

# Natalia Wynn

---

## "Remember, Reflect, Reimagine" : Jews and Irish nationalism through the lens of the 1916 centenary commemorations

---

Kultura Popularna nr 1 (51), 4-25

---

2017

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Natalie  
Wynn

**“REMEMBER,  
REFLECT,  
REIMAGINE”:  
*Jews and Irish  
nationalism  
through the lens of  
the 1916 centenary  
commemorations\****

DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0010.4073

\* I would like to thank Dr Zuleika Rodgers, Katrina Goldstone and Dr Barbara Hillers for interesting and thought-provoking conversations that have contributed to the ongoing evolution of my thinking on Jews and Irish nationalism, and collective memory regarding Irish Jewry. I am grateful to Rabbi Dr Charles Middleburgh for furnishing me – by return email – with references for rabbinic thought on Jewish engagement with non-Jewish authorities; to Zuleika Rodgers for bringing the *Tablet* and *Come Here to Me!* articles to my attention; and to Sue Hemmens for providing me with the proofs of the panels for the Marsh’s Library exhibition on the 1916 Rising. The articles and exhibition are discussed below.

The year 2016 has been significant for Ireland as the centenary of one of the most formative events in its recent history, the Easter Rising of 1916. Although progressive, egalitarian principles informed many of those who led and participated in the Rising, its legacy has been largely determined by the Roman Catholicism that had become inextricably intertwined with Irish nationalism from the late nineteenth century onwards (O’Driscoll, 2004: 141). The programme of official commemorations for 2016 sought to redress the historical balance by promoting a more nuanced public engagement with the narrative of Irish nationalism, and greater reflection on matters of Irish identity in general. The commemorations of 2016 thus provide a useful means for evaluating those groups that are located outside the Catholic nationalist mainstream, and the independent Ireland that came into being as a result of 1916.

This paper explores Irish Jewish identity and the Jewish engagement with Irish society through the lens of the Easter Rising, by investigating the way in which Jewish attitudes towards Irish nationalism have been remembered and represented in 2016. The question of Jewish integration into Irish society is explored through collective memory of Jewish engagement with the Rising and with the ensuing struggle for independence from Britain. This allows searching issues to be raised as to the legacy of Ireland’s shrinking Jewish community within broader non-Jewish society, and the manufacturing, selection and manipulation of “history” and “memory” in the local Irish setting. This enables us to move beyond communal narrative towards a critical historiography that is grounded in a more sophisticated understanding of the Jewish experience in Ireland.

**Natalie Wynn** is a post-doctoral researcher affiliated to the Herzog Centre for Jewish and Near Eastern Religions and Culture, Trinity College Dublin, and specialising in Irish Jewish history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

## 1916 and Its Centenary

The 1916 Rising was masterminded by a small coterie of extremists within the militant Republican movement, in order to take advantage of the British preoccupation with European – as opposed to Irish – affairs. The Rising was never expected to succeed, but was rather conceived as a symbolic blow for Irish independence, which would rekindle popular nationalist sentiment. On Easter Monday, April 24, civilian militias occupied a number of strategic locations around the city centre of Dublin, where they remained entrenched for five days against the odds. British bombardment reduced parts of the city to rubble and many civilians were killed.<sup>1</sup> Initially the Irish public was not well-disposed towards the Rising or its leaders. Many Irishmen were enlisted in the British army and the majority of nationalists were in favour of “Home Rule,” or devolved government under British patronage, as opposed to a complete break from Britain. Public opinion changed rapidly, however, once the British authorities began to execute the leaders of the Rising following hasty courts martial. A mere two years later in 1918, the Republican political party Sinn Féin gained huge successes in the British general elections. When the new MPs refused to take up their seats in Westminster, the first Dáil Eireann (Irish parliament) was formed in Dublin. In 1921, independence was granted in the wake of a three-year guerilla war. The terms of the ceasefire are still disputed today; the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 led to a two-year civil war,

1 “1916 Necrology: 485,” *Glasnevin Trust*, [www.glasnevintrust.ie/\\_/uuiid/55a29fab-3b24-41dd-aid9-12d148a78f74/Glasnevin-Trust-1916-Necrology-485.pdf](http://www.glasnevintrust.ie/_/uuiid/55a29fab-3b24-41dd-aid9-12d148a78f74/Glasnevin-Trust-1916-Necrology-485.pdf) (accessed December 20, 2016). According to the Glasnevin Trust, the 485 civilian casualties accounted for 54% of the dead; British troops represented 26%; rebels, 16%; and police, the remaining 4%.

whose resonances are still felt in southern Irish society and politics, and six counties of the province of Ulster (the present-day Northern Ireland) remain part of the United Kingdom.

The year 2016 has been one of the most important in the so-called Decade of Centenaries that marks one of the most turbulent and eventful periods in Irish history, from the launch of the campaign for Home Rule in 1912 to the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922 (while steering clear of the contentious legacy of the Civil War and Irish partition). This period recalls a very diverse series of milestones in recent Irish history: the 1913 workers' lockout; the Great War, in which thousands of Irishmen fought and died; the struggle for independence; and the laying of the foundations for the modern Irish state.

The theme for the official state commemoration of the 1916 Rising was "Remember" (recent Irish history), "Reflect" (on Ireland's achievements in the last one hundred years), "Reimagine" (the country's future for coming generations).<sup>2</sup> The stated aims of the programme of commemorations were engagement and inclusivity: to involve as broad a cross-section of the Irish public as possible in reflection upon 1916 and its legacy. This was intended to encompass as many cultural and political traditions as possible, and to reach out especially to the young people from a variety of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, which represent the more cosmopolitan Ireland of the future. The invitation to "Remember, Reflect, Reimagine" was taken up by academics, programme-makers and the public alike, who considered the Rising from a broad range of perspectives. The national broadcaster, RTÉ, aired a number of documentaries that responded to the government's challenge by focusing on less well-known aspects of 1916. These represented diverse voices and elements of the Rising's history that had been suppressed within the traditional nationalist narrative such as the role of women, the stories of its forty accidental child victims, and the official British response to the Rising as it unfolded in Easter 1916.<sup>3</sup> The role of cultural nationalism in the construction of modern Irish identity was another theme that was explored by programme-makers, complementing musical and poetical commemorations and reflections on the Rising. A few of the 1916 documentaries were made jointly with the BBC and were shown on British as well as Irish television, indicating a new openness in Britain towards contentious aspects of the nation's colonial past.

The atmosphere of popular commemoration leading up to Easter 2016 was infectious, stoking a sort of 1916 mania that culminated in a supersized version of the annual commemorative parade. This took place, as usual, on Dublin's main thoroughfare of O'Connell Street on Easter Sunday, March 27. Commemorative banners adorned Dublin's streets; souvenirs and books on 1916 were prominently on sale throughout the city centre and in Dublin Airport; and special postage stamps replaced the regular ones for the entire year. So many exhibitions appeared in various locations around Dublin that leading newspaper the *Irish Times* was prompted to address the quandary of "1916: Which exhibition should you go to?"<sup>4</sup> A handful of postboxes in key city centre locations were sprayed red – a startling contrast to the usual

2 "Ireland 2016," *Creative Ireland*, [www.ireland.ie/about](http://www.ireland.ie/about) (accessed November 29, 2016).

3 For further information on national programming on 1916, see "1916 Hub on RTÉ Player," RTÉ, [1916.rte.ie/the-rising-on-rte](http://1916.rte.ie/the-rising-on-rte) (accessed November 29, 2016).

4 Hugh Linehan, "1916: Which exhibition should you go to?" *Irish Times*, March 19, 2016, [www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/1916-which-exhibition-should-you-go-to-1.2578782](http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/1916-which-exhibition-should-you-go-to-1.2578782) (accessed November 29, 2016).

green – to invite passersby to discover how that area had been affected by the events of 1916 by texting a dedicated number.<sup>5</sup> A quick keyword search on Google in November 2016 revealed a baffling range of 1916-themed tours, both guided and self-led.

In sum, 2016 has offered an opportunity for the Irish nation as a whole to engage with and reflect upon 1916 and its aftermath from a safe distance in time. Official commemorations and programming have encouraged a greater – if tentative – level of maturity in this collective process of reflection. Can the same be said of popular reflection on Jews and 1916?

