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# Jewish Drama on the Irish Stage: The Socio-Political and Cultural Milieu of the Dublin Jewish Amateur Operatic Society (1908-1910) and the Dublin Jewish Dramatic Society (1924-1954)

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## *Abstract:*

This essay will conduct an examination into the as yet under-researched history of Jewish drama and theatre in Ireland. It will explore a number of socio-political and cultural contexts pertinent to shared or paralleled Jewish, Irish, and Irish Jewish concerns over language, identity, history, nationalisms, prejudice and oppression. It will also explore direct or implicit engagements and dialogues between various Irish Jewish dramatic societies and non-Jewish Irish movements and societies such as the Irish Literary Revival and the Gaelic League. Ultimately, the research hopes to provide a framework for future studies into Irish Jewish theatre providing a public platform giving voice to Ireland's largest non-Christian minority during the first half of the twentieth century.

*Keywords:* Gaelic, Literary Revival, Nationalism, Theatre, Yiddish

This essay will conduct an examination into the as yet under-researched history of Jewish drama and theatre in Ireland. The central focus will be on the beginnings of the Dublin Jewish Dramatic Society (hereafter DJDS), which had its original incarnation with a run of Jewish operas between 1908 and 1910 as successively the Dublin Jewish Amateur Operatic Society (hereafter DJAOS) and Dublin Jewish Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society (hereafter DJAODS). Abraham Goldfaden's *Shulamith, or Daughter of Zion* was the first to be performed in June 1908, followed by Goldfaden's *Bar Kochba, or Son of the Stars* in October 1908. *Haman the Second*, by a different playwright, Shomer (Nahum Meyer Schaikewitch), appeared the following year in January 1909, followed by a reproduction of Goldfaden's *Shulamith* in June 1909, and a further Goldfaden, *The Zauberin; or, the Enchantress*, was staged in April 1910. All

these performances were in Yiddish and staged at the Abbey Theatre. After some sporadic gatherings and performances over the next decade, most notably resurfacing as the Dublin Jewish Dramatic Circle in 1919, the DJDS was formed and ran consistently for some three decades from the 1920s to the 1950s staging plays by notable playwrights in both English and Yiddish. Of its entire history, the 1908 origins of the society and the post War of Independence period of the 1920s provide the richest materials for a fruitful exploration and investigation. The main object will be to place the society and contextualise the plays performed within the socio-political and cultural milieu of Ireland during the early decades of the twentieth century. It will also seek to establish the extent and success to which theatre provided a public voice to Ireland's largest non-Christian minority group of the time.

The main difficulty with this subject area is the lack of primary sources, particularly scripts that are either lost or to date have yet to be recovered. Another issue is that, although there are a few examples of surviving home grown Irish Jewish drama, most of the works performed were cultural imports. But there are still cultural and socio-political contexts against which the advent of Irish Jewish theatre can be examined. There is, for example, evidence of Irish Jewish engagements, dialogues, and disputes with Irish Nationalist movements such as the Gaelic League and causes such as Home Rule. There are also parallels invited by the language question as it pertains to both Irish and Jewish cultural identity, particularly how similarities in the perceived roles in respective languages may have helped rehabilitate the image of Jews, especially in the face of propagandist Irish anti-Semitism of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century. Likewise, there are parallels invited by the choice of Yiddish drama performed, particularly in relation to two of the Abraham Goldfaden works staged at the Abbey Theatre in 1908, which unfold along similar patriotic lines as dramas of the Irish Literary Revival, and indeed also invoked a centuries old Irish nationalist literary tradition of analogy with the Ancient Maccabees, or Jewish rebels against imperialist oppression. The article will conclude with a brief outline, a commentary on dramas performed by the Dublin Jewish Dramatic Society throughout the 1920s, and with a brief examination of home grown Irish Jewish dramas, particularly focused on the surviving works of two playwrights, Esther Morris (Mofsovitiz) and Emil Slotover.

Irish Jewish theatre has been afforded some cursory attention within the burgeoning field of Irish Jewish studies. As a cultural phenomenon, however, it has yet to be adequately documented, let alone thoroughly examined, resulting in a somewhat vague and frankly uninterested impression of a very minor theatrical phenomenon operating unnoticed at the margins of Irish society. True, Irish Jewish theatre will never be afforded the elevated position and consideration given in particular to the national theatrical movement of Yeats and Lady Gregory in terms of its overall significance in relation to Irish theatrical history. But as a medium for affording a platform for cultural expression to Irish Jewry alongside its entertainment value, Irish Jewish theatre most certainly warrants greater attention. There are of course reasons behind the scholarly neglect this subject has suffered, not the least being a dearth of research sources and materials. This has led in turn to a degree of indifference, casual assumptions and even inaccuracies in reportages pertaining to society activities. For example, in his pioneering social history, *The Jews of Ireland: From Earliest Times to the Year 1910* (1972), Louis Hyman mistakenly dates the performance of Abraham Goldfaden's *Bar [K]ochba*, one of the earliest society productions, as 1902 instead of 1909. That this is patently wrong requires no more evidence than the fact that the Abbey Theatre did not open its doors until 1904. Hyman accurately dates the performances of Goldfaden's *Shulamith* in 1908 and *Die Zauberin* in 1910, but as his social history draws to a close by 1910, he has little more to say on the subject of Irish Jewish theatre, besides listing the leading cast of *Bar [K]ochba* as a "Mr L. Briscoe taking the title role [of Bar [K]ochba],

Mr Antanovsli as Pappus, the dwarf intriguer, and Miss Minnie Cohen as Dinah” followed by naming the “Rev Simon Steinberg” as director of the 1910 production of *Die Zauberin* (1972, 340).

Ray Rivlin has more to offer, contributing two paragraphs in her *Shalom Ireland: A Social History of Jews in Modern Ireland* (2003) to the DJDS. She notes the formalising of the society by Larry Elyan, and how it “became a feature of Jewish cultural life from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s, when productions became more spasmodic before petering out” (Rivlin 2003, 110). But by far the most significant work on Irish Jewish theatre to date is Irina Rupp Malone’s “Synge, An-sky, and the Irish Jewish Revival” (2014). Malone, for example, argues correctly that Irish Jewish Theatre is a “forgotten chapter” in the history of Irish theatre more generally, and also raises the highly significant issue of alignment between “the Irish Literary and Dramatic Revival and the Yiddish Theatrical Renaissance [as] reverberations of a pan-European phenomenon”, but notes that “they are usually thought of as separate, if not ethnically-pure movements, rather than intersecting cultural trends” (Malone 2014, 17-18). This Malone attributes, at least in part to “the longevity of the myth of national ownership of national drama” which has relegated the “cultural oddity” of Yiddish drama at the Abbey Theatre to the margins of Irish theatre history (17). But most importantly, Malone’s essay illuminates, as she puts it, the “chance to examine a dialogue between two theatrical cultures, each shaped by its own distinctiveness” (*ibidem*), a prospect this essay will in turn continue to explore.

Given that both the Irish Revival and Renaissance of Yiddish theatre, happening concurrently whilst immersed and equally invested in the politics of place (or lack of in diasporic literatures), language, patriotism and identity, it follows that Malone would make the, albeit tentative, suggestion that the younger members of the Jewish Dramatic Society especially were keen to invite parallels and suggest similarities between “their productions and the patriotic drama of the Abbey” (19). There is indeed evidence of this, but Malone is wise in her caution insofar as she does not commit to categorising Irish Jewish theatre as affiliated specifically with Irish nationalism. Irish Jewry had notable Irish Nationalists within its ranks in and around 1908: figures such as the controversial novelist, Joseph Edelstein, author of *The Moneylender* (1908), who as a member of the Gaelic League, the Dublin and County Liberal Association and the Young Ireland branch of the United Irish League, spearheaded the short lived Judæo-Irish Home Rule Association in 1908 alongside Arthur Newman and Jacob Elyan. But the extent to and capacity within which Edelstein was affiliated with the DJAOS remains unknown. He did submit a short note to the editor of the *Evening Telegraph* on 14 October 1908, suggesting some form of official status in his claim to have been authorised by the Jewish Amateur Opera Company president, the Rev. Gudansk, “to state that a portion of the profits derived from the play, ‘Bar Kochba,’ now being played at the Abbey Theatre, will be devoted to the Dublin Distress Fund” (Edelstein 1908, 2).

