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The New Man

I moved to east London in early autumn 2018, following the hottest summer in a decade. I'd had one last valedictory season in Oxford: long evenings in the garden, punting on the Isis, cricket in the fading light. By September, the leaves were beginning to turn, and my long-delayed departure began.

In May I had signed a lease for a room in a shared flat in London. The whole place would be renovated over the summer, I was told. The owners had initially promised that the work would be done in a couple of months, by August at the latest. After the deadline passed they told me they needed more time. September came and went. By early October, when I eventually moved in, the carpet was yet to be laid, and all of the rooms—except mine—were piled floor to ceiling with unassembled parts of a house. There was plasterboard in the living room, timber in a bedroom, cushions and pieces of chairs in the bathtub.

In the building site beyond my room, nothing worked. Turning on the kettle would plunge the living room into darkness. The washing machine's spin cycle cut power to the downstairs flat.

Gurges and watery clanks sounded through the night. At first the noises came from my radiator, but soon they were coming from somewhere deeper, harder to determine. I'd wake up to a heave, a clank—and then silence. One evening in November, sections of the kitchen ceiling fell in, spreading a fine layer of dark grey dust over the floor and bench.

In those first few weeks in London I would wake each morning to find teams of labourers in the house. The beginning of the day's work would be heralded by Polish folk ballads. The workers would stay all day, hammering and shouting, smoking out the window. About twice a week a man named Marion would come in the later evening, after all the other men had left. He would work until two or three in the morning, Radio Three playing from his plaster-spattered stereo. One night, against the lamplight, he told me that today was the second anniversary of his wife's death. This was difficult to recall, he said, not only because she was the only woman he had ever loved, but also because their son had undergone a mental collapse following his mother's death, and had spiralled into drugs and crime. The son was now in prison in Romania, he said. I didn't ask after his daughter. He told me she had recently been disabled.

Marion's struggles did not help the air of unreality that had settled over my life. Between the rubble, the ballads, the leaks, the plasterer's ghosts and everything else, I had the sense that nothing was quite as it was, or should be. Perhaps if I went upstairs to the empty shell of the loft, I thought, I would just slip across to the other side. There would be one great clank, the power would go out again, and that would be it for me.

Almost imperceptibly, though, the other world that had opened up before me began to close itself off again. The renovations were finished (if never quite completed), the carpet was laid, and the plumbing and electrics were fixed. A new washing machine was installed. I heard fewer Polish folk songs, and then eventually none at all. The last I saw of Marion was his departing figure after he pushed the keys through the mail slot.

I assembled pieces of furniture from around the house until I had something like a bedroom. There were reminders of the time just past—pencil marks on walls, unpatched holes in the ceiling—but it seemed as though those odd few weeks were behind me. Another life, which had felt so close, slipped out of mind.

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It was in October that I first cycled along Cable Street. This is the East End proper: the skyscrapers of the City of London nearby dominate the squat council flats of Whitechapel. I had come here because my father's family had lived around Cable Street between the wars—or so I had been told. They had been part of the extraordinary mass exodus of Jews from the Pale of Settlement in Eastern Europe that took place in the five decades from around 1880. Escaping persecution and pogroms, Russian Jews moved all over the world, to the United States in particular. Around 150,000 went to London. By one estimate there were more than 200,000 Jews in London in the 1930s, most of whom lived in the East End.

What little I knew of that generation of emigrés was filtered through my father's half-told stories. His maternal grandparents, Harry and Jane Wislaw, were in the *schmatte* trade. Harry was a tailor, Jane a seamstress. This was a common line of work for Jews at the time: immigrants in the slums of London's inner east performed the labour of Savile Row. After the war, Harry and Jane left behind a bombed-out Britain to live out the remainder of their lives in suburban Christchurch, New Zealand. For my father's bar-mitzvah they gave him a bicycle. His stories about them end around then. About my father's paternal grandparents I knew little other than what I could intuit from my grandfather's contemptuous asides.

Wandering around those streets, past estate agents and off-licences, I couldn't find anything that matched my image of how life might have been here between the wars. Whatever sense I had was probably formed by my memory of a single photograph of my father's early life in Britain. It's black and white, and he's being wheeled in a pram down a London street. Everyone looks cold. It might be winter—or this might just be what England is like. In the background are a few trees and a detached house.

It began to dawn on me, here among the council flats, that the stand-alone house suggested that the photograph was probably not taken in London after all. Villas and bungalows are more the terrain of my father's later home in Westminster Street, Christchurch. What I thought was a postwar chill may well have been a breeze blowing in from the Pacific.