## 1916 in Jewish Communal Narrative

The buzz around 1916/2016 has created a renewed flurry of popular interest in contemporaneous Jewish attitudes towards the 1916 Rising and towards Irish nationalism in general. The standard version of Irish Jewish history, which suggests that there was widespread Jewish support for militant Irish nationalism, has been central to the collective memory of Jews and 1916 one hundred years on. Despite the lack of hard evidence for this assumption, it has barely been queried by historians, whether professional or amateur. Instead very definite assertions have been advanced regarding the Jewish response to Irish nationalism based on slim, often anecdotal evidence. There has been no serious interrogation of the sources or the evidence or, equally important, the motivations underlying this persistent emphasis on claims that the vast majority of Irish Jews were sympathetic towards the Irish struggle for independence and statehood.

A handful of Jews were prominent supporters of the republican cause, most notably Robert Briscoe, Michael Noyk and Estella Solomons. Briscoe rose to the higher echelons of the IRA during the War of Independence (1918–1921), and became a close associate of one of modern Ireland’s most influential political idealogues, Éamon de Valera. He was elected to the Irish parliament in 1927 and served two terms as lord mayor of Dublin, in 1956 and 1961 (Briscoe, 1959; Tye, 2001: 193–204; Benson, 2007: 24; McCarthy, 2015). Noyk was a close associate of leading nationalist figures Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith, and acted as legal representative to Sinn Féin during the War of Independence. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery at Dolphin’s Barn with full military honours in 1966 (Keogh, 1998: 72–73; Benson, 2007: 27; Noyk, undated). Solomons, a member of one of Dublin’s oldest Jewish families, was a celebrated artist and a member of the women’s auxiliary movement Cumann na mBan. Solomons sheltered fugitives and concealed

5 One of the first acts of the independent Irish government was to have Irish postboxes painted green (“The post-box,” *An Post*, [www.anpost.ie/AnPost/History+and+Heritage/History/The+Postal+Service+in+Ireland/The+post+box/](http://www.anpost.ie/AnPost/History+and+Heritage/History/The+Postal+Service+in+Ireland/The+post+box/), accessed November 29, 2016). The decision to temporarily paint some Dublin postboxes red was a dramatic gesture which grabbed public attention, prompting a slew of commentary in the Irish media and a mixed response on Twitter. See, e.g., Meadhbh McGrath, “Here’s why some of Dublin’s postboxes turned red overnight,” *Irish Independent*, March 21, 2016 (<http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/1916/heres-why-some-of-dublins-postboxes-turned-red-overnight-34558480.html>, accessed November 29, 2016). McGrath opens with the mild observation: “People wandering the capital this morning were surprised to find a number of our green post-boxes had turned red overnight.”

weapons for the IRA during the War of Independence (E. Solomons, 1966: 12–14, 22–23; B. Solomons, 1956: 203–204; Benson, 2007: 14). Isaac Herzog, who served as chief rabbi of the Irish Free State from 1919 until his appointment to the chief rabbinate of Palestine in 1937, is also believed to have been a Republican sympathiser and a close friend and confidante of De Valera (Keogh, 1998: 76–77; Herzog, 1996: 12; compare with Wynn, 2015: 130ff). The Judaeo-Irish Home Rule Association, founded in 1908, is frequently cited as an indication of broader communal leanings despite having been extremely short-lived, unrepresentative of the communal majority, and co-founded by a noted eccentric, Joseph Edelstein (Wynn, 2015: 117–118, 140–141; Wynn, forthcoming).

Most accounts suggest that many individual Jews were either actively or passively involved with radical nationalism,<sup>6</sup> but only a few members of the community are named as having been active supporters or members of Sinn Féin and Cumann na mBan.<sup>7</sup> Various other individuals are alleged to have helped the nationalists in some way, for example by assisting IRA fugitives or by turning a blind eye to illicit activity. A selection of these anecdotes will be discussed below. Others still are claimed to have been “involved” in the struggle for independence through brief encounters or tenuous links with militant republicanism, for example by selling or renting property to republican activists – whether knowingly or unknowingly is unclear – or in being “caught in the crossfire” during the struggle for independence.<sup>8</sup> Vague, general claims that the community as a whole was actively sympathetic or supportive are extremely common. For example Ray Rivlin claims, without citing any names, dates or places, that Jewish pedlars carried weapons for the IRA and that Jews voluntarily sheltered fugitives (e.g. Rivlin, 2003: 191–192; Keogh, 1998: 70, 77). Even being maximal with the anecdotal evidence, the alleged numbers of Irish nationalist Jews appear minute in proportion to the overall communal numbers at this time.<sup>9</sup>

Few commentators have paused to query the lack of hard evidence regarding the purported Jewish support for Irish nationalism, professional historians included. Dermot Keogh and Cormac Ó Gráda, whose work has been widely lauded as virtually the “last word” on a disappearing community,<sup>10</sup> have buttressed the popular version of events. In his book *Jews in Twentieth Century Ireland: Refugees, Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust* (Cork, 1998), Keogh draws questionable conclusions on the basis of a small selection of the available

6 Typical are Tye, *Home Lands*, 193–204; Ray Rivlin, *Shalom Ireland: A Social History of Jews in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2003), 191–96; Thomas O’Dwyer, “Erin go bracha,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 17, 1992.

7 Sam McGrath, “Jewish links to Irish Republican and Socialist politics (1901–1960s),” *Come Here to Me!*, [comeheretome.com/2013/11/18/jewish-links-to-irish-republican-and-socialist-politics-1901-1960s](http://comeheretome.com/2013/11/18/jewish-links-to-irish-republican-and-socialist-politics-1901-1960s) (accessed April 18, 2016); McGrath, “Jewish community during the Revolutionary period (1916–23),” *Come Here to Me!*, [comeheretome.com/2013/11/07/jewish-community-during-the-revolutionary-period-1916-23](http://comeheretome.com/2013/11/07/jewish-community-during-the-revolutionary-period-1916-23), (accessed April 18, 2016).

8 McGrath, “Jewish community during Revolutionary period”; Stuart Rosenblatt, “Portraits of 1916, Part Two: Caught in the Crossfire – Mogie Davy [sic], Samuel Reiss, Oscar Citron,” *Community News*, April 7, 2016.

9 The Irish census figures for 1911 estimate the Jewish community at 3,805 individuals (qtd. in Cian Traynor, “Young, Jewish and Irish,” *Irish Times Weekend Review*, December 11, 2010).

10 For an assessment of Keogh’s contribution to Irish Jewish history, see Robert Tracy, “The Jews of Ireland,” *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* (Summer 1999), [www.ucc.ie/icsm/irishmigrationpolicy/Judaism%20The%20Jews%20of%20Ireland.htm](http://www.ucc.ie/icsm/irishmigrationpolicy/Judaism%20The%20Jews%20of%20Ireland.htm) (accessed October 19, 2011).

material on Jewish attitudes towards Irish nationalism, suggesting that the Jewish involvement in radical nationalism may have been more extensive than hitherto realised. Keogh flags this as an area meriting future research (54–83). Not only are his claims unsubstantiated by his limited sources, but by the evidence as a whole (Wynn, 2015: ch. 2). Ó Gráda, who draws on a broader cross-section of sources, realises that the reality (which will be considered below) was more complex than either Keogh or the mainstream narrative suggest. However, he reconciles his findings to the accepted version of events by interpreting the evidence in terms of growing Jewish integration into Irish society. Ó Gráda concludes that this process began with the second generation of East European Jewish immigrants, resulting in a widespread Jewish identification with the nationalist cause (Ó Gráda, 2006: ch. 9; cf. Wynn, 2015: ch. 2).

The renewed popular interest in Jews and Irish nationalism in 2016 has again reinforced Jewish claims of participation in the foundational events of recent Irish history. These anecdotes have been taken up by non-Jews interested in exploring, or making a case for, diversity within the history of Irish nationalism. Yet no one has paused to reflect on the nature of the evidence – or the lack thereof. As the evidence is questionable, the anecdotes may well reveal more about the needs of contemporary Irish society than about the extent of actual Jewish engagement with Irish nationalism: both the needs of those who relate the anecdotes, and the needs of the audiences who receive them. But what is the potential alternative to a narrative that promotes an essentially positive image of integration, inclusion and common purpose? And why is it so threatening as to discourage a greater, more mature degree of reflection? Is it simply too unpalatable for all concerned?