Edelstein was one of the most prominent political figures on the Irish Jewish political stage, or at least the most publically vocal, and regularly expressed loud support for Irish Nationalism which he implicitly parallels with Zionism, the latter of which was generally endorsed and supported by Irish Jewry. His purportedly official letter on behalf of the DJAOS would thereby associate the dramatic society with Edelstein’s particular brand of Irish Jewish politics. Jewish charity had an important, if often overlooked, history in Ireland. Baron Lionel de Rothschild, for example, had organised a substantial famine relief fund (believed to be in the region of £8,000) in 1847 (see Shillman 1945, 50; Hyman 1972, 119-120). A *Freeman’s Journal* article on the “Jewish Amateur Operatic Society” of 25 August 1908, also highlights the “purely philanthropic basis” upon which the society was formed, and indeed would sustain as

the DJDS from the 1920s to the 1950s. The ethos of the society is thus outlined as pertaining to “some charitable organisation, not necessarily Jewish, such as a hospital, a board of relief for the indigent poor, or to assist destitute Jews in any part of the world”. The example of Telz (Yiddish for Telšiai) in the Kovno region of Lithuania, from which it is reported many Irish Jews derived their ancestry, is given on account of the great fire that decimated the town in 1907 (Anon. 1908h, 5)<sup>1</sup>.

Edelstein’s extension of this philanthropy to the Dublin Distress Fund is entirely consistent with the society’s ethos; but it also mirrors his wider political commitment to Irish Home Rule as outlined in Edelstein’s declaration on behalf of the Jewish attendees at the inaugural meeting of the Judæo-Irish Home Rule Association at the Mansion House, Dublin, on 10 September 1908 “to support such measures that will tend to secure for the people of Ireland a full grant of self-government, such as is accepted by the Irish Parliamentary Party, and in general to promote the welfare and prosperity of Ireland” (Anon. 1908i, 2). But Edelstein did not speak on behalf of all Irish Jewry, so the temptation to view his politics as either accurately or fully reflecting the agenda of the DJAOS must be treated with caution, especially when reading the society’s choice of production within any Irish political context. Edelstein had support, but he also had public detractors, such as Dr. Philip Wigoder, who considered affiliation with Irish Nationalism detrimental, if not downright dangerous to Jewish interests or even political security.

Heather Miller Rubens’s essay, “Rebellious Jews on the Edge of Empire: The Judæo-Irish Home Rule Association” (2018) offers a thorough commentary on the conflict and controversies of the dispute in which Wigoder led the opposition to Edelstein’s attempts to commit Irish Jewry to the Home Rule cause. He attended Judæo-Irish Home Rule Association meetings and published letters in the English Jewish Press, most notably “Jews and Home Rule” in the *Jewish Chronicle* (1908a, 21) and “Jews and Politics” in the *Jewish World* (1908b, 16), arguing that “Irish politics are largely a matter of religion, and the danger of religion is only too well known. Hence, the advisability of steering clear, as a religious body, of all local political questions” (cited in Rubens 2018, 99). The issue was not one of dictating political involvement on an individual level, as all individuals were free to pursue their own political interests and inclinations. The opposition was instead to attempts to collectively affiliate Irish Jewry directly with the Home Rule cause. With such an opposition in mind, it becomes apparent that giving Irish Jewish theatre an Irish Nationalist gloss is far from straightforward, even if the subject matter involved strongly invites such parallels. Malone is thus particularly conscious of this pitfall when she speculates on whether the appeal of idealised revolution in Yeats and Lady Gregory’s *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) might have inspired the DJAOS to perform Goldfaden’s patriotic revolution drama, *Bar Kochba; or, the Son of the Stars*, at the Abbey Theatre in October 1908 (Malone, 2014, 19).

But Home Rule was not the only political issue at play. The Goldfaden plays were performed in Yiddish at a time when the language question was highly politicised. Indeed, both Yiddish and Hebrew had been politicised within the pages of the Gaelic League newspaper,

<sup>1</sup> According to available newspaper reports, the DJDS would subsequently donate its proceedings to the “Ukrainian Jews’ Relief Fund” (1922; 1925), in aid of a new Synagogue (1925), the Jewish National (Palestine Restoration) Fund (1926; 1928), the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital on Adelaide Road (1928), the Jewish National Fund and Dublin Talmud Torah (1928), the Jewish National Fund and the new Dublin and National Schools (1934), the Dublin Hebrew Schools and Dublin Ladies’ Charitable Society (1935), amongst undoubtedly others. The scope and consistency of DJDS charity warrants further research in its own right, especially with regard to its contributions to the Jewish Youth Refugee Organisation (JYRO) during the war years from 1938 to 1947.

*An Claidheambh Soluis*, since the turn of the century. The “Business of the Hour” section of 20 January 1900 edition, for example, expresses indignation that Jews in Ireland have been granted permission by the Board of Education “to introduce the bilingual teaching of English and Hebrew in their primary schools” whilst the teaching of Irish continued to be suppressed, asking, “can any man of Irish blood and feeling do otherwise than rise in revolt against a system that grants to a handful of foreigners and to foreign language privileges that are denied to 700,000 Irish-speaking people, nay, to all Ireland and to the national language of the country?” (Anon. 1900, 712). Similar arguments and complaints would continue to be made over the next number of years. Yet, the staging of four Yiddish plays at the Irish National Theatre over the space of two years appears to have went without comment or objection from within the ranks of the Gaelic League. This is remarkable in itself, not least given the controversies of “Playboy riots” surrounding John Millington Synge only a year prior in 1907. If *An Claidheambh Soluis* was prepared to complain about foreign languages in Irish schoolrooms, one would suspect at least some comment on Yiddish drama being performed on the Irish National Stage.

The fact that no such objection appears to have manifested may be due at least in part to the development of a coinciding political dialogue embraced by both Irish Nationalists and many from within Jewry in general (rather than specifically within Ireland) that placed language at the centre of respective national identities. Hebrew especially would come to appeal to Irish language activists from within the Gaelic League for the parallels it would invite with their own campaign to position the Irish language as fundamental to Irish national identity. This was once more in no small part due to the efforts of Joseph Edelstein, who delivered an address on “The Gaelic League” decrying the decay of the Irish language at the hands of the National School system in November 1907, thereby bringing Irish and Jewish language together on the same political stage. Edelstein lauds the inclusiveness of the association, which he claims welcomes “Protestant or Jew, or even Turk” (Anon. 1907, 7). Edelstein was not the only Jewish voice on the subject. In attendance also, amongst others, were Abraham Weinronk, a 23 year old Russian Jewish emigrant and master baker of Clanbrassil Street, Dublin (1911 Irish census), Elias Weinstock, a 41 year old Russian Jewish emigrant and draper of Longwood avenue, Dublin (1911 Irish census), Edelstein’s 17 year old brother, Hyman Edelstein, who would shortly after immigrate to Canada, becoming a poet and active Zionist in Ottawa.

