in Portugal in 1496. They soon established a colony, and the Jews from this settlement came to be very well known. One Jew, Francis Annyas, was elected mayor of Youghal, County Cork in not only 1569, but also in 1576 and 1581.

Jews were first mentioned in a bill passed by the Irish House of Commons in 1746. The bill “naturalized persons professing the Jewish religion in Ireland.” This bill later went on to the British government for approval, but failed to be passed into law. Jews were also excluded from the Irish Naturalization Act of 1783, but the bill was amended to include Jews in 1846. The Irish Marriage Act of 1844 was openly amended to include Jewish marriage laws.

After the formation of these Irish colonies of Jews, many Jews later arrived in the city of Limerick in a rather unusual manner. A large group of Jews had paid for a passage to America in the 1880s. An unscrupulous ship captain charged them large sums of money for passage, with the promise that they would arrive in America. As the story goes, the ship captain docked the ship a few miles outside of Limerick, telling the passengers that New York was up the road, and then abandoned them. The Jews established their community in Limerick, and the members of this group are the ancestors of many of the Jews in Ireland today.

In the 20th century, some Irish people, particularly from the turn of the century to World War II, viewed Jews with mixed feelings. There are several historic examples of anti-Semitism and discrimination. On the other hand, there are also examples of Jews holding important social positions. Many Jews served the Irish political parties during the War for Independence, which occurred from 1919 to 1921 between the British and the Irish Nationalists, led by Eamon de Valera, as gun runners and messengers for the Irish army in the fight for their freedom.

Jews had many communities from which to choose upon their immigration to Ireland. Cities with Jewish communities included Dublin, Cork, and Belfast. In addition to these cities, several other Irish cities had communities with a significant Jewish population. One of the most infamous was in Limerick. While the people of Limerick did share most of the same views about Jews as the rest of Ireland and did not persecute them, Limerick is also the home of the most anti-Semitic event in Irish history. Here, in 1904, the only certified pogrom outside of Eastern Europe took place.

On January 11th, 1904, Father John Creagh, the priest and leader of a good-sized Catholic congregation, delivered a sermon to his congregants denouncing the Jews, claiming that they practiced blood libel, or the myth that they killed Christian children at Pesach and drained their blood to make matzos. Based on this lie, he called for a mass avoidance of Jews in Limerick. Some congregants were so riled up by this sermon that they decided to go to the Jewish neighborhood and assault the Jews. The local police, however, stopped this event, before any major damage was done or anyone was injured.

Unfortunately, the problem for the Jews of Limerick was not yet over. In the weeks that followed, Creagh preached yet again, this time calling for a boycott of all Jewish businesses. This boycott lasted for weeks, and became so devastating to many of the vendors that five Jewish families closed their stores and left Limerick. Luckily, this anti-Semitism did not spread to other parts of Ireland, and this was the only major organized act against Jews in Ireland’s recorded history.

At several points in the early 1900s, Jews served in important political posts in the Irish government. From the mid 1900s until the present day, several Jews have served as representatives in the Irish House of Parliament and have also been elected as the mayors of several major cities. Probably the most famous person among these individuals is Robert Briscoe. Briscoe is known for being the first Jewish Lord Mayor of Dublin, though he served in other political posts before his election in the Oireachtas, or Irish parliament, as a representative.

Briscoe, born in 1894, participated in the Irish War for Independence, where he was a gunrunner for the Irish Nationalists. Briscoe also accompanied Eamon de Valera, the leader of the Irish Nationalism movement and the first Irish president, to America on his first visit. Briscoe later spoke out, saying that his being a “Hebrew” did not impact his Irishness. Later on, during World War II, Briscoe also affirmed his belief in Zionism. He came under heavy scrutiny from the Irish security services while he was a member of the lower house of the Irish Parliament because of his support of the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Briscoe was also a major advocate for the successful entrance of approximately 5,000 Jewish refugees into Ireland from mainland Europe after the Holocaust.