## Collective Memory of Jews and 1916: Whose Narrative is it Anyway?

Between March 31 and May 27, 2016, the *Community News*, a weekly email bulletin issued by the Irish Chief Rabbi's Office, ran a feature by the local amateur genealogist Stuart Rosenblatt entitled “Portraits of 1916.” This consisted of a series of vignettes on Jews and 1916, composed mostly of anecdotes of Jews caught up in the Easter Rising in various ways, directly and indirectly. The series was preceded by a piece bearing the dramatic headline “Dr Kenny Harris's Grandfather Harris Abrahamson: the only Jewish fatality in the 1916 Rising.” As Abrahamson's descendants are unsure as to the exact circumstances of his death, the article presents two possible explanations: either that he was hit by a ricocheting bullet, or that he was shot for running when challenged by British troops.<sup>11</sup> On April 7, Rosenblatt discussed those “caught in the crossfire,” such as Modgie Davy, who was reportedly ejected from his workplace by armed volunteers at the outbreak of the Rising.<sup>12</sup> On March 31, Rosenblatt relates that his own grandfather Avraham Hillel Jackson, who had a weak eye, was punched in the face by a British soldier. The soldier reportedly believed that Jackson was winking deliberately to signal an accomplice,

<sup>11</sup> *Community News*, March 25, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Rosenblatt, “Caught in the Crossfire.”

and assaulted him out of frustration with his hesitant and broken English. The soldier knocked Jackson's pipe down his throat, and the family believes that this contributed to his subsequent death by throat cancer.<sup>13</sup> On April 14, in discussing members of the community reputed to have helped the IRA, Rosenblatt claims that as the Rising coincided with Passover, "many Jewish families in 1916 would have drawn the parallel between the Jewish fight for freedom from the Egyptians, and the Irish fight for freedom from the British." In this piece Rosenblatt discusses "Abraham" Spiro and Max Cohen, who are believed to have assisted the IRA and whose cases are considered below. He also claims that a well-known member of the Jewish community, Philip Sayers, was a Sinn Féin supporter who hid IRA fugitives in his home during police raids.<sup>14</sup>

Also in April 2016, the online Jewish magazine *Tablet* ran a lengthy article by Sharon Turkington, a London-based doctoral researcher. This discussed Jewish involvement in the Irish struggle for independence, focusing mainly on the nationalist activity of Estella Solomons. Turkington makes even more definite – albeit contradictory – statements regarding broader Irish Jewish attitudes towards the Rising and Irish nationalism:

"Family members and indeed entire Jewish communities were divided by the events of 1916, which highlighted generational, religious, and political differences ..."

"The Irish Jewish position on independence combined a civil and religious sense of duty, and ... many held halakhic views against the revolutionary violence that exploded across [Dublin] city on the last day of Passover ..."

"Support [for the subsequent War of Independence] reverberated across the capital, even within Dublin's Jewish quarter, where debates about the future of Ireland took over many Shabbat tables."

"Few of the Jewish political figures who fought for Irish independence are embraced in national remembrance, nor are those who opposed the declaration of a Free State."

Turkington's assertions regarding the "role that Jewish women played in the fight for independence" are perhaps most extravagant of all. She claims that the Goldberg sisters, Fanny and Molly, who "lived in the same Jewish quarter [of Dublin] as Solomons," worked on the weapons committee of Cumann na mBan, choosing to become "active participants in the fighting." Turkington writes that "Solomons and several other Jewish women, including the Goldberg sisters, smuggled ammunition from Portobello, Dublin's Jewish quarter ... to the General Post Office and other strategic buildings."<sup>15</sup>

Turning to non-Jewish Irish takes on Jewish revolutionary activity, two articles by Sam McGrath on the *Come Here To Me!* blog, although less recent, demonstrate that there is little difference between Jewish and non-Jewish

13 Stuart Rosenblatt, "Portraits of 1916, Part One: Beginnings: Joe Edelstein; Avraham Hillel Jackson," *Community News*, March 31, 2016.

14 Stuart Rosenblatt, "Portraits of 1916, Part Three: Let My People Go – Abraham Spiro, Max Cohen, Philip Sayers," *Community News*, April 14, 2016.

15 Sharon Turkington, "Solomons' Rising: The Personal Revolution of an Irish Jewish Woman in 1916," *Tablet*, [www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/19888/solomons-irish-rising](http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/19888/solomons-irish-rising) (accessed April 18, 2016).



understandings. McGrath asserts in his first piece, “Though their numbers were minuscule, members of the Jewish community were *disproportionately* active in the fight for Irish independence.”<sup>16</sup> This is followed by a supporting quote from author Hannah Berman’s family memoir, which was revised and updated for publication by her niece, Melisande Zlotover (Berman and Zlotover, 1966). Aside from sections on Briscoe, Noyk, and Solomons much of the article is tenuous. It is resonant of Rosenblatt’s series but more presumptive in tone, and in purporting to be based upon archival research. McGrath’s second article on “Jewish links to Irish Republican and Socialist politics (1901–1960s)” is more tenuous still. This opens with a list that includes vague references such as “1901: Two Jewish workers listed as being active in James Connolly’s *Irish Socialist Republican Party (ISRP)*,” and “late 1906s: Anecdotal evidence that many older working-class Jews in Dublin read the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Moscow Times*,” alongside more definite Jewish connections to Irish labour and republican politics.<sup>17</sup> It would be more accurate to state that the information to be gleaned from these articles does not give the impression of a “disproportionate” Jewish contribution to the Irish struggle for independence but, rather, the opposite.

Probably the most nuanced presentation of Jewish involvement in the Easter Rising, Jewish or non-Jewish, was the exhibition in Dublin’s historic Marsh’s Library entitled “1916: Tales from the Other Side” (March to December 2016). This drew upon material from the Library’s archives in order to display the range of responses to the Rising that were experienced by members of Ireland’s minority communities. The exhibition presented diverse views on the far-reaching changes wrought by 1916: positive, negative, and critical. It sought to underline the searching issues of identity and allegiance that were raised by the Rising, and the way that it prompted many from outside the Catholic nationalist mainstream to reflect upon their own sense of self and belonging. Although the exhibition’s blurb claimed to focus “especially on stories from Irish Protestant and Jewish communities,”<sup>18</sup> Solomons is actually the only Jew to be represented due to a direct connection with Marsh’s Library. Solomons visited in 1923, during the Civil War, and subsequently presented the Library with etchings of its interior based on sketches that are believed to have been made at this time. Nevertheless, rather than using Solomons as a basis for exaggerated or unsubstantiated claims of Jewish radical nationalism, she is simply cited as “a reminder that Irish rebels could, and did, wear multiple identities without contradiction: Irish, Jewish, nationalist, artist, and revolutionary.” The panel opens by describing Solomons as “an important *Irish* artist of the early twentieth century,” only referring briefly to her Jewish background in the second and last paragraphs.<sup>19</sup> Solomons is portrayed in the exhibition as Irish first and foremost, as an important figure in Irish culture secondly, and as a member of the Jewish community last. This represents a significant advance on the usual labelling which uses figures such as Solomons to reinforce claims of an advanced level of Jewish integration into Irish society. The result is a mixed message that emphasises Solomons’ ethnicity, singling her out as something of a curiosity as an Irish revolutionary who was Jewish by birth; yet, at the same time, Solomons is

<sup>16</sup> McGrath, “Jewish community during Revolutionary period” (emphasis added).

<sup>17</sup> McGrath, “Jewish links.”

<sup>18</sup> “1916: Tales from the Other Side,” *Marsh’s Library*, [www.marshlibrary.ie/1916tales/](http://www.marshlibrary.ie/1916tales/) (accessed June 2, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Elaine Doyle, “Panel 10: Estella Solomons,” (emphasis added).

classified as somehow representative of her community as a whole. This hardly equates to an inclusive – or sophisticated – popular understanding of either “Irishness” or “Jewish Irishness.”

## Representation versus the Sources: The Culture of Avoidance

Primary sources for Irish Jewry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are relatively scarce. Communal records, which only provide limited information on the experience of the individual and mention nothing of Irish politics, can be discounted for the purposes of investigating nationalist sentiment. One of the most important sources is the *Jewish Chronicle* newspaper, the organ of the Anglo-Jewish communal establishment, which provided a medium for all British communities to report their news and air their views on a range of topics including, occasionally, Irish politics. The *Chronicle* supplements the information available from communal archives as well as providing glimpses into the lives and thoughts of individual members of the Irish Jewish community.