It is reported that Edelstein’s address was warmly received, particularly his view that exclusion and suppression of the Irish language in favour of English, a “foreign language”, was “detrimental to the best interests of the country” (*ibidem*). Typical debate ensued both arguing that the Gaelic language was “retrograde”, the revival of which a potential cause of “civil strife”, countered by the argument that it “was Liberal policy to support everything that stood for freedom” (*ibidem*). In a curious turn, a named attendee at the debate, Charles Stephens, invoked the “lost tribes” legend to emphasise solidarity between the Irish and the Jews; but a more interesting position was presented by “Mr A. M. Zaaks”, who consolidated the Irish-Hebrew parallel by arguing “no nation could exist without its language”, citing a Hebrew saying that “If we have our language, no one can rule us”. His argument that “a great deal of the solidarity of the Jews was due to the fact that they had preserved a language of their own” (*ibidem*) reportedly received great applause. The fact that this came from the president of the Dublin Young Men’s Zion Mission is of particular significance, given that the DJAOS were most certainly Zionists and were performing the Zionist drama of Goldfaden, even if the nature and extent of the society’s affiliation or sympathy with Irish Nationalist causes is in question.

Indeed, as was the case with Philip Wigoder’s opposition to Edelstein’s efforts to present the agenda of the Judæo-Irish Home Rule Association as generally representative of Irish Jew-

ry, there were dissenters from Edelstein's position. Abraham Weinrock, for example, argued during the meeting that "the prevalence of different languages merely brought disunion among the people" and that "it was antipathy to the English people that was so much against Ireland at the present time". Edelstein responded with an unequivocal statement that "Ireland had every right to cry for her own flag and liberty [and that] National decay followed the loss of a nation's language" (*ibidem*). Edelstein's narrative was subsequently mirrored by the Gaelic Leaguer, Rev. Patrick F. Kavanagh, author of *A Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798* (1898) and a Gaelic League pamphlet, "Ireland's Defence: Her Language", during a League speech in Wexford in July 1908 reported in *An Claidheamh Soluis*. Kavanagh had long argued that language was vital to nationhood, so statements such as "Kill the Irish language and you kill Irish nationality" come as no surprise; but he also argues that "the Irish language in point of antiquity vies with the Hebrew, the oldest of known languages", and that "the Jewish people have preserved their venerable tongue, although they lost the heritage of their ancestors and the temple of their faith nearly two thousand years ago. Hence they have still a distinct existence; they are a nation – though a disinherited one" (Kavanagh 1908, 11). The same he argues is true of the Romany people, but in an unfortunate shift in tone, Kavanagh reinscribes the *otherness* of the alien outsider by asking indignantly, "will the once proud and renowned Irish race, so famed for learning, for valour, for virtue, be inferior in linguistic fidelity to Jew and gypsy?" (*ibidem*). But the discourse would continue and strengthen, a 1909 article on language and Home Rule, "The Language of the Outlaw", citing a lecture delivered the previous year by the Dublin Protestant barrister and author of "The Irish School of Oratory" (1897), John F. Taylor, in which he compares "the position of the Irish language under English rule to the position of the Hebrew language under Egyptian rule", invoking the Irish Jewish analogy in which linguistic suppression becomes a metaphor for oppression (8)<sup>2</sup>.

*An Claidheamh Soluis* would then go on to reprint an excerpt from a lecture by the German Jewish scholar, Ruben Braining, "Language a National Factor" under the title, "Language and Unity of Race: the Jews and Hebrew" in February 1909. Braining makes almost precisely the same case and series of points for Hebrew as the language of unified Jewish nationhood as Patrick K. Kavanagh does for Irish, arguing that if the Jews "maintained their language [Hebrew] as a living language their people would live" (Braining 1909, 11). Braining also demotes Yiddish to "a jargon which would soon be forgotten" (*ibidem*), a position consistent with late nineteenth and early twentieth century linguistic movements advocating Hebrew as the language of Zion that sparked a language war between champions of respectively Hebrew and Yiddish as the language of the Jewish people. But it is highly unlikely if any general distinction outside of scholarly circles would have been made differentiating Yiddish from Hebrew in Ireland circa-1908 when the first Goldfaden play was staged at the Abbey Theatre. Jews were frequently referred to as "Hebrews", whilst Hebrew and Yiddish, if they could be told apart, would have been viewed simply as Jewish languages. The fact that Hebrew was the medium of religious ceremony and intellectual scholarship, whereas Yiddish was the common tongue of the diaspora would most likely have been lost on most. If there was little differentiation to be made between Hebrew and Yiddish from a non-Jewish perspective, and the language parallel outlined above was indeed pervasive, then it might very well be the case that Gaelic League silence on the Goldfaden performances at the Abbey Theatre was indicative of a shift in narrative that accepted the legitimacy of Yiddish drama on the Irish stage as an expression of Jewish cultural identity that mirrored the same Irish expression of identity through Gaelic drama.

<sup>2</sup> See Abby Bender, *Israelites in Erin: Exodus, Revolution, & the Irish Revival* (2015) for a full account of the invocation of Egypt as metaphor for oppression in Irish discourse.

If this was indeed the case, and considerably more research would be required to verify such a conjecture, then the shift was highly significant indeed. Currently, evidence either way is circumstantial at best. But to simply assume that several Yiddish theatre performances in Dublin over the course of two years simply went under the radar fails to consider the levels of anti-Semitic rhetoric present in Irish cultural discourse during the period in question, which amounted to much more than crying foul over school language provisions. Indeed, Irish Jewish scholarship has only recently begun to fully challenge the narrative of Irish tolerance in this regard, a narrative centred to a large extent on a correspondence between Daniel O'Connell and the Jewish emancipation leader, Isaac Goldsmid, from September 1829, in which the Liberator thanks Goldsmid for congratulating him on his Clare election. O'Connell voted for the removal of disabilities then imposed upon the Jews in Britain and Ireland that prevented them from holding political office amongst other privileges of citizenship on the grounds that they could not take a Christian sacramental oath. Through O'Connell a parallel and affinity was thus established in which the "Jewish Question" and the "Irish Question" became aligned in an informal coalition jointly campaigning for both Catholic and Jewish emancipation. O'Connell famously encapsulated the spirit of this common cause in his letter to Goldsmid which reads, "Ireland has claims on your ancient race, as it is the only Christian country that I know of unsullied by any act of persecution of the Jews" (qtd. in Shillman 1945, 75).

The "Cyclops" episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), set in 1904, is probably much closer to the actual experience of Jews in Ireland during that period, wherein the Jewish Leopold Bloom is subjected to anti-Semitic abuse by the Irish Irelander Citizen who repudiates Bloom's claims to Irish identity. When asked why Bloom was Jewish, Joyce replied with the oft-cited "because only a foreigner would do. The Jews were foreigners at that time in Dublin. There was no hostility toward them, but contempt, yes the contempt people always show for the unknown" (Joyce to Mercanton, qtd. in Nadel 1989, 139). Bloom's birth claim to Irish national identity is thoroughly rejected by the Citizen during a confrontation in Barney Kiernan's pub. His reply, "Ireland [...] I was born here" to the Citizen's question, "What is your nation if I may ask?" is met with the latter's non-verbal but unsettlingly visceral contempt as the Citizen clears "the spit out of his gullet and, gob, he spat a Red bank oyster out of him right in the corner" (Joyce 1922, 317). Joyce's portrayal of the Citizen, generally perceived as modelled on Michael Cusack, founder of the Gaelic Athletic Association, is typically treated as the author's hostile indictment of "Irish Ireland" nationalism as envisaged by figures such as D.P. Moran and Daniel Corkery. Bloom subsequently complains to the Citizen that alongside his Irish national identity he "belongs to a race too [...] that is hated and persecuted. Also now. This very moment. This very instant", a race that has been "Robbed [...] Plundered. Insulted. Persecuted" (Joyce 1922, 318).