My memory-work was doomed from the outset, of course. This part of London has been serially made over in the waves of destruction and construction that mark modern British history: the Blitz, inflows and outflows of migration, Thatcher, and the tentacular growth of the City. Any traces that could have remained would have almost certainly been made over and then made over again in this cycle of demolition and rebuilding.

Few Jews remain in the East End now. After the war, with much of the area destroyed by German bombing, most moved northwest, to neighbourhoods such as Golders Green. Some emigrated, including Harry and Jane. Newer arrivals, largely from Bangladesh, settled in the East End in the 1960s and 1970s. Where there were once 150 active synagogues in this area, there are now four.

What was I doing here? It should have been obvious that I wouldn't find traces of interwar life hidden in the brickwork, and not only because of everything that had happened in the intervening decades. In reality, I knew next to nothing about the figures whose steps I thought I might be retracing. I had never even seen photographs of them. All I had were my father's recollections, vague and sometimes painful, which shimmered into and out of significance. He used to call his grandparents from a phonebox in front of a cemetery on Grahams Road, Christchurch. His bicycle was stolen from outside the hospital soon after their deaths. Their graves were in Linwood Cemetery. Harry ate little other than steamed fish. They argued in Yiddish.

Leaving behind the council flats, I searched for something that I knew definitely was on Cable Street. Near Shadwell Station there is a mural several storeys high, covering one end of a row of terraces. It commemorates the 'Battle of Cable Street', the

anti-fascist demonstrations against Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts in October 1936. Mosley's 3000 Blackshirts were met by 50,000 protesters, and somewhere between 100,000 and 300,000 more along the route. Despite attempts by police to clear the way, the march was eventually abandoned.

The mural depicts a city street in ferment. Police horses charge protesters, while packed crowds fight the massed authorities. Banners are flying, bodies are captured in motion, and pieces of machines wheel through the crowd. Above, residents hurl rubbish from the upper windows—glass bottles, propaganda leaflets and the contents of chamber-pots.

It was the Jewish presence in the East End that had turned it into a target for the growing fascist movement in Britain in the later 1920s and 1930s. Mosley formed the British Union of Fascists in 1932, and it quickly became the nation's largest extreme right-wing group. In November 1933 a front-page article in the BUF's newspaper announced details of 'the Jewish conspiracy against Britain'.

The *Daily Mail* in January 1934 ran the headline 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts', over the byline of the newspaper's owner, Viscount Rothermere. The immediate prelude to the events of October 1936 was a campaign of hooliganism led by the BUF and other affiliated groups, including window-smashing and attacks on Jewish-owned shops. Street violence that targeted Jewish residents had become common in the East End by this time.

While the Battle of Cable Street ended in defeat for the BUF, it led to a further radicalisation of the far right. BUF meetings swelled in the East End. Mick Clarke, a local fascist leader, declared at one meeting: 'London's pogrom is not very far away now. Mosley is coming every night of the week in future to rid East London and by God there is going to be a pogrom!'

In going to Cable Street I was undertaking my own minor version of heritage tourism. But my trip was ultimately less about looking for what I might find than it was about looking for what might no longer exist. I couldn't seriously expect, here in the East End, to find the place my family had left. Another way of putting it is that there's no East End now for me to find. Discovering what you left behind is not the kind of thing that happens to my father's family, to Jews. There's no family farm, no little church or village shop. The temple was destroyed and, much later, a homeland invented. I went home and picked up a curry on the way.

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To support a new research project on Jewish comedy, my job in London came with few formal responsibilities. I quickly found the autonomy to be a mixed blessing, however, as I had little idea where I was going with my work. As is typical with academic positions, I had been hired on the strength of what I had just finished rather than what I would now be starting. The two-year contract was too short to require tangible results, but too long to ignore that prospect outright. My manager's expectations were opaque, communicated mainly through raised eyebrows and extended pauses. *And what are you planning to work on next?*

I slowly came to understand that my project was unlikely ever to be completed. The topic *could* appeal to me, but I didn't know how to write something new about it. It was too vast, too well covered, and anyway I probably didn't have the skills. I don't speak Yiddish, and my knowledge of Jewish biblical material is negligible. I never actually announced this thought to myself or anyone else, but my habits nonetheless began to organise themselves around it, like water flowing around a rock. Month by month, my working hours became shorter and my weekends longer. I went to Venice three times in the spring and played cricket midweek in the summer.

I took to haunting the British Library, rummaging through its catalogues. In this purposelessness masquerading as research I consulted joke books, pamphlets and tracts, newspapers, histories of comedy, histories of Jews and antisemitism in Britain. For a brief moment I thought about trying to learn Yiddish—then booked myself another holiday.