Memoirs from this period are unfortunately thin on the ground; most recollections have been handed down second- or third-hand from later generations (such as the content of the Rosenblatt series). Much of the supposed evidence that these provide is therefore anecdotal, apocryphal, and likely to be exaggerated. A good example is the tale of one lady (unnamed) who is claimed to have sheltered an IRA fugitive in her home overnight with some, clearly embellished, versions of the story claiming that the fugitive was allowed to get into the lady’s bed to pose as her husband. Chaim Herzog, who related the full version of this anecdote to an interviewer in 1987, qualified his doubts as to its authenticity by noting that “nobody ever denied it.”<sup>20</sup> Another rather bizarre story involves Rev. Abraham Gudansky, minister of the anglicised Dublin Hebrew Congregation. This claims that Gudansky led other members of the Jewish community in assisting the rebel leader Michael Collins to evade the British authorities by posing as a Jew en route to Shabbat evening services.<sup>21</sup> The origins of this somewhat elaborate anecdote are unclear; apart from Rosenblatt’s version I have only come across it on one other occasion, in an interview with Sybil Fishman published in the *Jewish Chronicle*. Fishman claims to have doubted the tale for most of her life only to change her mind, on unstated grounds.<sup>22</sup>

A more concrete example of the misrepresentation of Jewish attitudes towards Irish nationalism is that of the Goldberg sisters, Fanny and Molly. These claims are advanced by Rosenblatt and McGrath, as well as by

20 Chaim Herzog, Interview with Carol Weinstock, July 1987, cf. Esther Hesselberg, Interview with Carol Weinstock, 1 July 1985 (National Library of Ireland, Acc. 5734).

21 Stuart Rosenblatt, “Portraits of 1916: Series Conclusion: ‘A Shabbos Stroll,’ Rev Abraham Gudansky,” *Community News*, May 27, 2016.

22 *Jewish Chronicle*, 6 December 1996.

Turkington.<sup>23</sup> Rosenblatt’s piece elicited the following correction from Fanny Goldberg’s son, Louis Marcus: “In the interests of truth, I have to scotch the myth that has been *growing in repetition over the last few years* that my mother ... and her sister ... were active in the Easter Rising. In fact, both were young girls in Cork at the time. Indeed, my mother in her memoir tells how amazed people were to read in Tuesday’s newspaper that there had been a rebellion in Dublin the day before.” “Some time later, my mother notes that Molly had become a member of Cumann na mBan for the social and musical opportunities that it offered. My mother makes no suggestion that she herself had become a member.”<sup>24</sup>

Marcus’s comments refute Turkington’s assertion that the Goldberg sisters were involved in gunrunning in the Portobello area of Dublin during the 1916 Rising. As he notes, the family was living in Cork at the time and not in Dublin’s main area of Jewish settlement in the South Circular Road area, as suggested by Turkington. In fact Molly Goldberg’s decision to join Cumann na mBan appears to have had little ideological motivation, if any. Even Solomons herself did not live “within [Dublin’s] Jewish quarter” as stated by Turkington, but a few miles away in the more genteel suburb of Ballsbridge. She was both physically and socially removed from the communal majority whose frustrations with British rule Turkington portrays her as having shared.<sup>25</sup> Solomons’ education, her profession as an artist, her close connections with Irish artistic and cultural circles, and her marriage to the non-Jewish poet Seamus O’Sullivan, reveal her to be counter-conventional to the Irish Jewish norms of the early twentieth century. Solomons was entirely unrepresentative of her female Jewish contemporaries.

Another story that has been rehashed in a variety of sources claims that the Jewish printer Leon (often referred to as Abraham) Spiro allowed his foreman to produce an underground Republican newspaper in his printworks. The foreman is often identified as the well-known IRA volunteer, Oscar Traynor (Ó Gráda, 2006: 261, n. 60; Rivlin, 2003: 191–192; Benson, 2007: 27), and the newspaper has been named as the IRA journal, *An t-Óglach* (“the Volunteer”).<sup>26</sup> Suspicion should immediately be aroused by confusion among commentators as to whether Spiro’s forename was Abraham or Leon. Indeed his daughter, Jessie Spiro Bloom, provides a rather different account of this incident in her unpublished memoir. The Spiro anecdote – like Marcus’s correction – is a clear indication of the way in which such events have mushroomed in the popular imagination over the years. Bloom states that her father’s foreman commandeered his printing press to produce IRA orders (as opposed to a newspaper) during the Civil War (and not in 1916, as stated by Rosenblatt), while he was forcibly detained in his office. Spiro went unharmed as he and

23 McGrath, “Jewish links”; Stuart Rosenblatt, “Portraits of 1916: Part Four: Cork and 1916: Isaac Diamond, Gerald Goldberg, Fanny & Molly Goldberg, Louis Goldberg,” *Community News*, May 6, 2016; Turkington, “Solomons’ Rising.”

24 Louis Marcus, “Correction from Louis Marcus,” *Community News*, May 13, 2016 (emphasis added).

25 Turkington, “Solomons’ Rising.”

26 McGrath, “Jewish community during Revolutionary period”; Rosenblatt, “Portraits: Part Three.”

his foreman were on the best of terms, but was “not too keen, on having [the IRA] take over his office.” (Bloom, undated: 180) Bloom does not imply that this was anything more than a once-off occurrence, nor does she name the foreman. Other sources reveal that Abraham Spiro, who enjoyed a successful undergraduate career at Trinity College Dublin, was Leon’s son and Jessie’s brother, and that Leon was the printer.<sup>27</sup> This explains the confusion of the anecdotal sources, as well as showing how easily distortions arise and grow within informal, oral narratives.

The Spiro incident also reminds us that it is worth considering whether or not other Jews who are cited as having assisted Irish nationalist militants did so voluntarily or out of fear or compulsion. This is relevant to the stories of shelter or other assistance being provided to the IRA by members of the Jewish community that are outlined above. Both McGrath and Rosenblatt state that Max Cohen’s home was used by the IRA as an arms dump. McGrath quotes from the deposition by IRA volunteer George White to the Irish Military Bureau that Cohen “knew all about the dump but said nothing” to the authorities. According to McGrath, White also recalls that Cohen’s brother Abraham had told him that his shop could be used anytime “as a means of escape.”<sup>28</sup> However, the War of Independence was a vicious and brutal conflict, and the few written pronouncements on the political situation that survive suggest that many Jews were nervous of the nationalist agenda as well as the threat that militant republicans posed to political stability and the social and economic *status quo* in Ireland.<sup>29</sup> It is therefore wise to exercise caution in assessing claims such as those regarding the Cohen brothers. Rather than being IRA supporters, the Cohens may well have been acting in their own interests by keeping on the right side of the IRA and avoiding collusion with the British authorities. This is an equally valid – and arguably more logical – interpretation of their actions in light of the sources as a whole.

What distinguishes the two possible interpretations of the Cohen brothers’ reputed support for IRA activity is a world of nuance. The potential complexities of Jewish “involvement” in the nationalist struggle tend to be ignored or missed altogether by commentators, and when contrary evidence is put forward this is disregarded or dismissed. Rather than thanking Louis Marcus for setting the record straight on the Goldberg sisters, Rosenblatt neither responded to nor acknowledged his correction. When I challenged McGrath on the Spiro anecdote he did modify his piece (and correct the forename to Leon), noting in his article that I “suggest” on the basis of Bloom’s memoir that Spiro had been “forcibly detained.”<sup>30</sup> I had, in fact, pointed out that Bloom makes it clear that her father was not happy to have his office taken over by the IRA, that there is no evidence that this was anything more than a once-off occurrence, and that *An t-Óglach* does not figure in Bloom’s memoir. McGrath did not acknowledge these points, or my view that Bloom’s recollections are likely to be the most accurate source for the events in question on the basis

27 David Lenten, “1901 Census” (Excel spreadsheet). The *Jewish Chronicle* reports Abraham Spiro’s academic career at length (November 11, 1898 and September 18, 1896) where Leon’s trade is given as “publisher.”