This was indeed the experience of many Irish Jewish peddlers with similar attitudes and hostilities recounted in Myer Joel Wigoder's autobiographical poem, "Thoughts on My Seventy-Fifth Birthday", part of which recounts his own experiences within that trade in the 1890s:

When first in Dublin I arrived,  
 I shed hot bitter tears,  
 Penniless in a foreign land,  
 I faced the coming years.  
 Upon a frugal scale I lived,  
 So as to pay my way,  
 How hard I toiled that I might earn,  
 A few shillings each day.  
 I did not scorn to carry a bag,

And deal in humble wares,  
My back bent low, I carried on,  
Heedless of stones or stares (Wigoder 1935, 155)<sup>3</sup>

The violence experienced by Jewish peddlers was no doubt the product of anti-Semitic xenophobia combined with the fact that peddlers typically sold their wares on an instalment basis incurring debt amongst members of the native population. This system is referred to in Yiddish as a “wickleh” in Joseph Edelstein’s controversial novel, *The Moneylender* (1908), a work of extreme interest insofar as it is the first in Irish literary history to include Yiddish within its pages.

John Wilson Foster categorises *The Moneylender* as a unique piece of “Dublin slum life” fiction, and the levels of violence and brutalities depicted can be quite harrowing (2008, 179-180). Edelstein intended his novel as a cautionary tale exposing the interconnected evils of Jewish usury in Ireland and Irish anti-Semitism by demonstrating how each can prove to be the product of the other in an endless cycle of misery. This he illustrates through an episode of anti-Semitic violence against the novel’s protagonist, Moses Levenstein, whilst working as a peddler, which subsequently transforms him into a Shylockian stereotype economically exploiting and even terrorising the Dublin poor as a particularly vicious and callous moneylender:

Moses turned and found a small crowd gathered around him, and throwing skins, stones and marbles at him. One fellow of about eighteen years raised his fist and struck Moses about the face ; another pulled his coat; another struck him across the chest with a stick; the smaller lads kept humming a disgusting anti-Semitic song, while Irishmen with clay pipes in their mouths stood by, laughing, jeering, spitting, and taking little or no notice of the cruel, inhumane barbaric treatment being meted out to a human being, who, hunted from Russia, the purgatory for honest men, had come to Dublin to earn an honest living by carrying a heavy load on his back [...]. (Edelstein 1931 [1908], 16)

Edelstein’s object may have been reform, but *The Moneylender* caused considerable controversy and upset amongst the Irish Jewish community because it was perceived as perpetuating and reinforcing the dangerous stereotype of the Jewish moneylender. On the other hand, it also offended Irish Irelander nationalists through its brutal depictions of Dublin slum life and was accused in turn of stereotyping the Irish poor as violent drunks. The novel is quite gothic in its grimness and was undoubtedly a lurid exaggeration of the environment it was representing; and its depiction of quite callous Yiddish speaking Jewish moneylenders stood in stark contrast to the more elevated and patriotic Yiddish opera of Goldfaden.

Yiddish had effectively been the language of the alien other, and speaking it, or even English in a Yiddish accent could invite hostility or ridicule. Yiddish speaking Jews, for example, embody linguistic foreignness in the stories of Joseph O’Connor, which Foster classes as the earliest “Dublin slum life” tales, which were first published in the *Evening Herald* under the pseudonym, “Heblon”, and collected as *Studies in Blue* (c. 1900). But Foster also notes that the casual racism and anti-Semitism experienced by Jewish characters in tales such as “The Jewman’s Pony”, “Gentile and Jew”, and “A Monday Morning Incident”, need to be contextualised within the “larger social maelstrom of Dublin slum life with its drinking, hunger, greed, violence, and marital strife”, and that the Jews of these short tales tend to be “wily survivors” rather than outright villains, as likely to be victims of Gentile criminality as perpetrators (2008,

<sup>3</sup>Wigoder had composed his memoir, *My Life* (1935), in Hebrew before translating it into Yiddish. The cited edition was then subsequently translated into English by his son Louis E. Wigoder.

179-180). *Studies in Blue* purportedly derives its sketches and vignettes from experiences, anecdotes and reports compiled by the Dublin Metropolitan Police, and are thus representative of the conflicts, tensions, and hostilities existing between Jewish and Gentile communities at the turn of the twentieth century.

Jews have in fact formed a minority population in Ireland for many centuries. Numbers have fluctuated throughout that time, with the most extensive increase in population occurring between the 1880s and opening decade of the twentieth century, during which time Ireland received an influx of immigrants hailing mostly from Lithuania. Cormac Ó Gráda estimates a mere 285 Jews resided in Ireland at the beginning of the 1870s rising to 5,148 in 1911, at which time the Dublin Jewish population tallied at 2,965 (2006, 11). Ó Gráda also lists “peddlers, drapers, shopkeepers and dealers, and commercial travellers” as accounting for 67 percent of employed Jewish males in 1891, 57 percent in 1901, and 49 percent in 1911. He also cites a police report finding “that in Dublin in 1903 about 170 Jews were licensed as peddlers and another 46 registered as moneylenders. The same police report also noted, though it does not support in detail, the allegation that there were other unregistered Jewish moneylenders who lent mainly to the working classes, their only security being that the borrower was working” (49).

Xenophobic and protectionist rhetoric of the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries construed this noticeable increase in the Irish Jewish population as a crisis. In 1893, a nationalist priest, Fr. Thomas Finlay espoused in *The Lyceum* that “the influx of the Jews into Ireland constitutes an economic danger to the industry of the wealth-producing classes” (Finlay 1893, 215-216). Finlay’s anti-Jewish propaganda was then mirrored by Arthur Griffith in the *United Irishman* on 23 January, 1904, a year prior to his founding of Sinn Féin, when in support of Fr. John Creagh’s Limerick Boycott he presents the “Jew” as an alien parasite, a “usurer and a grinder of the poor [who] in Ireland is in every respect an economic evil [insofar as he] produces no wealth himself – he draws it from others” (Griffith 1904, 256). Creagh’s rhetoric is even more extreme in its anti-Semitic xenophobia, going so far as to invoke the ancient Blood Libel in economic terms, depicting the Limerick Jews as vampiric enemies of Christianity carrying the legacy of deicide, the murder of Christ, ritualistically re-enacted through the sacrifice of innocent Christian children. In a sermon, “Jewish Trading: its Growth in Limerick”, which was published in the *Munster News*, 13 January 1904, Creagh insidiously claims that “nowadays [the Jews] dare not kidnap and slay Christian children, but they will not hesitate to expose them to a longer and even more cruel martyrdom by taking the clothes off their back and the bit out of their mouths”. He continues:

Twenty years ago and less Jews were known only by name and evil repute in Ireland. They were sucking the blood of other nations, but those nations rose up and turned them out. And they came to our land to fasten themselves on us like leaches to draw our blood [...] and now the question is whether or not we will allow them to fasten themselves still more upon us, until we and our children are the helpless victims of rapacity. (qtd. in Keough, McCarthy 2005, 35)

Griffith and Creagh both appeal to the pre-immigration past of twenty years prior in their propagandist efforts to demonise Irish Jewry, Griffith arguing that in contrast to the few Jews living in Ireland of that period

Today we have Jewish magistrates to teach us respect for the glorious constitution under which we exist; Jewish lawyers to look after our affairs; and Jewish moneylenders to accommodate us; Jewish tailors to clothe us; Jewish photographers to take our picture; Jewish brokers to furnish our houses; and Jewish auctioneers to sell us up in the end for the benefit of all our other Jewish benefactors. (Griffith 1904, 256)

Similar anti-Semitic propaganda was appearing throughout the Irish press, especially in regional titles. An advert for the Cash Tailoring Company of Capel Street Dublin, “Nailing a Lie: £50 Challenge”, which ran from at least 7 October 1905 to 1 February 1908, mere months before the Goldfaden performance, in *An Claidheamh Soluis*, reads:

Several Gaelic Leaguers and others having complained to us recently that they were informed we employ Jewish labour, we now offer the above to any person who can prove that we are not an exclusively Irish firm, with Irish capital, Irish management, and employing none but Irish labour. (Anon. 1905, 10)

The advert disappeared for nearly three years but would return again on 1 December 1910. Needless to say, propagandist rhetoric of this nature depicting Jews as parasitic alien foreigners, despite the fact that by the opening decade of the twentieth century a new generation of Jews had been born in Ireland incurred a crisis of identity. These perceived incongruities of Irish-Jewish identity were expounded and interrogated in Dublin Jewish journalist and fiction writer, E.R. Lipsett’s much cited 1906 article, “Jews in Ireland”, published in *The Jewish Chronicle* under the pen name “Halitvack”.

