

## East Belfast's Forgotten Philanthropist

The name Otto Jaffe has long been associated with North Belfast, so it may come as a surprise that he made the East of the city his home for most of his adult life.

He was born in Denmark in 1846 to German parents, and his birth was registered in Hamburg where the family was from. He came to Belfast at the age of 12 and he entered the family business Jaffe Brothers Linen Merchants at the age of 16 after completing his education both here and in Switzerland. He married Paula Hertz of Hamburg in New York in 1879, and they had 2 sons, Arthur and William.

He entered public life in 1894 when he was chosen to represent St Anne's Ward for the Belfast Corporation and in 1899 he was elected Lord Mayor of Belfast for the first time.

Otto built his house Kin Edar in 1898 shortly before he became Lord Mayor for the first time. It stood on ground near what is now Sydenham Avenue in East Belfast and it would have fitted well with the houses of the other wealthy merchants who lived in the area at the time. Kin Edar sounds like it must have been a very impressive residence. It had 4 receptions, 9 bedrooms, servants apartments, baths etc., and its grounds (about 8 acres)

contained tennis courts, glass houses, a vinery, fruit and vegetable gardens, 6 outhouses and 2 workers cottages. It would have covered most of the area that is now Norwood Avenue and Drive etc.

In 1900 Otto Jaffe was knighted by the then Lord Lieutenant, Lord Cadogan and in 1904 he was made Lord Mayor of Belfast for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time.

Sir Otto was well known throughout his public life in Belfast for his generosity of both time and money. During his first term as Lord Mayor he and the Lady Mayoress raised £10,000 for the dependants of soldiers and sailors serving in the Boer War. He was officially connected with the Royal Victoria Hospital where he was Governor having also contributed £1000 of his own money to the original building fund.

Otto was particularly interested in education, and in 1905 he gave £4000 to the fund for better equipment for Queens College (now university). He served as Chairman of the technical Education Committee for Belfast and also sat on the Dublin Committee, and for his services to education the Royal University of Ireland conferred on him an honorary law degree - the L.L.D. He was also an active member of the committee that got the public libraries act extended to Belfast leading to the establishment of the first free library.

In 1904, he contributed £4000 to the building of a new synagogue in North Belfast, to replace the Great Victoria Street Synagogue

built by his father, Daniel Jaffe and 3 years later he erected the Jaffe School for the Jewish Children of Belfast on the Cliftonville Road again at his own cost. He continued to finance both the Synagogue & the school, and apparently even had to pay for the dinner that was held in his honour for the opening of the school!

His Public roles also included Justice of the Peace, German Vice Consul then in 1882 he was elected Consul, Belfast Harbour Commissioner., and in 1901 he was High Sheriff of Belfast. In whatever little spare time he had he was President of the Natural History and Philosophical Society and a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, and was interested in other institutions such as the Scout Movement and the Salvation Army

Sir Otto is also connected to east Belfast through the linen industry. In 1910 he erected the Jaffe Spinning Mill on the Newtownards Road, also known as Strand Spinning. In this capacity he provided work for about 350 of the people in the area rising to 650 in 1914 when the company expanded to make munitions. In later years the company was bought over by James Mackie and Son and is still visible today as the Portview trade Centre.

So how come for a man who did so much for Belfast there is not so much as a plaque or memorial to commemorate Sir Otto Jaffe? Things turned sour for the Jaffes after the outbreak of the First World War. In August of 1914 the Government passed the Aliens Restriction Act that allowed them to control the activities of what

they defined as “enemy aliens”, particularly Germans. It also covered movements in that they could not travel more than 5 miles, and there were prohibited areas where they were not permitted to live. The Trading with the Enemy Act also closed down any German owned businesses.

I should point out that in 1888 Otto Jaffe had been naturalized as a British citizen and de naturalized as a German Citizen and was also staunchly unionist, therefore seeing himself as being totally loyal to King and Country. Even the fact that his eldest son Arthur was a Captain in the London Irish Rifles and was fighting in the war did not stop him from being viewed with suspicion, and in December of 1914 a telegram was passed to the British government stating that he was a spy who had been reporting to the German Authorities on Belfast and in particular the Harland and Wolff shipyard.