28 McGrath, “Jewish community during Revolutionary period”; Rosenblatt, “Portraits: Part Three.”

29 For examples of the varying assessments by Irish Jews and non-Jews regarding Home Rule, Irish nationalism and the treatment of Jews in Ireland in general, see *Jewish Chronicle*, August 4, 1893, August 11, 1893, September 8, 1911, September 15, 1911, June 28, 1912, and May 30, 1913.

30 McGrath, “Jewish community during Revolutionary period.”

that she provides the earliest, least embellished account of the Spiro incident (one brief paragraph), and that she was closest to the original source, her own father. Nor did McGrath respond to my observations regarding the Cohens.<sup>31</sup> In linking a well-known newspaper to the Spiro episode McGrath has lent this version of events an aura of greater authenticity, not to mention notoriety that is then carried forward into its next incarnation. The *An t-Óglach* version of this episode features in Rosenblatt's repertoire,<sup>32</sup> which has been aired on a number of occasions during 2016. In this way, the belief that Spiro willingly colluded with the well-known IRA volunteer Oscar Traynor to print an infamous underground republican newspaper is given further traction going forward.

The apparent refusal to engage in any real dialogue on the way that Jewish attitudes towards Irish nationalism are popularly represented suggests that the purveyors of these increasingly elaborate anecdotes do not wish to have their romanticised version of events complicated by inconvenient fact or nuance. As noted above, these narratives promote a relatively positive image of Jewish integration into Irish society. It serves both the official Jewish community and the non-Jewish majority alike to deflect critical analysis of the anecdotal evidence. It will be interesting to observe the direction in which the Jewish nationalist narratives evolve in the future, though a cynical prediction is tempting on the basis of precedent. After all why ruin a good story that, like a fine wine, matures over the years and is consumed with due eagerness?

These anecdotes and their evolution demonstrate that, not only is there a need among their purveyors to “prove” Jewish support for the nationalist cause, but that an enthusiastic audience is perpetually on hand to lap them up. Rosenblatt gave at least two public talks on Jewish involvement in the Easter Rising during 2016, as well as one radio interview on Dublin's 103.2 FM, which has been posted, to YouTube, and a talk to the pupils of the Jewish secondary school, Stratford College.<sup>33</sup> His first public talk was held at the Dublin Institute of Technology on Easter Monday, while the second represented the Irish Jewish Museum's offering for Heritage Week (August 20–28) and was aptly titled “Who ever heard of the Jewish involvement in the 1916 Rising?” This refers to the Irish author and editor David Marcus's collection of short stories, *Who Ever Heard of an Irish Jew?* (London, 1990). Marcus's volume is widely invoked to express the novelty value of the *genus* Irish Jew in all its unexpected, somewhat comical quirkiness. Rosenblatt's unintended irony neatly sums up the popular appetite for tales of Irish Jewish nationalism: however strange the details may be, they are never quite as bizarre as that weirdest of oxymorons the Irish Jew itself. There is a degree of condescension implicit in the acceptance of the Jewish nationalist narratives, reflected in Rosenblatt's choice of title that needs to be recognised and interrogated. What also needs to be queried is the willing complicity of Irish Jews in perpetuating this image of themselves as quaint and harmless curiosity-pieces (Goldstone, 2008: 102–109; Goldstone, 2000: 305–314; Wynn, 2015: ch. 2). There is a degree of amused scepticism among Irish Jews regarding some aspects of communal history, such as myths of accidental arrival in Ireland (Wynn, 2014: 69–84). However, the general failure to question these and other fanciful elements of

31 Natalie Wynn, emails to Sam McGrath, April 5 and 6, 2016; cf. Bloom, unpublished memoir, 180.

32 Rosenblatt, “Portraits of 1916: Part Three.”

33 “Stuart Rosenblatt talks Irish Jews and 1916,” *YouTube*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KavybhrvNFC](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KavybhrvNFC) (accessed December 20, 2016); “Stratford students learn about Jewish participation in the Rising,” *Community News*, May 6, 2016.

communal narrative leaves the myths there to suffice in place of something more plausible. As the Irish Jew becomes an increasingly rare – and therefore exotic – species with the passage of time, collective reflection on the Irish Jewish communal narrative has become correspondingly less, as opposed to more, mature. Critical historiography is becoming less relevant to the majority of observers than it has ever been.

## 1916: What the Sources Actually Say

As indicated above, in contrast to popular wisdom contemporary Jewish sources do not in fact reveal much Jewish interest in the 1916 Rising. Myer Joel Wigoder, author of the only firsthand account of east European Jewish immigration to Ireland, simply mentions in passing the food shortages that were caused by the Rising as this made it difficult to obtain *matzah* for Passover (M. J. Wigoder, 1935: 99). This is Wigoder's sole reference to either 1916 or to Irish politics in general. The only other significant memoirs are Bloom's, which do discuss at length the mounting tensions between Irish nationalists and British patriots in Dublin in the early twentieth century. She recalls that Dubliners were taken by surprise at the unexpected turn of events in Easter 1916 and remembers the Rising as a time of uncertainty, confusion and rumours. Shooting could be heard in the South Circular Road area due to its proximity to the city centre, the sky glowed red at night as Dublin burned, the city was placed under curfew, and its inhabitants suffered gas outages. Bloom sums up the time of the Rising as exciting and unpredictable (Bloom, undated: 157–180).

In contrast to their lack of opinion on the Easter Rising, both Wigoder and Bloom express a great deal of admiration and gratitude towards the British authorities, for allowing their families a fresh start in a largely tolerant, free and open society. Wigoder expresses “a debt of gratitude to the sovereign under whom Jew and Christian were alike. The strong position of our people under [Queen Victoria's] rule contrasted strongly with the persecution in other lands” (M. J. Wigoder, 1935: 73). His grandson, Geoffrey Wigoder, believes that “Briscoe was indeed the exception. My grandfather was far more typical” (G. Wigoder, 1985: 15). Bloom's mother was another great admirer of Queen Victoria, instilling in her children a deep sense of reverence for the monarch. Bloom recalls that “politics was quite a problem for the Jews, who basically were loyal to the British when feeling against England was at its highest,” and discusses at length the impact of Ireland's deepening sectarian divisions (Bloom, 1952: 22, 31–32; Bloom, undated: 32–33, 98–111, 143–144, 148–151, 154–156). Even though Solomons' Republican sympathies have been projected by one commentator onto her immediate family, her brother Bethel's memoir shows that they remained British patriots (B. Solomons, 1956: 18).<sup>34</sup> Their mother Rosa was decorated by the Red Cross for her contribution to the British war effort in 1914–1918, and her certificate is preserved among Estella's papers (Trinity College Dublin, MS 4632/509e).

Communal records and the *Jewish Chronicle* indicate that British patriotism as expressed by Wigoder, the Spiros and the Solomons, Estella excepted, was

<sup>34</sup> Compare with *Irish Times*, 9 November 1999.

the norm for the Jewish community in the early twentieth century. In this respect, Jews appear to have followed the Irish political mainstream. Many seem to have favoured the respectable constitutional nationalism of Home Rule, that was the most common form of nationalism at the time and did not conflict with loyalty to the British Crown. This represents an important nuance in the relationship of Jews to Irish nationalism that is generally missed, ignored or understated in secondary literature. The sympathies of many Jews probably did shift as a result of Britain’s hardline response to militant Irish nationalism. Yet this, again, followed the Irish political mainstream. Louis Marcus notes as

“True ... that my family and the Cork Jewish community in general were very sympathetic to the Irish struggle for independence. My parents more than once told me how revolted they were at the horrors inflicted by the Black and Tans [the nickname for the notorious militia deployed to suppress the rebels during the War of Independence] on the people and city of Cork”.<sup>35</sup>

Although the Goldbergs were probably not alone in their reaction to the activities of the Black and Tans, Marcus’s statement does not equate either to a nationalist political stance or to active support for militant nationalism among the Jewish community as a whole. Without further direct evidence it can only be taken at face value for what it is – an expression of one family’s sympathy at the brutality and suffering inflicted on their neighbours and on their adopted city. Even if these sentiments were as widely shared by other members of Cork’s Jewish community as Marcus suggests, this does not mean that they can be automatically extended to Jews of Dublin, Limerick, or other Irish cities.