The most famous event in his political career, however, was when Briscoe was elected Lord Mayor of Dublin in 1956. As Lord Mayor, Briscoe paid several visits to the United States, and in many ways improved relations between politicians in America and Ireland. Earlier, Briscoe first visited the United States in 1939, with Eamon de Valera. During his second visit to New York in 1959, when he was the Grand Marshal for the St. Patrick’s Day parade, Briscoe openly shared his Jewish views and beliefs with the press in New York. In fact, when interviewed by a reporter about his preparations for St. Patrick’s Day, Briscoe replied, “Yes, a happy St. Patrick’s Day to everyone back in Ireland, and also a happy Purim to those celebrating it without me back home. I hope to join them soon in the hopes of enjoying much hamantaschen.” Briscoe was the Lord Mayor for one year, and was then re-elected for another term later in the 1960s. His son, Ben Briscoe, was elected to the same post in 1988.

In addition to Robert Briscoe, there were several other Irish Jews who were politically important. For instance, Chaim Herzog, who was born in Belfast, was the 6th President of Israel, a post that he held from 1983 to 1993. His father, Isaac Herzog, was the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, and served in this position after being the first Chief Rabbi of Ireland under de Valera.

In addition to these political triumphs, Jews were met in several instances with open arms and welcomes during important events in Irish history. One of the best examples of this acceptance was during the Irish War for Independence. Jews were employed by both the Liberal (pro-independence treaty) and IRA (anti-independence treaty) parties during the war in several important jobs, such as gunrunners, messengers and scouts. Jews were often employed in groups that specialized in executing these tasks. These groups were depended upon during the fighting, and many Jews saw the front lines during this war.

For those who were not directly involved in the fighting, being a Jew could be advantageous as well. One of Robert Briscoe’s sons, Joseph, was six when the Irish Civil War broke out, between the Freestaters, who supported a completely independent Ireland, and the Republicans, who did not. At the time, a curfew was being enforced. Joseph and a friend of his broke the curfew and were questioned by some Republican soldiers. When asked if he was a Republican or a Freestater, Joseph simply replied, “Neither. I am a Jew.” His interrogators found this amusing, and chose to lead Joseph back to his home.

Beyond the war, Jews were shown great respect as well. Strong Jewish communities were established in Dublin and Jewish businesses and synagogues took root in these places. Specific neighborhoods became enclaves where Jews lived, worshipped, and made a living. One of the largest and most famous of these communities was a part of Dublin on the banks of the River Liffey called Little Jerusalem. There, many Lithuanian Jewish immigrants and their Irish-born children did business and recalled fond memories of growing up.

In my research for this paper, my bar mitzvah mentor, Devera Witkin, was able to put me in touch with her friend, Davida Handler, an Irish Jew who left Ireland in 1959. Ms. Handler was nice enough to allow me to interview her by email. She has positive memories of growing up as an Irish Jew, and was able to tell me all about it.

Ms. Handler grew up in Dublin, where most of the Jewish community was and still is based. She lived with her parents and a sister, among Catholic neighbors and many Catholic friends with large families, where there were often 10 or more children. In fact, one of her Catholic friends assumed that Ms. Handler's parents did not like each other, since there were only two children in their family!

Though Ms. Handler grew up in a mixed neighborhood with different religions, her family did a good portion of their shopping in Little Jerusalem, shopping for specifically Jewish foods, such as kosher meat, pickles, and bagels on Sunday mornings. In fact, most of the Jewish families who did their shopping in Little Jerusalem went to Clanbrassil Street, where every store was devoted to Jewish businesses, such as butchers, delicatessens, and bakeries.

Ms. Handler and her family were not religious, yet they did attend High Holiday services and special occasions at the Grenville Hall Synagogue, built after the bombings of Dublin during World War II. It is an Orthodox synagogue with a relatively small congregation compared to that at the former Adelaide Road synagogue.