Lipsett, however, downplays Creagh’s Limerick boycott as isolated, attributing tensions instead to a mutual estrangement between Irish and Jews, wherein “the Jews understand the Irish little; the Irish understand the Jews less” (Lipsett 1906, 29). Lipsett elaborates further to argue that Ireland can form no concept of the compound “Irish Jew” that does not sound contradictory, either to the native Irish, or to the Jews themselves, whom he claims have been unduly influenced by native cynicism regarding any attempt to identify as “Jewish Irishmen” (*ibidem*). He goes on to argue that the confusion derives from a close native identification of Jews, often anti-Semitic, with the modes and narrowly perceived manner of their trade, either as shopkeepers, pedlars, or money lenders, and with fundamental misconceptions best illustrated by the now hackneyed query, “Are you a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew?” (*ibidem*). Racial *othering* is exposed as rife in the article, with individuals typically identified by the qualifier, “a Jew”, or pejoratively reduced to “Jewmen”. However, the fact that a shift in narrative had occurred, or was occurring on the linguistic front, and particularly within the pages of the Gaelic League press, must have proved significant in terms of perceptions of Irish Jewry. Ironically, it is also unclear the extent to which Yiddish was still spoken or was in decline in Ireland in 1908.

The Goldfaden performances were part of a general artistic revival of Yiddish that in many cases unfolded like the Gaelic and Literary Revivals along patriotic and nationalistic lines. Goldfaden is generally recognised as the father of Yiddish theatre, which he established in the 1870s. His movement developed from humble beginnings into a voice, or “cultural expression of Jewish life”, playing, as Liptzin remarks, “a vital role in the cultural life of the Jewish masses, especially on the American scene” (1963, 33). America, particularly New York, provided a vibrant platform for the evolution of Yiddish theatre, with a Yiddish Revival also occurring in other important cultural centres, such as London. For Dublin to emerge as an albeit smaller, and for a time brief Jewish cultural centre also, indeed one based at Ireland’s National Theatre at the height of the literary revival, speaks to not just to an increasing Irish Jewish population at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also of an emergent Irish-Jewish cultural voice seeking a public platform. This context had not gone unnoticed in the Irish press, a *Freeman’s Journal* article of September 1911 remarking on the performance of Yiddish plays in Dublin as applicable to an address given by the English Jewish philanthropist and baron, Sir Francis Montefiore, on the opening of a Yiddish People’s Theatre in London, in which he discusses the great Jewish contributions to music and stage, and how the new Yiddish theatre movement provides a medium for providing a “true picture of Jewish culture” to the world, whether that

be “scenes from Israel’s great past”, “scenes of Jewish life in Palestine”, or simply “the [domestic] beauty of Jewish home Life” (1911, 7), all of which would become manifest in the productions of the Dublin Jewish Dramatic Society, especially in the 1920s. The importance of Hebrew to the Zionist movement is also recognised by the article, and the practical function of Yiddish, which is described as the “Esperanto of the Jew”, varying from country to country, even from community to community, is lauded as “the channel of communication between members of the race sojourning in cities as far apart as Johannesburg and Edinbur[gh], Paris and Tehran” (*ibidem*).

Yiddish theatre had clearly garnered enough interest to shift the narrative at least in a small degree away from propagandist anti-Semitism, and it is clear from aspects of the production that attempts were made to accommodate non-Yiddish speakers in the audience as much as possible shy of performing a translation. The unnamed Jewish correspondent the *Evening Telegraph* review of *Shulamith*, for example, informs us that “a synopsis of the principal event [was] provided on the programme”, but also celebrates the fact that those actually versed in Yiddish were better positioned to appreciate the production’s “candour and fearlessness of expressing opinions” (Anon. 1908d, 2). Newspaper reviews likewise described and contextualised the performances, which, given that scripts are unlikely to have survived, prove as invaluable to research now as they would have been to non-Yiddish speaking interested parties of the time. The same reviews also allow one, I believe, to dispense with the idea that these Yiddish plays were intended principally as expressions of Irish Nationalism. Rather, the choice of Goldfaden especially, was intended to invite powerful patriotic and thematic parallels with Irish Nationalist and literary traditions that could demonstrate or resurrect a longstanding sense of a shared or comparable history existing between Irish and Jews.

One aspect of this most certainly invoked is a very curious literary tradition referred to by Jerold Casway as “Gaelic Maccabeanism”, which began with seventeenth century bardic poets placing the rebel hero, Owen Roe O’Neill within the tradition of ancient Maccabean freedom fighters (2000). This identification of Irish resistance to British Imperialism with an episode of ancient Judaic history was later revived and cultivated in the nineteenth century, first by the extremely popular Irish poet, Thomas Moore, and then by several Young Ireland poets who invoked specific parallels between Erin and Zion. Such parallels and identifications would have stood in defiance to the anti-Semitic xenophobia of Finlay, Griffith and Creagh, harkening instead to the sentiments of Daniel O’Connell discussed earlier. The *Evening Herald* explains how Goldfaden’s *Shulamith* “is founded on a very popular Talmudical legend dealing with the patriotic life of the Maccabean warriors”, while the *Evening Telegraph* places emphasis on the pride Dublin Jewry should take in their “successful revival of old time stories and music [...] eminently characteristic of [Jewish] national history and ideals”, and that the opportunity should be taken to see “this rare display of Jewish talent and [hear] national Jewish music [...] by everyone interested in the welfare of the Jewish people” (Anon. 1908c, 5; Anon. 1908f, 2). The *Evening Herald* Correspondent, “Jacques” also hails “the Yiddish Renaissance in Dublin” and thanks the actors for giving him “an evening of lavish slices out of Jerusalem life in 200 B.C.” (Jacques 1908, 3).

Solomon Liptzin groups Goldfaden’s plays into three categories: his early comedies, “which castigated the follies of ghetto life and preached enlightenment for the superstitious masses”; the second category composed following the 1881 Russian pogroms, which “underscored the vices of excessive enlightenment [and] of overhasty assimilation to foreign ways”; and the third including *Shulamith* and *Bar Kochba*, which constitute “dramas of Jewish national resurgence and Zionist hopes” (1963, 38). The concurrent aligning of Irish and Hebrew as cornerstones of respective linguistic identity on the same political stage in both Irish Jewish and Gaelic League

discourses most likely influenced the choice of which Goldfaden plays were performed, as of all the Goldfaden plays available, the DAJOS chose two from the latter category, and of both, greater emphasis is placed on the rebel thematic of *Bar Kochba*. This is unsurprising as *Shulamith* is more obviously a love story than one of armed rebellion. The male lead, Avisholem (played by I. Shreider, who may have belonged to the Hyman Shreider family, but does not appear in the Irish Census), is identified as a “member of the great family of Maccabeans [...] on his way to the annual festivities held in Jerusalem”, and is costumed in warrior’s garb. But the plot emphasis is on his betrayal of Shulamith (Bessie Fisher), whom he rescues from a well and pledges himself to only to later fall in love with and marry another, Avigayel (Gertie Shillman). Disaster befalls the union with the mysterious and macabre deaths of the couple’s children, one killed and eaten by a black cat, the other drowned in a well, the latter particularly reminiscent of Avisholem’s first encounter with Shulamith. Meanwhile, the abandoned and heartbroken Shulamith, who beset with unwelcome suitors has either feigned or descended into madness, deliriously muttering about wedding vows and a black cat. Upon learning the truth, Avigayel releases Avisholem who is reunited with the restored Shulamith (Anon. 1908g, 22).

