

From Provincial Jewry in Victorian Britain
Papers for a conference at University College, London, convened by the Jewish Historical Society
of Great Britain
prepared by Aubrey Newman - 6th July 1975. Reproduced here with his consent.

(It is Professor Newman's intention to update this paper)

BELFAST

1874 Synagogue Great Victoria Street. Founded 1872 by and built at the expense of the late D. J. JaffÉ.

Has seat accommodation for 80 persons. The seats are free.

There is no Jewish school, but instruction in Hebrew and religion is given at the residence of the Rev. J. Chotzner.

1901 Jewish population 400-500.

Synagogue Great Victoria Street (Founded 1870) 78 seatholders.

Board of Guardians (Founded 1893). Object - to assist Jewish poor and strangers, Income and expenditure about £50.

Hebrew Foreign Ladies' benevolent Society (Founded 1896) Hebrew Society for Visiting the Sick. Literary and Social Society.

Regent Street Hebrew National School (founded 1898). Number of pupils on roll - 113; average daily attendance - 95.

Board of Deputies returns

1876 0 Marriages 0 Burials 14 Seatholders

1880 0 1 24

1890 1 2 42

1900 4 8 64

Prepared from material provided by Rabbi Dr. A. Carlebach, J.G. Fox, and H. Meek, and originally printed in the Belfast Jewish Record

The organised Belfast Hebrew Congregation was founded in 1869, but the first regular service seems to have taken place in 1864, and there were certainly Jews in Belfast and Northern Ireland at various dates in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There were, for example, Jewish tradesmen in Belfast during the eighteenth century, these including such men as Israel Woolf who was reported in the Ulster Miscellany for January 1754 as having 'set up trade in this town. He is a vendor of gold and silver plate and ornaments and picture frames in gold and pure gilt on plaster.' There is also in the Donegall Estate Papers a reference to a 'Jew Butcher' in 1771, but no further details are known of any community until 1845 when Reverend Morris J. Raphall of Birmingham came to lecture on the Bible; 'he was countenanced by the intelligent inhabitants but a rabble gathered at the place and with drums, noises and riots prevented the lecture proceeding.' By 1861 there were 52 Jews in Ulster, most of them in Belfast. Many of them, were originally, from Germany. and had come to Northern Ireland as a result of the growth and development of the linen trade. Prominent among these were Jacob Mautner and Daniel Joseph JaffÉ. JaffÉ, born in Mecklenburg in North Germany, had apparently been a frequent visitor to Belfast to purchase linen goods before deciding to settle there and in partnership with his brother Isaac (of Hamburg) to set up an export house and expand the trade. Of his nine sons and daughters, several took a prominent part in public life, especially Martin and Otto, later Lord Mayor of Belfast. It was in

Martin's house in Holywood Co. Down that the first service was held in 1864. In 1869 an advertisement was published in a German-Jewish newspaper calling for 'a minister of the non-orthodox culte', and in 1871 there was laid the foundation stone of the Great Victoria Street Synagogue. The cost of the synagogue was largely defrayed by Daniel Jaff  who died in 1874 shortly after the synagogue's consecration.

The first minister of the congregation was Dr. Joseph Chotzner, born in Cracow and a graduate of the University and Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau. By 1879 the congregation had so far grown that it boasted of regular services, a choir, and 'a philanthropic society for granting loans'. Chotzner left Belfast in 1880 to go to Harrow where he ran a house for Jewish boys there; he returned to Belfast in 1893, and in the years between the congregation was served by one or two officials who acted as Chazanim and teachers. The lay leadership passed to Otto Jaff  who had been born in Hamburg in 1846, came to Belfast in 1858, and had gone to the U.S.A. in 1865. Jaff  returned to Belfast in 1877 and launched himself into a career that was at once business, civic, and charitable. Reputedly 'shrewd, sharp-witted, far-seeing and almost parsimonious in business, ...0 lavish in unostentatious charities', he was elected a city councillor in 1894, and was the first Lord Mayor of Belfast in 1899. A year later he was knighted and continued to participate fully in the public and educational life of the City and province. He was also Life-President of the Belfast congregation and presided over the remarkable growth of the whole community.

There is little available on the life of the congregation between 1880 and 1897 when there were about 40 paying members paying contributions varying between one and two shillings per week. The balance sheets where they survive reveal an income rising from £82.10.0. for the ten months of 1891-92 to £210.12.3d. for 1893-94; the expenditure was just below that. Dr. Chotzner's salary in 1893 was £13 per quarter and the Chazan, Reverend Mayrowitz, was paid £1.7.6d. per week. The congregation had set up a School Board and members of the Board supervised the work of the teachers; examinations were held, on every Rosh. Chodesh. 'In 1892 the congregation acquired additional premises in which there was installed a mikveh, and in 1897 yet another house was bought to serve as a school-building. This, the Hebrew National (State) School, provided both secular and religious education. In 1898 there were 113 pupils on the roll.

This great increase in numbers - in 1890 there were already 60 families and in 1900 one hundred - was the result of the influx of largely East European Jews, whose relations with the German-Jewish 'host' community were not always harmonious. There is ample evidence of the distaste felt on both sides; the Russian-Jewish immigrants felt little or no respect for the Anglicised leaders of the congregation, while they for their part were out of sympathy with the manners, the business ethics, and the religious outlook of the newcomers. Even Dr. Chotzner was to be found on various occasions criticising the newer immigrants and their bigotry in petty religious matters. In the meantime Otto Jaff  continued to preside over the congregation, doubling at times as Treasurer, although he did not often actually attend the Committee meetings. Decisions taken at meetings were usually referred to him for confirmation, while at times he was represented by his non-Jewish secretary who acted as an umpire at turbulent discussions and elections. A growing deficit worried him, as did the apparent reluctance of the synagogue members to shoulder a greater share of the burden. In one letter, of April 1899, he complained that the synagogue used more gas than he, his stables, and his servants. The differences between the 'magnates' and the newer members were eventually reflected in the decision to set up a new independent synagogue, largely composed of the more recent arrivals from Lithuania and Poland and led by a series of 'foreign' Rabbanim. However, the need for continued co-operation over such issues as education and the supply of kosher meat led the two congregations to reconsider the possibilities of amalgamation and in 1903 the new united body was established, followed in 1904 by the building of a new synagogue and in 1907 by the opening of a new school paid for by Sir Otto Jaff  for the use, though not exclusive use, of the Hebrew Congregation.

At no time in these years was the congregation able to pay its way financially, and over and over again it was able to meet its liabilities only through the generosity of its President. He had not only to pay the bulk of the four thousand pounds for the new synagogue but even for the dinner given in his honour to celebrate the opening of the Jaff  school. None the less, if the vitality of the community can be measured by the degree of argument revealed in the synagogue minute books, Belfast was certainly very lively. Much smaller than Dublin, it is at the same time an interesting example of a small community managing to steer an independent existence between

two warring sets of political and religious interests.

SOURCES: See also Louis Hyman, *The Jews of Ireland* (Shannon, 1972)

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