Although it may seem so because she has lived in the U.S. for so long, Ms. Handler originally never had any intention of leaving Dublin. However, she left simply because she was visiting with her family in New York when she met her future American husband. When the two were engaged, they returned to Ireland and were married at Grenville Hall Synagogue and then moved to California, where she still lives.

Today, the number of Jews in Ireland has unfortunately shrunk considerably. The Jewish community in Ireland has always been particularly small, with the highest numbers in the mid-20th century around 5,000. However, as of 2002, only 1,780 Jews were still living in all of Ireland, according to the Irish Census. Jewish communities, such as Little Jerusalem in Dublin, have lost many of their stores for varied reasons. Communities that used to have 10 kosher butcher shops now have one small shop that is still family owned. Many of the Jewish stores are now owned by larger chains, and this trend has uprooted some of the smaller "mom and pop" stores.

While doing research for this paper, I also had the pleasure of interviewing Natalie Wynn, who is Ms. Handler's cousin. She is Jewish and currently lives in Ireland, and she told me about the Irish-Jewish community there. She has lived in Dublin, the largest Jewish community in Ireland, for the last 37 years, and was able to tell me how the community has changed.

According to Ms. Wynn, the Jewish community has been shrinking for the last 40 years, and continues to shrink. The congregation that she attends is extremely small, with a synagogue building that only comfortably seats 100. There is one rabbi who periodically visits from the UK, and they do not have their own full-time rabbi. When he is at the temple, the congregation holds weekly Shabbat evening services and monthly Shabbat morning services, in addition to holiday, wedding and bar mitzvah celebrations.

Besides Ms. Wynn's own congregation, the Jewish community in Ireland has lost many of its numbers exponentially, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, when overall Irish immigration was at its height. Many younger people left because they were looking for Jewish communities with more opportunities and larger congregations. Soon, others left to find spouses, and their parents and grandparents soon followed. What remains of the community is very limited, and there is little interaction among its members. Many young people intend to leave as soon as they are able. The remaining Jews are trying to keep the community alive. Unfortunately, this is a nearly impossible task with the sharp decrease in numbers.

Despite a recent influx of Jews from other places such as South Africa, which is slowly beginning to reinvigorate the community, many of the Jewish people left in Ireland still do not believe that there is much of a future for Jews there. Many of the Irish-born Jews who now live there believe that within 50 years Jews will no longer have large, organized congregations, and may lose touch with their Jewish heritage if they remain in Ireland. Despite this outlook, many Jews in Ireland today continue to practice their faith and pass on their traditions, both Jewish and Irish, to their children, in hopes of keeping the future of Judaism in Ireland alive.

In addition to the Jews who actually live in Ireland, there are many people who identify themselves as Irish Jews because of their heritage who live in other countries. I am one of these people. I believe that the Jewish community in Ireland can be strengthened and kept alive not only by the people in Ireland, but also by those who identify themselves as such. Despite having moved away, people are still able to pass on their Irish and Jewish roots to succeeding generations, in hopes that these future generations may come back to Ireland and continue the traditions. Irish Jews might even follow the lead of Jews from other countries, and return to Ireland someday to re-establish their businesses in the dwindling Jewish communities such as Little Jerusalem. I believe that the spirit of the community can be kept alive by those who maintain a strong identity and connection with their heritages, regardless of whether they are living in Ireland or elsewhere. I have not yet visited Ireland, but when I do, I would very much like to visit Dublin and see Little Jerusalem, the Irish-Jewish Museum and the Jewish community for myself.

For me, the possibility of the loss of the Jewish community in Ireland marks the connection that I must maintain with the Irish-Jewish community. By passing on my heritage and identity to future generations, I can help to keep the community alive and strong. This is a part of me that I cannot forget, which will always be with me. If others do the same, the community as a whole will be able to grow and thrive.

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