Yet despite being a love story rather than one of armed rebellion against oppression, *Shulamith* in terms of its form and themes also invites parallels with the Irish Aisling tradition. Shulamith is the “daughter of Zion”, but also like the Irish Shan Van Vocht, can be read as a feminised embodiment of Zion to whose cause the wayward warrior returns. Indeed, like in the Aisling tradition, Shulamith appears to Avisholem in a dream. Even if such a reading is fanciful or at best a nod to the Irish Jewish analogy, any invocation of this nature can be seen as aligning with for example, the sentiments of Michael Davitt, who attacked Creagh’s Boycott in a January 1904 letter to the *Freeman’s Journal* (5) which recalls his earlier letter to that paper in July 1893, in which Davitt famously writes: “The Jews have never to my knowledge done any injury to Ireland. Like our own race they have endured a persecution the records of which will forever remain a reproach to the ‘Christian’ nations of Europe. Ireland has no share in this black record” (5). Ironically, it is now O’Connell and Davitt who are most cited in a narrative of Irish tolerance toward the Jews, a circumstance that has unfortunately since skewed and glossed over the anti-Semitic attitudes of the aforementioned Finlay, Griffith and Creagh. But the impetus to reinforce dialogue and common ground between the communities was still strongly in evidence in February 1909, five years on from Davitt’s famous appeal, when Padraic Colum was invited to address the Jewish Literary and Social Club on Lombard Street on the subject of the Irish Literary Revival.

The title of Colum’s lecture is given respectively as “The Revival of Irish Literature” in the *Freeman’s Journal*, (Anon., 1909d, 5), “Origin, Progress, and Revival of Irish Literature” in the *Evening Telegraph*, (Anon. 1909e, 2), and “The Revival of the Literary Spirit in Ireland” in the *Irish Independent* (Anon. 1909f, 8). A copy of Colum’s lecture has yet to be recovered, but the language of the aforementioned newspaper reports indicate that the occasion was organised in the interests of reciprocal sympathy for respective causes. For example, in his vote of thanks to Colum, Jacob Elyan declared that “they as Jews must sympathise with the Irish people in the endeavour to revive their language” (*ibidem*). The *Evening Telegraph* likewise reports Elyan’s allusion to “the great part played by the language of a nation in the nation’s welfare” (Anon. 1909e, 2) in alignment with ongoing comparative debates on the centrality of language to both Irish and Jewish national identity. The Jewish Correspondent for the *Evening Telegraph* gives a detailed account of proceedings, noting that the audience was at capacity, and likening Colum’s lecture to a return to “the ‘Beth Hamidrash,’ or House of Learning of the Russian Pale, where we were wont to foregather when anyone was willing to come and expound the words of Law and Wisdom”. The correspondent tells us that Colum reads extracts from the old Irish Sagas,

“in which the tragic exploits of Cahoulán [*sic*] were set forth”, and that rather than delivering a dry, factual account, the lecture showed:

[...] the philosophical side of literature, tracing for us line by line, the different modes of thought which prevailed at different periods in the development of Irish literature; so that we were all impressed by the great beauty of form, of manner, and of matter which is to be found everywhere where the purely Gaelic spirit prevailed. (*Ibidem*)

Of considerable interest is the report that the presumably exclusive Jewish audience had “more than a little knowledge” of Colum’s subject matter hitherto, including the Jewish Justice of the Peace, Maurice E. Solomons, who produced a copy of Colum’s collection of three plays, *Studies* (1907a), and poetry collection, *Wild Earth* (1907b).

The importance of language to national identity raised by Elyan has already been discussed as a vital point of dialogue between the respective revival of Irish and Jewish literary cultures. But Colum’s discussion of Cú Chulainn, the ancient Irish warrior hero, must have also recalled the theme of Goldfaden’s *Bar Kochba* performed a mere seven months beforehand at the Abbey Theatre. Goldfaden’s play blends history with mythology and legend to dramatically recount the Simon Bar Kokhba rebellion against the Roman Empire in 132 CE, which led to an independent Jewish state and war before Jerusalem fell to the Romans in 135 CE resulting in the destruction of the city and temple. Bar Kokhba was not a Maccabee, *per se*, but is generally associated with the three-hundred-year tradition of Jewish armed rebellion beginning with the first Maccabean Revolt of 167 BCE. *Bar Kochba* would have resonated with Irish Nationalism on a number of levels, not least of which being the fact that the titular hero is a martyr and his revolt a failed rebellion. The description of the play’s protagonist in the *Evening Telegraph* would also have struck a chord with Celtic Revivalists due to its echoing of the Irish heroic tradition:

History writes him down as an enthusiast who lays down his life for his people, but legendary myths have been woven around him: he is a strong man whom no chains can bind, no walls enclose, on whom the spirit of kingliness has descended so that the people cannot refrain from bowing down before him, though they have as yet no proof of his greatness; and contrary to Jewish tradition, he is crowned “King of Israel”. (Anon. 1908d, 2)

This is effectively in the spirit and tradition of any number of legendary Irish heroes, from Cú Chulainn to Fionn mac Cumhaill. Treachery, betrayal, prophetic curses, and ghostly encounters also figure prominently in the plot. But ultimately, as noted in the *Irish Independent*, Goldfaden’s *Bar Kochba* “appeals strongly to the patriotic sense of the Jewish race”, the musical score in particular described as echoing “the woes of a people whose strivings and sufferings are among the most tragic in the world’s history” (Anon. 1908k, 6).

Both *Shulamith* and *Bar Kochba* were staples of Yiddish theatre, and both plays are recorded as playing to capacity audiences in Dublin. But they also had a very real, topical political context because of their Zionist sentiments and themes of patriotism and rebellion against oppression outside of potential parallels with the Irish nationalist cause. In particular, as David E. Fisher notes, the play ends with the hero swearing “victory for the Jewish people in the future” in a soliloquy echoing “proto-Zionist sentiments in Russian Jewry during the 1880s” (Fishman 2005, 10). As a result, Fishman continues, the play, “which idealised the ancient Judean uprising against Rome, was taken by the authorities to be a veiled allegory in favour of revolution in Russia” (26). *Shulamith* and *Bar Kochba* are thus regularly cited as instrumental causes in the Tsarist ban on Yiddish theatre in Russia in 1883. The next play to be performed,

however, was not a Goldfaden, but rather, a tragic comedy, *Haman the Second* by Nahum Meyer Schaikewitch (Shomer). Shomer was a prolific novelist and playwright, composing numerous works on Russian Jewish village life for both print and stage. He was immensely popular, due as Jeremy Dauber points out, to his “masterful ability” to give his audience what they wanted: “sentimental, melodramatic fiction packed with juicy murders, star-crossed lovers, wild plot twists, and far-flung settings with, at least arguably, no redeeming educational or literary value whatsoever” (Dauber 2013, 56).

Shomer also brought the ire of fellow Yiddish writers, particularly that of Sholem Aleichem, who attacked the popular author’s dangerous romantic sensibilities and sentimental propensities in an 1888 satirical pamphlet, *Shomer’s Mishpat*, or *Shomer’s Law*. Dublin newspaper descriptions of the production seem to confirm much of this criticism, the play appearing seeped in a combination of high melodrama and low comedy, with an extremely convoluted plot involving a highly unlikely ruse to expose the diabolical and traitorous machinations of a Jew-hating Apostate. The play is modelled on the attempted genocide of the Jews by Haman under the Persian King Ahasuerus c. 483 BCE, as recounted in the “Book of Esther”, which, being at the centre of the Jewish festival of Purim would have been second nature to Shomer’s audience. The action is updated and migrated to the Kingdom of Poland, and the villain in question, the “Haman” of the piece is the Kingdom’s Prime Minister who goes by the name, Clement. This figure is in fact Jewish, originally called Yeffin, who has become a Jew hating apostate who has gone so far as to imprison and abuse his own father, Ossip, whom he keeps as a slave in order to protect the secret of his birth and original faith (Anon. 1909a, 6). The play also re-enacts the pervasive peril and threat of persecution faced by the Jews, whether under the Persians, Poland, the Russian pogroms, or even more topically the Limerick Boycott of John Creagh in 1904. Clement falls in love with and is rejected by the Rabbi’s daughter. He responds by imprisoning the father and daughter and threatening torture and death if they refuse to renounce their faith and convert to Christianity. They hold firm, as the reviewer of the *Evening Herald* notes, “he extends his anger to all the Jews in the land, regardless of whether they ever knew of the offending Rabbi or not” (Anon. 1909c, 4). Clement, like the Biblical Haman, is foiled in his attempts and executed.

