

Jewish Historical Studies

Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England

Article:

Introduction: Continuing disruptions, new beginnings

Michael Berkowitz^{1,*}

How to cite: Berkowitz, M. 'Continuing disruptions, new beginnings'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2021, 53(1), pp. ix-xiii.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2022v53.001>.

Published: 14 March 2022

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double blind peer-review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Copyright:

© 2021, The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2022v53.001>

Open Access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

*Correspondence: m.berkowitz@ucl.ac.uk

¹ UCL, UK

INTRODUCTION

Continuing disruptions, new beginnings

Despite the difficult, unprecedented circumstances of this past year, the Jewish Historical Society of England, and its annual, *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the JHSE* (the issue before you, either virtually or hard-copy), move ahead. Under the leadership of chairperson Caroline Maurice, as chief administrator, and Miri Rubin, the President providing overall and scholarly guidance, the Society continues to attract new members and to launch new programmes to ensure the longevity and vitality of the organization. Its journal, too, is in a course of change and progress. In the next few years it will be turned over to a group of three editors – Shirli Gilbert, Adam Mendelsohn, and Avril Alba – who will expand the remit from England (which has, though, typically included Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Ireland), with deliberate speed, to the historical British empire and Jewry in the English-speaking world writ large. More detailed illumination of this transition will appear in forthcoming issues.

This year's *Transactions* comprises both the tried-and-true as well as a new wrinkle or two. Continuing with the thrust of the journal since its inception, we begin with four substantial articles centred on Anglo-Jewry. Philip A. Williamson has written on the history of an interesting facet of liturgy for British Jewry, “special acts of worship”. This is an especially fine instrument for exploring vicissitudes in Anglo-Jewish history and its relationship to institutional Judaism *per se*. Alysa Levene contributes a perceptive study of provincial Jewry, seeing the communities outside the major cities in the context of each other and in the light of larger trends in politics and “civic engagement”. This piece complements articles in *Transactions* in the last few years on Bradford and the Home Counties.¹ Jonathan Lewis reaches beyond the British Isles in focusing on the activities of Jewish chaplains in the British Army confronting the horrors of the Bergen Belsen concentration camp. Although Belsen and

¹ Grace Idle, “Bradford’s Jewish History: A Reconsideration, Part One”, *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* (hereafter, *Transactions*) 49 (2017): 144–61; Idle, “The Jewish Community in Modern-Day Bradford”, *Transactions* 50 (2018): 122–58; Jonathan Romain, “Royal Jews: Jewish Life in Berkshire from the Readmission till Today”, *Transactions* 47 (2015): 217–37.

its liberation are strongly etched in Anglo-Jewish memory, and many are familiar with the account of Rev. Leslie Hardman,² Lewis is the first to take an in-depth view of the chaplains' service among the Jewish survivors of that camp, including the occasionally tempestuous relations in their own cohort. Lewis's contribution will appear in two instalments.

This issue also includes the first-ever history of "spiritualism" among the Jews of England, in the article by Samuel Glauber and Boaz Huss. Compared to astrology, which despite being chided as un-Jewish or anti-Jewish, has been the subject of several scholarly books and hundreds of articles about its practice among Jews, there are only a handful of studies dedicated to Jews and "spiritualism" – the attempt to communicate, mainly in the form of a "séance", with the dead. Huss and Glauber convincingly demonstrate that spiritualism was extremely popular with Anglo-Jewry, crossing all its class-based, gender, and denominational borders. Even the eminent rabbi and scholar Moses Gaster took this movement seriously. The journal's frontispiece shows an advertisement from the *Jewish Chronicle* (1932) of the Jewish Society for Psychic Research, promoting an address by "The Very Rev. Dr. Moses Gaster (Late Chief Rabbi of The Sefardim) on 'The Spiritual Aspect of Life, According to Jewish Teaching'". While indulging in spiritualism reflects the enthusiasm of Jews for popular culture outside the Jewish sphere *per se*, it also opens a window into the Jews' mania for all kinds of fads (some of which extend back to antiquity), which assume the form of nineteenth- to twenty-first century "new age" passions.

Consistent with pursing "the new", this issue also ventures into uncharted territory by reproducing, for the first time, a selection from an international best-seller, *Educated: A Memoir* (2018), by Tara Westover, as it relates to contemporary British Jewish history.³ We warmly thank Tara, her publicist Erin Richards, and publishers Windmill Books and Random House for permission to use this excerpt. Westover reflected on her childhood, beginning in a fundamentalist enclave in rural Idaho, to her young adulthood as a progressive social scientist. As a year-abroad student at Cambridge from Brigham Young University, Tara was assigned as a tutee to Professor Jonathan Steinberg, who was then at Trinity Hall. Millions of readers of (and listeners to) Westover's moving memoir were

² Leslie H. Hardman, *The Survivors: The Story of the Belsen Remnant*, told by Leslie H. Hardman and written by Cecily Goodman; foreword Lord Russell of Liverpool (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2009).

³ Tara Westover, *Educated: A Memoir* (London: Windmill Books, 2018).

treated to her story of having her life dramatically changed due to having Jonathan as her teacher and mentor. Jonathan Steinberg, who died on 4 March 2021, spent his last twenty years as the Walter H. Annenberg Professor of European History at the University of Pennsylvania, following some thirty years in Cambridge.