The probable lack of Jewish engagement with militant Irish nationalism that is implied by the sources is unsurprising given the bigger picture. Since rabbinic times Jewish wisdom has advocated caution in dealing with non-Jewish ruling powers, emphasising the vulnerability of the Jewish minority at times of political turbulence.<sup>36</sup> The palpable nervousness of some Irish Jews at the prospect of regime change simply reflects the uncertainties of Jewish diaspora life from ancient times to the present day. Loyalty to the British Crown was not only the obvious course of action for the communal establishment, but its duty according to rabbinic teaching, and my research indicates that this position is likely to have been shared by most Irish Jews – in line with their non-Jewish counterparts. It must be remembered that the majority of Jews at this time were still relative newcomers to Ireland and were therefore not fully invested in Irish society. Despite the egalitarian aspirations of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic and the important role of progressive political

<sup>35</sup> L. Marcus, “Correction.”

<sup>36</sup> E.g., *Avot* 3:2 (*Chapters of the Fathers*, transl. Abraham J. Ehrlich and Avner Tomaszef, with commentary by Pinhas Kehati (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organisation, 1986), 100–103): “Pray for the welfare of the ruling power, since but for the fear of it, men would swallow each other alive.” *Tosafot Yom Tov* (Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, 1578–1654) explains that “the powerful [the majority] would destroy the weak [the Jews] were it not for fear of the authorities.” The rabbis believed that political turbulence brought out the underlying tensions in any society, notably anti-Jewish sentiment and violence. Therefore they followed the teaching of the prophet Jeremiah (29:7): “But seek the welfare [i.e. stability] of the city where I have sent you into exile ... for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

factions in the Rising, it had decidedly conservative, Catholic overtones. This element came to dominate Irish nationalism and to define the Irish state until relatively recently. Two of the leaders, Pádraig Pearse and Joseph Mary Plunkett, were devout Catholics who saw themselves as emulating the lives of the saints in their behaviour and attitudes. Pearse even timed his reading of the Proclamation to coincide with the Angelus bell.<sup>37</sup> There is no reason why Jews would see the Irish struggle for independence as their battle or their particular concern, especially at its outset in 1916. In contrast, as the memoir literature shows, they were grateful to the British Crown for the relative tolerance they experienced in Ireland. Research on broader aspects of local Jewish identity indicates that Jews have historically tended to be more interested in international Jewish politics than in local non-Jewish politics,<sup>38</sup> and there is no reason to assume that Irish Jews should be any different. Again, it all comes back to the interpretation of the evidence – or, more specifically, the complexities that are revealed through careful interpretation of the surviving evidence, by reference to the broader Jewish experience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In consulting the full range of contemporary Jewish sources, it becomes evident that the Jewish relationship with Irish nationalism has been far more ambivalent and complex than most people care to acknowledge.<sup>39</sup> It is not helpful to approach it as a simple case of “were they or weren’t they?” – rather the questions might better begin with “*what* were they?” and “*why*?” It is reductive to characterise any change in Jewish attitudes as a straightforward Jewish adoption of the nationalist cause, as it is impossible to pin down the exact nature of any change that may have occurred. The most probable scenario is that Jewish opinion was consistently influenced by Irish political opinion. For a number of Jews this may have led to a shift from loyalty to the British Crown and support for Home Rule under British patronage, towards a greater degree of receptiveness to the cause of Irish independence. However, we cannot make any assumptions as to the extent of Jewish receptiveness – whether among individuals or the community as a whole – as the lack of concrete evidence makes this impossible to determine. Therefore it is crucial to be cautious, and to avoid filling the gaps in our knowledge with speculation, such as Turkington’s claims regarding “Jewish political figures.” What is certain is that Briscoe, Noyk, and Solomons were atypical of the majority; but what exactly the majority thought and how their thinking might have evolved between 1916 and 1923 is likely to remain something of a mystery.

## 1966: The Turning Point for Collective Memory?

If we are to accept that the popular understanding of Jewish attitudes towards Irish nationalism has at some point distorted the realities of the situation, the question remains of where, when and how did the shift in collective memory

37 Cólín Owens, “Redeeming ‘Dublin’s many shames’: The GPO and ‘British Syphilization’” (paper presented at the American Conference for Irish Studies, University of Notre Dame, April 1, 2016).

38 My thanks to Zuleika Rodgers for this observation.

39 For a detailed critique of this relationship in the context of Jewish integration into Irish society, see Wynn, “Ireland’s Jewish Community”, ch. 2.



come about? Why and how did this eagerness to write the Jewish community collectively “in” to the Irish struggle for independence arise? Although contemporaneous Jewish attitudes towards Irish independence are likely to remain elusive, the transformation of popular memory may well be traceable to specific events: 1966 and the fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the Easter Rising.

Irish historians view 1966 as a milestone in Irish historical memory. Previously the 1916 Rising had been commemorated for the most part by militant republicans, who used it to express their dissatisfaction with the failure of the Irish government to deliver the united, Irish-speaking Ireland that the Rising had called for.<sup>40</sup> As the first ever state-sponsored commemoration of 1916, the fiftieth anniversary allowed the government to foster a new, more positive interpretation of the Rising, “a constructive patriotism” (then Taoiseach [prime minister] Seán Lemass, quoted in Daly: 2007, 30) which aimed to transform 1916 into a focal, unifying point through an inclusive and forward-looking commemoration. The celebrations were extensive and nationwide, and are still vividly remembered by those who experienced them (Daly and O’Callaghan, 2007: 1–2, 7; Daly, 2007: 18–27).<sup>41</sup>

In 1966, the government’s aspiration to inclusivity was hindered somewhat by the conservatism of Ireland’s Catholic authorities. The government did, nevertheless, reach out to the Protestant and Jewish communities, the main Irish minorities at the time, to invite them to participate in the commemorations. Both groups responded enthusiastically, indicating that 1916 was coming to be viewed as a landmark event in the creation of the Irish state (Daly, 2007: 45–46). Having experienced the atmosphere of excitement and national pride in the build up to the 2016 commemorations, their enthusiasm is understandable. The mood in 2016 was infectious, and it was almost impossible not to be moved by it in some way.

In 1966, the Jewish eagerness to buy in to the new national narrative of 1916 is apparent from contemporary reports. The then chief rabbi Dr Isaac Cohen took a quotation from the Proclamation as the theme for his address at the official state service of thanksgiving: “In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty; six times during the past 300 years they have asserted it in arms.” This choice of quote in itself is remarkable given the abhorrence of violence and political unrest that has characterised mainstream Jewish thought since Antiquity and in coming, furthermore, from the official representative of this tradition in Ireland. Cohen continued: “Humanly speaking there was no possibility of victory in such circumstances. The people of Israel marched on in the hands of God to freedom but for the men of 1916 there was no miraculous parting of the waters of the sea, and the lives of many of them were engulfed in the ensuing destruction.” (Daly, 2007: 46–47, quoting the *Irish Press*, April 11, 1966)<sup>42</sup> The Rising was commemorated within the Jewish community itself

<sup>40</sup> On the significance of 1966 in terms of previous commemorations of the Rising, see Mary E. Daly and Margaret O’Callaghan, “Introduction – Irish Modernity and ‘the Patriot Dead’ in 1966,” in *1916 in 1966: Commemorating the Easter Rising*, ed. Mary E. Daly and Margaret O’Callaghan (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007), 1–17.

<sup>41</sup> The aspiration to be inclusive and forward-looking in commemorating 1916 was reprised in 2006 and again in 2016 (cf. “1916/2016: Remember, Reflect, Reimagine,” *Creative Ireland*, www.ireland.ie, accessed November 29, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> For an image of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, see “1916 Necrology: 485,” *Glasnevin Trust*. Cohen’s comparison with the Israelites seems a little back-handed, as his comments could be taken to imply that God was not on the side of the rebels due to their violent

with a special synagogue service, where a specifically composed prayer was recited. This celebrated “a small heroic band of Irish citizens [who] struck an unforgettable blow for freedom” (qtd. in Ó Gráda, 2006: 190).

