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Introduction: Continuing Tumult
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INTRODUCTION

Continuing Tumult

As the Jewish Historical Society of England marks its 125th anniversary, we have now reached volume 50 of *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*. Perhaps more time and critical distance is advised for such a reckoning: but I believe it is reasonable to assert that the Society and its journal are on a relatively firm and promising footing. Around five years ago I recall a JHSE lecture at St John's Wood Synagogue, by a well-known scholar on a fascinating contemporary subject, which counted an audience of less than half a dozen. The most recent JHSE London lecture by Professor Bernard Wasserstein, on the withdrawal of the British administration and military from Mandate Palestine, witnessed standing room only at University College London, 17 January 2019 – an audience of more than a hundred. This coming March (2019) has been designated as “Jewish History Month”, with a number of events sponsored by the JHSE. The response to this initiative also may serve as an indicator of the trajectory and impact of the Society. By no means is a primary gauge for success the number of bums on seats. But as a combined lay and academic organization, public engagement and outreach cuts to the heart of our very purpose of encouraging, promoting, and presenting Jewish history. As an explicit means of connecting the founding of the JHSE with its present, the first address to the Society, on 11 November 1893, by Lucien Wolf, is reprinted here, followed by a trenchant analysis by Mark Levene.¹

As the current issue was materializing, it seemed that the most urgent concern for Jews in the UK, and those following the course of Anglo-Jewish history, was the strife over the insensitivity to antisemitism on the part of the leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn. The most prescient, historically informed analysis of which I am aware was delivered by Professor Jack Jacobs of the City University of New York, who has been a visiting scholar this year at the Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism

¹ Mark Levene's *War, Jews, and New Europe: The Diplomacy of Lucien Wolf 1914–1919* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the Littman Library, 1992), remains an indispensable, outstanding scholarly work. See also Michael Jolles's treatment of Lucien Wolf below, 167–8.



Luciana Berger, MP.
Courtesy of UK Parliament, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

at Birkbeck, University of London.² Alas, the text of that superb lecture cannot be reproduced here, but I shall encourage the author, as strongly as possible, to contribute to a future issue on this theme.

In order, however, to address this topic directly, I sought and was graciously afforded an interview on 6 September 2018 with a Member of Parliament (MP), the Honourable Luciana Berger, who has been central to the debate on antisemitism within the Labour Party. It is to the shame of the Party that the MP has been compelled to divert her time and energy to this nagging question, especially with regard to the poor judgment and lack of pro-active leadership on the issue by Corbyn. She is one of the most dedicated and effective public officials focusing on issues related to mental health in Britain. Unfortunately for her, and more critically, for the country overall, inter-party disputes and the overwhelming Brexit debacle have prevented any progress, or even informed discussion, concerning the actual governance of the country. Besides fumbling Brexit, Labour has not yet fully expunged the “toxicity” of those wishing to influence the party through preying on antisemitic stereotypes. On this past Holocaust Memorial Day, Berger told an audience in her constituency of Liverpool that “Today, we must not be bystanders. Social media is full of antisemitism –

2 Jack Jacobs, “Jews and the Left: A Case of British Exceptionalism?”, keynote address, international conference, Jews, the Left and Antisemitism: International Perspectives, Birkbeck, University of London, 5 Dec. 2018.

the conspiracies that Jewish people run the banks, organised 9/11, profit from wars, manipulate the media, and have loyalties to a foreign power. The Jew-hating, conspiracy theorist David Icke can fill stadiums, and speaks to millions. Lists are compiled of Jewish people working in the media or Jewish MPs and circulated as evidence of conspiracies. Whether it's the neo-nazis, or those who think they belong to the left, we must call out this antisemitism as loudly as we can.”³

No one has been calling out antisemitism as consistently and courageously as has Berger. Due to the tensions and disappointments in her own Party, Berger, along with six other Labour MPs, resigned from the party on 19 February 2019. “I’m a proud British Jew”, she asserted in an interview, “but I didn’t expect my political activities to be dominated by [the antisemitism] issue. This ultimately is about poor leadership. And it’s distracting us from focusing on one of the most disastrous Tory administrations.”⁴ From my own perspective, given the antisemitic baggage attached to the (ludicrous) pro-Brexit sentiment, the coziness of Tory leadership with vile, expressly right-wing antisemitic fanatics like Steve Bannon, and the unchecked demonization of George Soros as an antisemitic trope, the Conservatives, alas, do not offer a compelling alternative.