The impression given by newspaper reviews, however, was of the Dublin society doing the best they could with ramshackle material. The Jewish Correspondent for the *Evening Herald* seems deeply unimpressed, declaring the characters “incarnations of type, hardly individuals at all”, but reserves praise for the actors, adding, “the strong colours, the stilted characters, the conventional setting, the superabundance of tragedy and comedy and tears – all these had a tiresome effect, and only the liveliness of the artistes kept one from falling asleep over it” (*ibidem*). Familiarity with the Esther story would obviously have enabled the audience to navigate the convolutions of plot, but other themes, particularly that of coerced religious conversion would have resonated politically in 1909 Ireland, given the recent activities of the conversionist London Mission Societies to the Jews. An article, “Jewish Mission Society: Annual Meeting” reporting a meeting of the “Church of Ireland Auxiliary of the London Jews’ Society” in Gregg Hall, Dawson Street, at which the Bishop of Limerick was in attendance, appeared in the *Irish Times*, 29 April 1908. The speaker boasts of recent Jewish converts to Christianity, and expresses hopes that “now that they were able to select missionaries to the Jews from their own people, of their own flesh and blood, acquainted as they must be with the special prejudices that beset the Jews, they might hope for even more rapid results” (Anon. 1908a, 10).

Accusing Jews of prejudice for not converting to Christianity in twentieth century Ireland is as absurd as it is insidious. But alongside the insult there was also the painful heritage of forced apostasy in centuries past. The Church of Ireland Jews’ Society may not have carried the same

threat of violence as the Inquisition had, for example, in Spain or Portugal; but the theme of coerced conversion in “Haman the Second” was a reminder of that history. The Missions even organised an exhibition, “Palestine in Dublin” in May 1908 at the Rotunda to aid in their efforts but were forced to admit that “many Jews were not flocking into the Christian Church” (Anon. 1908b, 7). But they persisted, nonetheless. A sermon “in aid of the Church of Ireland Jews’ Society” was even delivered at St. Andrews on 17 January 1909, mere days before the Shomer performance at the Abbey Theatre. There was clear indignation and resistance to the Missions amongst Irish Jewry, even a united front between Joseph Edelstein and Philip Wigoder, who had only the previous year been at odds over the activities of the Judæo-Irish Home Rule Association. On the issue of Jewish conversion, the two, amongst others, were united, posting the following notice of protest against a meeting of 16 May 1909:

The Mission Societies to the Jews. How They Work! How Many Homes They Have Ruined! Our Duty to the Nation. A public open-air meeting of Jews will be held on the ground adjoining the Grand Canal and facing Martin Street, S.C.R, on Sunday next, 16th inst, at 4 pm sharp to protest against the action of the Mission Societies to the Jews in the endeavours to procure the conversion of our Brethren. Some of their actions will be lucidly exposed by Messrs Joseph Edelstein and Philip I Wigoder. (Reprinted in Edelstein, Wigoder 1909, 5)

Events took a violent turn when Edelstein set up a rival stage to protest the Missions’ Jewish convert, Isaac Luft, who was addressing the crowd in Yiddish. Edelstein was subsequently charged with assault for throwing a tumbler style drinking glass at his rival speaker during a particularly heated exchange in which Edelstein was declaiming, “There never was a converted Jew!” (*ibidem*).

The Dublin Jewish Amateur Operatic Society returned to Goldfaden with a reproduction of *Shulamith* in June 1909, and a further drama, *The Zauberin, or the Enchantress* in 1910, the latter performance receiving considerably less newspaper reportage and analysis, which make the play much more difficult to discuss. *The Zauberin*, however, also closed the curious incursion of Yiddish theatre by a home grown drama society at the Abbey for the better part of a decade, and although considerably more work is required in this field, it does appear evident that the grounds for a public Jewish cultural voice in Ireland, one that also proposed parallels and dialogue with Irish Nationalism, was being laid that would provide a template for the Dublin Jewish Dramatic Society, which was formally established in the 1920s. The DJDS staged productions by major Jewish playwrights including Sholem Aleichem, David Pinski, Leon Kobrin, S. Ansky, Abraham Reizen, and Israel Zangwill throughout the 1920s. Many of these productions were once more staged at the Abbey, Ireland’s national theatre, in both English and Yiddish, often produced by the legendary Frank Fay. Alongside these Jewish dramas, the DJDS also staged works by Irish playwrights, some of which from the Irish Literary Revival period, including Lady Augusta Gregory’s *Spreading the News*, Bernard Duffy’s *Special Pleading* and Michael Brennan’s rather dubious *The Young Man from Rathmines*, strongly suggesting efforts being made to dismantle cultural boundaries between Ireland’s indigenous Christian and marginalised Jewish communities.

A second article at the very least would be required to do justice to and offer a similar commentary on the Jewish dramas staged by the DJDS, especially in the 1920s, which saw such productions, amongst others, as Leon Kobrin’s *Der Zeitgeist* performed in March 1923, Shalom Aleichem’s *Der Geht* in March 1924, Avrom Reizen’s *Der Shadchan’s Daughter* in April 1925, David Pinsky’s *Yeshurim* in December 1925 followed by *Forgotten Souls* (first performed by the Dublin Jewish Dramatic Circle in 1919), Israel Zangwill’s world famous *The Melting*

*Pot* in 1926, and S. Ansky's equally famous supernatural drama, *The Dybbuk* in 1927. Outside Jewish theatrical groups also appeared in Dublin in and around this time, including Madame Itzkovitch's Company, "The Famous Jewish Players", who put on a production of Joseph Markovitch's *Chaveirim* at the Abbey Theatre in June 1923, the Vilna Troupe who performed Max Yordan Mordau's *Doctor Kohn* in April 1924, and Fanny Waxman's Yiddish Repertoire, who performed Segal's *The Rabbi's Widow* in June 1924. Performances in Yiddish by the home grown DJDS were still appearing in the 1930s with M. Segalman's *Shma Isroel* in July 1932, but by 1940 the society ceased performing plays of Jewish interest until a production of Sylvia Regan's *Morning Star*, was staged at the Olympia Theatre in January 1947. The Society would continue in popularity, performing Pinski and Ansky into the late 1940s before petering out in the mid 1950s. Although photographs of many of these performances survive, the same is not true for scripts and so forth (at least not at the time of writing), and newspaper reviews simply do not provide the same level of detail available for the earlier Yiddish productions.

Attention will instead turn in the latter part of this article to the homespun Irish Jewish dramas on record, focusing principally on two playwrights, Esther Morris (Mofsovitze) and Emil Slotover, both of whom having surviving works. Those that do not have surviving works are nonetheless of considerable interest. For example, Ida Briscoe, mother of Robert Briscoe, composed a Purim sketch and pageant called *The Women's Parliament*, which was performed at the Gaiety Theatre in April 1919 amidst the upheaval of the War of Independence in which her son, the future Dublin mayor was active (*Irish Times*, 7 Apr 1919, 7). Briscoe's play was performed alongside works by two giants of Yiddish literature, Sholem Aleichem's *She Must Marry a Doctor* and David Pinski's *Forgotten Souls*. Aleichem's play is a social satire on the clash between orthodox Jewish marriage traditions and modernity, *Forgotten Souls* is a drama on the theme of self-sacrifice in the domestic space. The Irish Jewish poet, Rosa Solomons, was also present and gave a reading of "Gratitude" from her collection, *Facts and Fancies* (1883). Briscoe would also produce a play, *Chanukah* for a Hanukah celebration at the Olympia Theatre in December 1923, to commemorate "the victory of the Israelites under Judas Maccabeus over the Assyrians under Antiochus" (Anon. 1923, 3). Solomons' poem, "The Menorah" was also recited by Doris Zlotover, and the evening consisted of a concert with singing, musical performances and dance.