Scholars note the political nature of commemoration in general, as a deliberate act that relies on a process of selection and manipulation of memory at both individual and group levels. Despite its outward appearance of consensuality, commemoration is in fact the product of intense contest, struggle, and annihilation.<sup>43</sup> National discourses of identity and opposition determine what is included, excluded or marginalised from collective memory and, thereby, from history itself (Graff-McRae, 2007: 219–38). On the positive side, as in the case of 1916, commemoration offers possibilities for constructing unity and solidarity,<sup>44</sup> allowing past events to be reinterpreted according to constantly changing needs and securing their role in defining group values and identity into the future (Higgins, 2007: 168).

These observations are extremely pertinent to the sentiments expressed by the official Jewish community in 1966, which indicate that the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising marked an ideological turning point for Irish Jews as well as for the Irish nation in general. The contrast between the apparent lack of interest in Irish nationalism that is visible in the memoir literature before 1966 and the effusive sentiments of Isaac Cohen, as a representative of the communal establishment in 1966, is striking. This suggests that the inclusive thrust of the commemorations inspired (or, from a more cynical perspective, provided a convenient opportunity for) Irish Jews to reflect upon and refashion the Jewish relationship with Irish nationalist politics. It is pertinent to note that Berman’s memoir was published in 1966, following its makeover by Zlotover. This edited out disparaging references to non-Jews, replacing them with vague and generalised claims of Jewish support for Irish nationalism (Berman, undated; compare with Berman and Zlotover, 1966). That same year Michael Noyk was buried in the Jewish cemetery with full military honours, and one cannot help speculating as to whether the communal authorities would have welcomed such a spectacle in previous years. In 1966, however, it suited the mood of the times.

The elaborateness of popular memory of Jews and the Rising in 2016 and the eagerness to promote narratives of Irish Jewish nationalism, demonstrate just how thoroughly communal attitudes have been transformed in the fifty years since 1966. Unfortunately this has been an entirely unreflexive process. This is particularly evident with regard to the Home Rule tradition that was written “out” of the Irish nationalist narrative of 1966 (Daly, 2007: 36–37), and likewise dropped from its Jewish counterpart. Although recent years have seen a move towards recovering this aspect of Irish identity these developments, while of great national significance, have not been reflected in Irish Jewish communal narrative which remains simplistic and reductive. Indeed, in reporting his attendance at the official commemoration of the Easter Rising in 2013, the chair of the Jewish Representative Council of Ireland, Maurice Cohen, described the event in strong political terms as honouring martyred patriots.<sup>45</sup>

---

actions. However, it seems unlikely under the circumstances that any disparaging meaning was intended.

43 John Gillis, cited by Daly and O’Callaghan, “Irish Modernity,” 2.

44 Edna Longley, cited in Graff-McRae, “Forget Politics,” 234–35.

45 Maurice Cohen, Chair’s Report, Biennial Meeting of the Jewish Representative Council of Ireland, June 30, 2013.

# Irish Nationalism and the Jews: Legacy, History and Memory

I have deliberately maintained a distinction above between Irish Jews and the broader Irish nation when considering the ideological changes that came about in 1966, and the shift in meaning and significance of the 1916 Rising that made it a focal point for the construction of positive expressions of “Irish” identity. This is due to my belief that Cohen’s speech and the Jewish commemorative prayer (presumably also written by Cohen) were expressions of a Jewish aspiration to be accepted as authentically “Irish,” as part of the nation that had adopted 1916 as a cornerstone of its identity; rather than reflections of a reality whereby Jews were already considered *de facto* to be “Irish.” The commemorations of 1966 provided the Jewish community with a “way in” to “Irishness.” It created an opportunity to present a positive image of Jewish integration into Irish society and, conversely, of Irish acceptance of its Jewish minority, when the reality has been considerably less smooth and straightforward. This representation of Jewish “Irishness” has become an important strand of the established communal narrative of Irish Jewish history. It is there to be drawn upon and elaborated as further opportunities arise in order to claim Jewish embeddedness in Irish society and investedness in Irish national identity. In 2016, it has allowed the community to participate in the commemoration of a foundational event in modern Irish history; to feel directly part of – *included in* – the collective national memory of this event and its momentous aftermath. Although this process seems to have begun in earnest 1966, it remains open-ended.

Positive representations of Irish attitudes towards the Jews have been an element of the Irish and Irish Jewish narratives since the early nineteenth century. These images have been promoted at different times and for different reasons by Irish nationalists, the Anglo-Jewish establishment and the Irish Jewish communal mainstream. These assertions appear to be supported by the successes of Irish Jewry, often described as the “disproportionate” Jewish contribution to Irish society – a word that has also featured in assertions regarding Jews and Irish nationalism, as we have already seen. However, the reality was rather more complicated than this suggests, as is evident not only from the case of Jewish nationalism narratives but from other examples too (Wynn, 2015: ch. 2). The sources consistently show that, in fact, many Irish Jews have struggled – and continue to struggle – to reconcile what David Marcus has famously termed their “hyphenated” identity (Marcus, 2001: xiv).<sup>46</sup> It has been difficult, and impossible for some, to reconcile what precisely it means to be an “Irish Jew,” beyond the superficialities of an Irish accent and somewhat “Irish” character traits (Wynn, 2015: 43–59; Lentin, 2002). This reflects the battle to be accepted as authentically “Irish” in a society that still associates its national identity to a large extent with the Catholic faith; the popular understanding of “Irishness” has yet to catch up with the increasingly secular and cosmopolitan reality. In his address to the World Jewish Council meeting in Dublin in November 2016, Irish president Michael D. Higgins astutely observed: “To uncover the reasons which led so many [younger Irish Jews] to leave this island would probably teach us much about ourselves as

<sup>46</sup> Although Marcus refers to the “ongoing trauma of having to juggle a hyphenated heritage,” the nuances of the term he coined are lost on many commentators who understand it in a more straightforward, descriptive sense.

a society.”<sup>47</sup> Whilst this particular extract from Higgins’ speech was selected for quotation in the establishment *Community News* it went, typically, un-commented upon. This reflects an unspoken communal policy of avoiding engagement in any critique of the Jewish experience in Ireland.

Although the Irish population is becoming increasingly mixed, Ireland’s Jewish community continues to shrink. Proportionate to its mounting existential predicament are the pressing issues of memory and legacy – the Jewish “place” in Irish cultural, economic, and political life. Jews – or, rather, the handful of Jewish exceptions – represent a tiny minority within the Irish nationalist movement and its historical narrative. While they were not alone in their “invisibility” it is, in the Jewish case, somewhat understandable given the scarcity of direct evidence for Jewish involvement with radical nationalism. The effort to carve a metaphorical Jewish “space” within the largely Catholic founding narrative of the Irish state is part of a broader ideological project. It fits neatly alongside assertions of a relatively continuous Jewish presence in Ireland from medieval times to the present day. This plank of communal narrative is, likewise, a liberal interpretation of the evidence, which shows that the Jewish presence in Ireland was in fact sporadic until the early nineteenth century (Hyman, 1972). Tales of Jewish support for Irish nationalism are central to this retrospective “indigenisation” of Irish Jewry which, I believe, began in earnest with the refashioning in 1966 of Irish identity itself around the milestone of 1916.

Once we acknowledge how the Jewish place in Irish society has been (mis) represented and (mis)understood up to now, the fundamental issue remains of whether it is possible to determine in more objective and realistic terms the extent of this Irish Jewish “space” in the first place.<sup>48</sup> This has yet to be resolved, along with all its implications for other equally – if not more – searching and uncomfortable questions as to the nature and extent of anti-Jewish prejudice in Ireland; as to the way in which negative representations of Irish Jews may have influenced the Irish Jewish self-image; and as to the realities of Jewish/non-Jewish interactions in contemporary Ireland. Much research remains to be done in these areas, in particular that of prejudice; currently the debate is simplistic, centring on trying to “prove” whether or not “antisemitism” really “exists” in Irish society (with the profusion of inverted commas reflecting the rudimentary and reductive character of much of the existing discourse) (Wynn, forthcoming).

The matter of actual, as opposed to manufactured, Jewish “space” in Irish society leads to the related dilemma of defining the virtual void that has arisen with the shrinkage of the community. How do we acknowledge this void in a respectful manner that does not simply seek to “paper over the cracks” with superficial, externally imposed meaning? How can the community and its historians commemorate the legacy of the past with dignity and honesty, in order to rise above the existing historical narrative? How can we progress beyond the current eagerness to present a reductively positive image of harmony and co-operation between Jews and the Irish majority that leaves out most of the bad bits? These dilemmas have obvious resonance in terms of the Jewish experience elsewhere.<sup>49</sup> This underlines the importance of referring to

47 Qtd. in *Community News*, November 25, 2016.

48 For critiques of the collaboration between Jews and non-Jews to produce the existing “cosy” and largely uncontentious representations of Jews and Jewish history in Ireland, see Goldstone, “Reflections on Jews” and “Rewriting You”.