One of the far-right tracts I read was *The Alien Menace*, published in five updated editions between 1928 and 1934. Written by Lieutenant-Colonel A.H. Lane, each edition of the book raises alarm about recent immigration. In the first, just under a hundred pages in length, Lane writes: 'This book might be called "Britain for the British".' What follows is a heady mix of racial pseudo-science and decreasingly veiled antisemitism. In his preface he claims that recent migrants are 'generally the scum of Central and Eastern Europe'. This is 'not intended to be anti-Jewish,' he says, but rather 'anti-alien and pro-British'.

Over time, in line with the radicalisation of antisemitism in Britain, Lane became more virulent in his denunciation of Jews. One of his central claims was that Jews are at the origins of the scourge of international communism. He repeatedly refers to Karl Marx as 'the Prussian Jew'. He says that Bolshevism is 'controlled by a combination of internationalists in which those of the Jewish faith predominate'.

Paradoxically, Jews are also ruthless capitalists. He worries that ‘our most important industries ... are now wholly or partly controlled by German American Jewish interests’. Jews, we discover across the fifth and final edition’s 250 pages, are all of these things at once: politically powerful and physically degenerate, exploitative controllers of capital, ruthless communists and impoverished vectors of disease, directing the media yet curiously unable to be viewed kindly by the ordinary British man.

Reading such tracts was both amusing and banal. In time, I became immune to the claims the authors were making. It was as though their rhetorical strategies had been forced through a mincer. As I confronted a mush of rhetoric day after day, the writing became uniform, a series of gestures that amounted to the same thing—another claim that Jews run the world, that the body-politic is withering away, that ‘we’ are on the brink of a race war, that Jews use Christian blood for matzo.

I read deeply into the appendices of *The Alien Menace*. With Lane’s army career now behind him, he had the time to assemble a list of newspaper cuttings that reported immigrant crimes. Each new threat indicates yet another moral crisis: from ‘Deportations’ and ‘Illegal Landings, etc.’ to ‘Thefts, etc.’ and ‘Fraudulent Trading, Bankruptcies’. Alongside my fair-minded guide, I learnt to be as worried about ‘International Thieves and Swindlers’ as about those foreign-run centres of vice, ‘Opium Dens, Night Clubs, etc.’

One case in *The Alien Menace*, under ‘Passports, etc.’, caught my eye. On 1 January 1927 the *Daily Mail* reported that a man who had gone by numerous different names, ‘an electrical engineer of no fixed address’, had been convicted of ‘entering the country with an irregular passport and stealing a passport’. He was said by the prosecution to be ‘a runner or messenger for the Communist Party’. His sentence was six months’ imprisonment and a recommendation for deportation. The clipping contained a brief biography:

[He] registered in England as a Russian in the name of Neumann in 1916. Neumann was believed to be his correct name. In 1918 he appeared to have gone to America, and in 1924 returned to London, living in the East End. During the general strike last May he was very active. When that was over he left the East End and went to live with a friend named Prowse at Tottenham, N. Last June he stole Mr Prowse’s passport, and travelled on the Continent with it. Last year he bought a passport for 500 francs from a Frenchman, and went with it to Germany and Holland, and last Friday arrived at Harwich.

Detective-Sergeant Foster, of Scotland Yard, said that [he] had used the names of Gurowitz, Neumann, Newman, Caquin, and Prowse. He had tried to become naturalized in America.

Lane was presumably drawn to this case for several reasons. The first is the series of lies the man told about his identity. This menace had slid in and *lived among us*. The second is the suggestion that this man was Jewish—several of his names, along with his origins, and where he had lived in London, imply as much. The time of his arrival, for Lane, also showed his cowardice. The man was probably seeking to avoid conscription into the Tsarist army, and Russia was a British ally for the first three years of the war and a bulwark against communism. Finally, and worst of all, are his political leanings (which of course confirm his Jewishness). His actions during the General Strike, and his decision to clear out of the East End afterwards, show that he was involved in fomenting trouble on behalf of Judaic class warfare. A lying, rootless, disloyal, communist Jew.

What was I looking for at the British Library? If I had come looking for the remnants of my family, Neumann is as close to an adoptive ancestor as could be imagined—a Jewish everyman at the moment of crossing over. In the blurred outlines of this man's story I saw shimmering into view a figure of the many human lives that lie behind the great historical forces of the century. He seems to float on the winds of the era: persecution, war, emigration, exile, Bolshevism, strikes. A person with no apparent source of income and no clear past, he had been blown about in the madness of a world that had lost its mind. A new man, washed clean both of and by history.