I don't remember exactly when I met Jonathan. I know that he was familiar with my teacher, George Mosse. Jonathan was born in New York City in 1934, while his father, Milton (1903–1950) presided at the Park Avenue Synagogue. Besides serving as the rabbi of a preeminent Conservative synagogue, Milton Steinberg was the author of a novel set in first- and second-century Palestine, *As a Driven Leaf* (1939), which remains a compelling vision of the tension between faith and reason, and of a still valuable one-volume treatment of the Jewish religion, *Basic Judaism* (1947). Although he died terribly young, Milton Steinberg was an extraordinary figure of twentieth-century American Judaism.

Milton Steinberg was born to a poor family of Litvak garment workers from Seraye (Seirijai), in Rochester, New York (where I am from), and his cousins included Philip Bernstein (1901–1985). Bernstein, for many years the rabbi of Rochester's Temple B'rith Kodesh, served as a lead U.S. Army chaplain during the Second World War and was an official government adviser in the American zone of occupied Germany during a particularly critical period. I had spoken to Jonathan, informally, about his family, and he was the remaining connection I had to the world of my own father's childhood in Rochester between the wars.

Jonathan was indeed a remarkable scholar and teacher. His article reflecting on his experience in Britain, where being the son of Milton Steinberg had almost no resonance, versus the United States, where his father was continually, almost instantaneously invoked, is a penetrating, eloquent, and subtle comparison of British and American Jewry.⁴ We also reproduce here, by kind permission of the author, the obituary by Jonathan's Cambridge colleague, Christopher Clark.

As a further token of remembrance, the journal's cover displays a wood engraving by John F. Greenwood, of a corner of Trinity Hall from his book *Twenty Four Woodcuts of Cambridge* (1926). Greenwood's description reads:

In 1350 William Bateman, Bishop of Norwich, founded Trinity Hall on a site that about twenty years previously had been occupied by a house of monastic students from Ely. The study of the law, which the Founder

⁴ Jonathan Steinberg, "Milton Steinberg, American Rabbi: Thoughts on his Centenary", *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 3 (2005): 579–600.

had in his mind, is provided by lectureships and not less than three studentships, which are tenable by graduates of the College.

The buildings are for the most part modern or considerably modernized, except that of the Library, the interior of which shows fine work of the early seventeenth century.

Among the notable names on the books of Trinity Hall are Holinshed the chronicler; Lord Chesterfield, of the “Letters”; Bulwer Lytton; F. D. Maurice, social worker and divine; and Sir Leslie Stephen, philosopher and author.⁵

Jonathan Steinberg, a modest soul, certainly should be added to this colourful roster. At Cambridge he was a mentor to several doctoral students including Geoffrey Giles,⁶ who developed a sophisticated and engaging lecture course on the Holocaust at the University of Florida, which served as a model to several such offerings in the United States. While in Philadelphia Jonathan continued to teach undergraduates and supervise theses. He also completed a stunning, monumental biography of Bismarck, revealing tremendous dexterity in diverse historical methodologies. Tara Westover’s *Educated* ensures that the indelible impression of Jonathan’s presence and inspiring teaching has had a breadth of exposure rarely enjoyed by academics.

The current *Transactions* also takes stock of the achievements of the historian Antony Polonsky, who stands alone as a builder of bridges between Jews and non-Jewish Poles, and the academic communities of Britain, North America, Israel, Central Europe, and especially Poland and the Baltic nations. Michael Fleming, who provides a brief introduction to this section, served as a guest editor of the contributions by Mary Fulbrook, Dariusz Stola, Joanna Michlic, and Connie Webber. Each of them confront issues that represent Polonsky’s burning concerns, about which he himself has written superlative history.⁷ The career of Professor

5 John F. Greenwood, *Twenty Four Woodcuts of Cambridge* (London: John Lane, 1926), 24, 25, pl. VII. Thanks are due to Jeremy Schonfield for locating this image.

6 Geoffrey Giles, “The Nazi Persecution of Homosexuals in Occupied Countries: A Lenient Exception to Normal Justice against Non-Germans?”, in *Eradicating Differences: The Treatment of Minorities in Nazi-Dominated Europe*, ed. Anton Weiss-Wendt (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 41–60; Giles, *Students and National Socialism in Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

7 See esp. his three-volume history, *The Jews in Poland and Russia* (Oxford and Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010), and a condensed and updated version, *Jews in Poland and Russia: A Short History* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013).

Polonsky, who was born in South Africa, has spanned Britain, the United States, and Poland. Among his many enduring and still evolving legacies is the emergence of Polish Jewish Studies in Britain and the United States as a dynamic subfield of Jewish Studies. Connie Webber, who in the previous issue of *Transactions* reflected on her work with Professor Ada Rapoport-Albert,⁸ was also the key interlocutor in her service as publisher to Antony's pathbreaking annual, *Polin*.

This issue contains, as well, review essays of important anthologies by Dean Anthony Irwin and Christopher Probst. I wish to thank them and all the other authors, as well as the anonymous readers of submissions. As has become the custom, I warmly express my deepest gratitude to our copy-editor, Katharine Ridler, contributing editor, Jeremy Schonfield, and production designer Tony Kitzinger.

Michael Berkowitz

⁸ Connie Webber, "Thoughts on creating Worlds through Language: An Appreciation of Ada Rapoport-Albert by her Publisher", *Transactions* 52 (2020): 269–75.