During the early days of 1915 Sir Otto and Lady Jaffe continued to live in Belfast with relative normality. The Great War, which was to have been over by Christmas, was entering its sixth month, and there were a few small German air raids in and around Belfast, which were affecting the morale of the people, but it was with the sinking of the Lusitania that things really became untenable for them.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 1915 the Cunard passenger liner the Lusitania which was bound for Liverpool was torpedoed by a German submarine off the coast of Cork and over 1000 people were

drowned. Anti German feeling in Britain rose to breaking point with riots in several major cities including Glasgow, London, Manchester and Liverpool. German businesses were wrecked and their homes destroyed, and all Germans living in Britain were advised to apply for places in internment camps “for their own good”.

What were termed “non naturalized aliens” (and this included those of Turkish and Austrian birth) had already been interned in these camps by the British government. This was coupled with the distressing reports of bodies being brought ashore from the wreckage of the Lusitania which the newspapers carried each day, and even those who had been friendly with the Jaffes began to turn their backs on them. Lady Lillian Spender, wife of Sir Wilfred Spender and one of the most noted socialites and diarists of the day was a friend of Lady Jaffe and writes in her diary in May 1915:

“She is exceedingly German and was very indiscreet during the war but she is apparently quite pro English now. I wish she hadn’t called as it makes me feel uncomfortable receiving her here when I signed a petition the other day (the one that lord Beresford presented 2 days ago) pleading for the greater restriction of aliens. She wanted us to come motoring with them on Saturday, but I got out of it. It is indeed a relief that the government is taking steps at last in the matter”

The Jaffes also had to resign their place on the committee of the children’s hospital in 1915 due to the fact that a group of local

ladies refused to subscribe further if “the Germans” were allowed to stay.

The naturalization question was heavily debated particularly in the House of Lords and the House of Commons in the days and weeks following the sinking of the Lusitania. As I have already pointed out Sir Otto had become naturalized as a British citizen over 20 years previously, and it was stated in the house of Lords that people “ought absolutely and entirely to accept as an Englishman a naturalized German who has sent his own son to fight in the ranks alongside our sons” (Hansard May 18 1915). During this same speech in the House of Lords, Lord St Davids states

“We have seen in the last few days in the newspaper protests by certain naturalized Germans who have told us that all their interests are in this country, that their sons are fighting with us, and that they are heart and soul in our cause. As regards the gentlemen who signed these protests I have not the slightest doubt that most probably all of them are entirely sincere.”

Sir Otto wrote such a letter to the Northern Whig that was printed on May the 18<sup>th</sup> 1915. In it he describes the suggestion that he has any sympathy towards Germany in the conflict as being “a most painful suggestion” and he implores, “how anyone who has any knowledge of me and my life would think that I could approve of the horrible and detestable actions of which she (Germany) has been guilty is almost beyond my comprehension.” He also

described himself as being “overwhelmed with pain and sorrow”.

At this time it was decided in the House of Lords, that it would not be reasonable to have any naturalized Germans face a tribunal and subsequent internment, but it would seem that Sir Otto still felt compelled to leave Belfast for London in 1915. Those who knew him say he left a broken man. He resigned his post as Alderman of Windsor Ward from Belfast City Council in June of 1916 at which they expressed regret at the circumstances of the resignation, as he was almost 70 years of age at the time. He must have realised then that he would never return to Belfast, and by 1918 he was selling off some of his properties at less than a quarter of their value.

Kin Edar his beloved home which he had built in East Belfast was not sold until 1923, when it was purchased by Charles Payne the Managing Director of Harland and Wolff who lived there until it was finally demolished in 1935. Sir Otto lived out the remainder of his life in London until his death in April 1929 at the age of 83. Lady Jaffe was too ill to attend his funeral, and she died a few months later in August of the same year.

It is a sad reflection that for a man who gave so much of his life, money and efforts to Belfast, and who brought his own father and mother back from Nice to be buried here he chose to be buried elsewhere. In his obituary in the Belfast Newsletter Rabbi J Shachter who was religious head of the Belfast Jewish Community at the time paid him this tribute “With his single hearted love of

humanity, his noble characteristics which gained for him the affection and reverence of all classes and creeds, he distinguished himself as a noble child of a noble family... We shall cherish his memory, and in the words of the book of Daniel we say 'Go thou thy way till the end be'. May his soul rest in peace”

Perhaps now is the time for us to cherish the memory of Sir Otto Jaffe once again so that he may take his rightful place amongst the noted citizens of Belfast.

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