49 Goldstone, “Reflections on Jews” considers the legacy of Irish Jewry with reference to the controversial renaissance of Jewish culture in eastern Europe, often at the hands of non-Jews, in places where there has been little or no Jewish presence since the Holocaust.

broader Jewish historiography if we are ever to develop a more sophisticated approach to Irish Jewish history.

Going one step further still the question arises of, in whose interests is it to manipulate the Irish Jewish past as we see with the example of Irish nationalism? The relative Jewish “invisibility” of the past has enabled Irish people – both Jewish and non-Jewish – freely to reimagine the Jewish “place” in Irish society, and to reconstruct the past as they see fit, to suit their own particular ends. This has bigger implications than the immediate goal of giving the Jewish community a “share” (or investment) in the foundational events of recent Irish history and Irish statehood, whether this “share” is being graciously endowed by Irish commentators, eagerly broadcast by the custodians of Irish Jewish history, or exaggerated by both parties. The refashioning of an idealised past of Jewish openness towards and, consequently, integration into Irish nationalism and state-building reinforces the claim on the Jewish side of a largely smooth and seamless integration into Irish society. It authenticates the Jewish community as “Irish.” On the Irish side, this relatively “feelgood” narrative creates the impression that Irish society has historically been more tolerant and accepting of its religious, social and ethnic minorities than has been the actual reality. Overtones of anti-Jewish sentiment are easily swept aside in favour of a positive message overall.<sup>50</sup> Both sides can thus avoid what are difficult and searching issues for all Irish citizens, especially in the current world climate of growing intolerance. In Ireland, Jews and non-Jews alike have collaborated to evade matters that are contentious and awkward for all, by burying them under a heap of mythology. In failing to ask the difficult questions the myths are left unchallenged, there to be perpetuated and elaborated for future generations. It takes courage and maturity to pursue answers that we expect will be uncomfortable but, in doing so, new possibilities are created (or constructed) for the future.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Benson A. (2007), *Jewish Dublin: Portraits of Life by the Liffey*. Dublin: A & A Farmer
- Berman H., “Recollections.” American Jewish Archives, undated
- Berman H. & Zlotover M. (1966), *Zlotover Story: A Dublin Story with a Difference*. Dublin: Healy Thom
- Bloom J. S., “The Old Days in Dublin: Some Girlhood Recollections of the '90s.” *Commentary* (July 1952): 21–32.
- Bloom J., Unpublished memoir, American Jewish Archives, undated.
- Briscoe R. with Hatch A. (1959), *For the Life of Me*. London: Longmans.
- Daly M. E. (2007), “Less a Commemoration of the Actual Achievements and more a Commemoration of the Hopes of the Men of 1916.” In *1916 in 1966: Commemorating the Easter Rising*, ed. Mary E. Daly and Margaret O’Callaghan, 18–85. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy.
- Daly M. E., & O’Callaghan M. (2007), “Introduction – Irish Modernity and ‘the Patriot Dead’ in 1966.” In *1916 in 1966: Commemorating the Easter Rising*, ed. Daly M. E. and O’Callaghan M., 1–17. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy.

<sup>50</sup> In this vein it is interesting to note that Robert Briscoe was used to promote an image of Irish tolerance during the 1950s, a time when the country was perceived internationally as a hotbed of sectarian prejudice (Lukas Peacock, “‘Breaking Down Barriers’: An Insight into the Political Career of Robert Briscoe” (MA thesis, University College Dublin, 2010), ch. 3).

- Goldstone K. (2008), "Now You See Us. Now You Don't": Reflections on Jews, Historical Amnesia and the Histories of a Multi-Ethnic Dublin." *Translocations* 4, no. 1 : 102–109.
- Goldstone K. (2000), "Rewriting You: Researching and Writing about Ethnic Minorities." In *Cultivating Pluralism: Psychological, Social and Cultural Perspectives on a Changing Ireland*, ed. MacLachlan M. and O'Connell M., 305–314. Dublin: Oak Tree Press.
- Graff-McRae R. L. (2007), "Forget Politics! Theorising the Political Dynamics of Commemoration and Conflict." In *1916 in 1966: Commemorating the Easter Rising*, ed. Daly M. E. and O'Callaghan M., 219–238. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy.
- Herzog, Chaim. *Living History: A Memoir*. London: Phoenix, 1996.
- Higgins R. (2007), "I am the narrator over-and-above ... the caller up of the dead: Pageant and Drama in 1966." In *1916 in 1966: Commemorating the Easter Rising*, ed. Daly M. E. and O'Callaghan M., 148–172. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy.
- Hyman L. (1972), *The Jews of Ireland: From Earliest Times to the Year 1910*. Shannon: Irish University Press.
- The Jewish Chronicle*.
- Keogh D. (1998), *Jews in Twentieth Century Ireland: Refugees, Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust*. Cork: Cork University Press.
- Lentin R. (2002), "Ireland's Other Diaspora: Jewish-Irish Within/Irish-Jewish Without." *Golem* 3. <http://www.hagalil.com/golem/diaspora/ireland-e.htm> (accessed 8 March 2006).
- McCarthy K. (2015), *Robert Briscoe: Sinn Féin Revolutionary, Fianna Fáil Nationalist and Revisionist Zionist*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Marcus D. (2001), *Oughtobiography: Leaves from the Diary of a Hyphenated Jew*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan.
- Noyk M., "Statement Regarding 1910–1921 Period." Dublin Military History Bureau. National Library of Ireland, MS 18,975.
- O'Driscoll M. (2004), "The 'Jewish Question,' Irish Refugee Policy and Charles Bewley, 1933–39." In *Racial Discrimination and Ethnicity in European History*, ed. Gudmundur Halfdanarson, 139–154. Pisa: University of Pisa.
- Ó Gráda, Cormac. *Jewish Ireland in the Age of Joyce: A Socioeconomic History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Peacock L. (2010), "Breaking Down Barriers": An Insight into the Political Career of Robert Briscoe." MA thesis, University College Dublin.
- Rivlin R. (2003), *Shalom Ireland: A Social History of Jews in Modern Ireland*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan.
- Solomons B. (1956), *One Doctor in His Time*. London: Christopher Johnson.
- Solomons E. (1966), *Portraits of Patriots: With a Biographical Sketch of the Artist by Hilary Pyle*. Dublin: Figgis.
- Tye L. (2001), *Home Lands: Portraits of the New Jewish Diaspora*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Wigoder G. (1985), *In Dublin's Fair City*. Jerusalem: World Zionist Organisation.
- Wigoder M. J. (1935), *My Life*. Edited by Samuel Abel. Translated by Louis E. Wigoder. Leeds: J. Porton & Sons.
- Wynn N. (2014), "Irish-Jewish Constructs of Tsarist Eastern Europe." In *Ireland: West to East: Irish Cultural Connections with Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Aidan O'Malley and Eve Patten, 69–84. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Wynn N. (2015), "Ireland's Jewish Identity Crisis." In *Jews and Non-Jews: Interactions, Memories, Perceptions from the Perspective of Cultural Studies*,

- ed. Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich and Jacek Partyka, 43–59. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Wynn N. (forthcoming), “Irish Representations of Jews and Jewish Responses/Jewish Representations of Jews and Irish Responses.” In *Jewish Questions and Irish Questions: Uncanny Crossovers in Irish and Jewish History*, ed. Aidan Beatty and Dan O’Brien. New York: Syracuse Press.
- Wynn N. (2012), “Jews, Antisemitism and Irish Politics: A Tale of Two Narratives.” *PaRDeS: Zeitschrift der Vereinigung für Jüdische Studien. e.V.* 18 : 51–66.
- Wynn N. (2015), “The History and Internal Politics of Ireland’s Jewish Community in Their International Jewish Context (1881–1914).” PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin, Asher. *Jewish Dublin: Portraits of Life by the Liffey*. Dublin: A & A Farmer, 2007.