There is a word in Yiddish for the kind of character Neumann was: *luftmensh*, a man who lives on air. A *luftmensh* can come from anywhere and with any purpose: a criminal or a cod-philosopher; an organ-grinder or a down-on-his-luck businessman; a dubious inventor or a tramp. He is as likely to turn up to a Seder in rags as he is to arrive wearing a gold watch. He may never be heard of again or he may be impossible to get rid of. The *Guardian* reported that when Neumann arrived in Britain from France, he presented himself to immigration officers as 'an electrical engineer'. He said that 'he had come to this country to put a new blowlamp on the market. He was unable to speak a word of French and had no papers on him relating to any blowlamp.'

There was an odd coda to Neumann's story, which I discovered in the fragile collections of the British Library's newspaper reading room. It seems that he or

someone close to him later told the *Sunday Worker* that the police had attempted to ‘extort’ a confession from him. The newspaper reported:

He has been on a bread-and-water diet. His cell is in a filthy condition, and he is not allowed a mattress, but has to sleep on the floor. No doubt this is intended to make him more amenable to the third degree inquisition.

Despite these conditions, Neumann still found time to send ‘fraternal greetings to the Workers, both British and Chinese, who are struggling for the overthrow of capitalism’.

The *Sunday Worker*’s accusations about police heavy-handedness led to a libel trial against its editor, which the police eventually won. It turned out that the police had no access to Neumann’s cell and that the prison regime was no different for him than it was for anyone else. This electrical engineer had been detained as little more than an ordinary thief. As a later retraction noted: ‘[T]he statements in the original paragraph were quite unjustified.’

What became of this *luftmensh*, this man of air? He was never deported, despite the court’s recommendation. He went on to have ten children in England, who went by some of the many names Neumann adopted. I have every reason to believe that one of the children was Lionel Dean, my paternal grandfather. While I will never be certain, there are enough parallels in the reporting on Nathan Neumann—name, job, origin, year of arrival—to suggest that he was in fact the *luftmensh paterfamilias*. Some of my cousins are named Newman, although they’ve discussed returning it to what they believe to be the original family name, Neumann. Then there are the Deans, from whom I am descended. There may well be some Caquins, Prowses and Gurowitzes out there.

There has always been some unspecified hint of scandal in my family associated with Lionel’s father. Lionel didn’t say much about him, other than that he was no good. *No good* was in fact one of my grandfather’s phrases. It was never that clear to me what he meant by this—a shirker, a scrounger, a liar, a *luftmensh*. *My father?* he would say. *No good.*

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The only time I have visited the graves of my father’s other grandparents, Harry and Jane Wislaw, was when I was in Christchurch giving a talk about nostalgia. I asked the audience: what might it mean to be living in the past? ‘Are we in a romance with what can never be called back, and with what might never have existed?’ My editor, sitting in the front row, looked back at me as I went on, vexed.

I had been out with my parents to the Linwood Cemetery, on the east side of Christchurch, before the talk. Both my parents have relatives buried here, on different sides of the cemetery. The graveyard is a record of early colonial immigration, the plots split into different religions (separated even in death). On the south side, with a view back towards the city, are the grand nineteenth-century headstones of the early Anglicans. Halfway up the hill, to the northwest and near a major road, are the Catholics.

Most of the graveyards in Christchurch were damaged in the major earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. On Linwood's sandy ground the land had warped, lifted and dropped thousands of times, flattening headstones and breaking open tombs. The monument to Thomas Dixon (beloved husband of Janet, d. 1918) lay in three pieces next to his distended concrete grave—the pillar, the capital and the rounded stone decoration. The tomb of Clara Clark (d. 1906, beloved wife of W.H. Clark) lay on its side.

There are few visible examples of Jewish life in Christchurch. This is a city in which the spire of the cathedral was once visible from kilometres away in every direction. However, in Linwood, a series of low monuments, all in black, record the presence of Jews from the settlement's early history—Freidlanders, Schwartzes and Woolfs.

It will always be a shock to see the Star of David in suburban Christchurch. Whatever led these people to come to the end of the earth was much like whatever led Neumann to leave Russia. It was part of the same historical process. My father, who was with me, stopped in front of the grave of Harry Teplitzky (d. 1977, immigrated 1920). 'Oh,' he said. 'Tip.'

Eventually we found my father's maternal grandparents. The flat stones were undamaged. Harry Wislaw (d. 1965, immigrated 1953), a tailor. Jenny Wislaw (d. 1970, immigrated 1953), a seamstress, known as 'Jane'. A Star of David with simple text on a black background. We placed pebbles on the graves and waited in the autumn breeze for something to happen.

Amid all the destruction, none of the Jewish graves had been disturbed. The monuments here are simpler, hidden away, less vulnerable to shaking. They face a different direction, from east to west. For once, here in Christchurch, the Jews had been left undisturbed.