Other home grown Irish Jewish playwrights to emerge in this period include Stella Rosefield, Joseph Namille, and Joshua Baker, who had their plays, respectively *Dear Lazarus* and *Eloquence Retrained* (the latter a co-authored Yiddish-English Comedy by Namille and Baker) performed at Greenville Hall in February 1925. Lawrence Elyan, a prominent society actor, also produced an English-Yiddish comedy set in a Dublin Jewish home performed alongside Bernard McCarthy's *Cough Water*, a farce set in a Begbawn Dispensary in 1925. But of these playwrights, the only one with material so far recovered is Esther Morris (Mofsovitze), who published three plays, *The Conscript*, *The Matchmakers*, and *The Story of Purim* in a small collection, *Tears & Laughter* (1926)<sup>4</sup>. She had performed in a Yiddish production of Leon Kobrin's *Der Zeitgeist* at the Abbey Theatre in 1923, and had her own *The Matchmakers* performed again at the Abbey in 1925. Both were produced by Frank Fay. Morris writes in the "Preface" of her collection of the difficulties faced by the Dublin Jewish Dramatic Society in "securing for production suitable plays of Jewish interest", and of the unsatisfactory recourses "to adaptations

<sup>4</sup> Esther Morris is the great grandmother of contemporary poet, Simon Lewis, who reimagines the Jewish immigrant experience in turn of the century Cork in his excellent poetry collection, *Jewtown* (2016).

and translations from the originals of Jewish Dramatic Literature” into which the society was forced (Morris 1926, 1).

*The Conscript* is set in a Russian cottage in 1900. It involves the perilous conscription of a young Jewish man into the Tsarist army. Ó Gráda notes that although there having been a specifically anti-Semitic agenda behind military treatment of Jews in late nineteenth century Russia remains a subject of debate, Jews most certainly did suffer discrimination within that brutal regime, and “images of Jewish boy-soldiers being carried away at the age of twelve and of young draft dodgers fleeing across the border permeate Litvak folk memory” (2006, 27). Rivlin adds that the practice of conscripting Jewish boys into military service had lapsed by 1874, but that all Jewish males were eligible over the age of twenty one, and that as conscription could last from twenty-five to thirty-five years, many wealthy families paid Gentiles to replace their sons, while others hid or adopted false names (Rivlin 2003, 30). Morris’s play is a one act domestic drama in which an elder of two sons, Jacob, due to be married to his childhood sweetheart, Kailia, has been conscripted. The familial father is long dead, and the mother has lost the money she saved to buy at least one of her children out of service in an accidental fire. The younger, Joseph, who also has (albeit unreciprocated) feelings for Kailia performs an act of self-sacrifice by entering military service in his older brother’s place. Joseph is also motivated by viewing this move as his only means of escaping his stifling existence within the confines of the Russian Pale.

*The Match Makers*, performed at the Abbey, is a comedic take on the Shadchan tradition given a contemporary setting. The setting is the home of a lively unmarried eighteen year old Jewish girl, Maide Bloom, which is visited (unknown to each other) by three match makers, Mrs Katz, Mrs Mebbich, and Mrs Tuvos, all trying to arrange her marriage to a wealthy young American visitor, Harry Fried for commission. Harry, however, scuppers their efforts by taking the modern approach and proposing directly, as has become the way in the States. Maide accepts with her father’s blessing, as he is extremely impressed by the manner in which Harry has inadvertently thwarted the designs of the three disgruntled would be Shadchans. Both plays speak to the modernising of Jewish culture and practice. The third play of *Tears & Laughter*, *The Story of Purim*, is framed, a play within a play, in which a grandmother’s account to her grandchildren of the story of Esther thwarting the intended genocide of the Jews by Haman becomes an acted drama. The play recounts the prejudicial motives of the antagonist, concluding with the Grandmother warning her two grandchildren that although this is an ancient story, that “there are still wicked Hamans in the world, who would harm us Jews today, as in the days of King Ahasuerus, and we must put our trust in the Great God of Israel to protect us” (Morris 1926, 56).

Potentially the most promising Irish Jewish playwright, Emil Gedaliah Slotover, was only five years old when Esther Morris’s *The Match Makers* was performed at the Abbey Theatre in 1925. Born in Dublin in 1920, Slotover was related to the novelist, short story writer and translator, Hannah Berman, and would become an actor and playwright in the early 1940s during World War II, or the “Emergency” as it was known in Ireland. A Trinity College Law graduate, he acted in Lennox Robinson’s production of Bernard Shaw’s *Misalliance* at the Peacock Theatre in February 1942, three months before his own *Wrestling with Angels* was produced at the Peacock in May 1942. Slotover was also a member of the Dublin Jewish Dramatic Society, performing in Ivor Novello’s *A Symphony in Two Flats* at the Gaiety Theatre in January 1943. Of Slotover’s three known original works, only one, *On Guard* survives, which is his *Selected Works*, edited by Wendy Saloman. As Saloman writes in her introduction, Slotover was “a seeker of psychological and spiritual truth, beyond orthodox Judaic thought”, *Wrestling with Angels* a “will-versus-con-

science” comedy about a hen pecked husband, and *On Guard* on his personal “conflict between Irish patriotism and sympathy with the allied cause” in wartime Europe (2004, vii-x). The latter goes right to the heart of Slotover’s Irish Jewish identity in which Irish neutrality would most certainly have felt directly at odds with the threat of Nazism.

One would imagine that this was the driving force behind Slotover’s most intriguing work, *The Refugee*, which premiered at the Peacock on 6 April 1943 amidst astonishing controversy that resulted in the play being censored by the Irish authorities. Indeed, most of what is known about *The Refugee* derives from a letter of 1943 from Martin O’Neill of the Garda Biochana in Dublin (reprinted in the *Selected Works*), who provides a synopsis of the plot. The play, set in Dublin, involves Eric, an amnesiac Hungarian refugee, and a Dublin writer, Peter, trying to piece together his forgotten life. But given Ireland’s neutrality, references to Eric’s Jewishness and Concentration camps were expunged, amongst other perceived “anti-German” propagandas, as revealed in a 2002 email from American scholar, Joan Dean (also reprinted), with Slotover being interviewed and the performance attended by Special Branch (Slotover 2004, 156-157). Needless to say, the original script if discovered would be an invaluable research asset. Slotover’s career, however, was tragically cut short when he unfortunately died in a traffic accident in England at the age of 25 in November 1945.

In conclusion, this article has endeavoured to demonstrate how Irish Jewish theatre provided a public platform for Ireland’s largest non-Christian minority of the era that presented an impressive array of home grown and key imported Jewish dramas throughout the duration of its various societies. The presentation of Jewish theatre in Ireland also managed to engage or suggest parallels that negotiated with pertinent socio-political and cultural discourses along lines of language and identity, history and patriotism, prejudice and oppression, which placed it in dialogue with major non-Jewish Irish movements and societies such as the Irish Literary Revival and Gaelic League. This article merely scratches the surface of what is undoubtedly a very rich subject matter, unfortunately hampered by a lack, or loss of original source materials. But what is certain is that the advent of Irish Jewish theatre provides a very interesting, if for too long neglected, chapter in the history of Irish theatre in general. The hope is that the findings presented here will provide a framework for future research, especially into the particular significances of the individual dramas performed against Jewish, Irish, and ultimately Irish Jewish contexts.

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