While divisions overall in British society are deep and bitter, those between Jews and publicly declared antisemites, and between Jews themselves around the pro-and anti-Trump divide, has precipitated a wider gulf in public discourse than at any time in the post-1945 world.⁵ The history of antisemitism in the United States, though, struck a new nadir on 27 October 2018 when a gunman murdered eleven congregants at a Pittsburgh synagogue. The murderer himself made abundantly clear that his motivation was the Jewish institutional support for open immigration, and continuing encouragement of immigration, through the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). While President Trump himself did not

3 See the official website for Luciana Berger, MP: lucianaberger.com (accessed 28 Jan. 2019).

4 See www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/labours-leading-jewish-mp-luciana-13178445, 1 Sept. 2018 (accessed 4 Sept. 2018).

5 For one of the better journalistic assessments, see Jonathan Weisman, “American Jews and Israeli Jews are Headed for a Messy Breakup. Is the world ready for another Great Schism?”, 4 Jan. 2019, at www.nytimes.com/2019/01/04/opinion/sunday/israeli-jews-american-jews-divide.html (accessed 28 Jan. 2019).

pull the trigger, he stoked the sentiment which emboldened the killer with his anti-immigration invective, which bears a strong historical association with the worst excesses of antisemitism.⁶

Transactions seeks to constructively enjoin such recurring questions, centering on migration in periods of crisis, with the next issue devoted in large part to the Kindertransport – the events originally termed “the children’s movement” which resulted in some 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish children arriving in Britain in the wake of the Nazi “November pogrom” (9–10 November 1938) to the beginning of the Second World War. In January 2019 a three-day conference was held at UCL, organized by Jennifer Craig-Norton, Lesley Urbach, and Anita Grosz, on new research on the Kindertransport. Several of the outstanding papers presented at that gathering will serve as the basis for articles in our Volume 51, in addition to articles and reviews on other historical themes.

For the (literal) issue at hand, number 50 of *Transactions*, after the reflections on Lucien Wolf’s introductory address, we present a richly textured study by Judith Olszowy-Schlanger and Sian Collins on “Samuel of Norwich in the marshlands of King’s Lynn: economic tribulations reconstructed from a newly discovered thirteenth-century Hebrew starr in Cambridge University Library”. It provides a fascinating new discovery in light of the seminal facsimile collection of medieval Hebrew starrs recently published,⁷ and exploits this find (in the best sense) to relate a family history of Jews who were among the most prominent in medieval England, that of Isaac of Norwich. On a personal note we are thrilled to welcome Professor Olszowy-Schlanger as a near-neighbour, as the new director of Oxford’s Centre for Jewish Studies.

Alex Kerner’s article, “Shirts, biscuits and underpants: unveiling the lower social strata of London’s Sephardi congregation in the eighteenth century through its inner arbitration court”, is the first of two contributions to this volume that continue from last year’s *Transactions*. Kerner’s perceptive analysis helps us to answer a question that too often goes unasked: what did Jews actually do with their daily lives? It is

6 See “History Professors and Scholars’ *Amici Curiae* Brief in Support of Plaintiffs-Appellees”, <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/3673920/154.pdf> (accessed 28 Jan. 2019).

7 Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, ed., *Hebrew and Hebrew–Latin Documents from Medieval England: A Diplomatic and Palaeographical Study*, *Monumenta Palaeographica Medii Aevi*, Series Hebraica I, 2 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015).

particularly keen in examining the flare-ups that led to conflicts eventually arriving at the docket of the arbitration court.

The lens on Jews in London is trained on a different angle than ever before, in this journal, through Rodney Curtis's exploration of "Anglican evangelical missionaries and the London Jews Society: Palestine Place at Bethnal Green and related developments, 1813–1895". Through the scholarship of Todd Endelman and others we have learned that Jews' actions, including institution-building, often was a reaction to perceived threats, to Jews, on the part of missionaries. Curtis examines the thought and activities of the missionaries themselves, whose ranks included converts from the Jewish community. Indeed, even the most basic comprehension of the evolving social landscape of the East End needs more serious consideration of what was happening among those who saw themselves as working, ultimately, to "save" the largely uninterested Jews.

Rachel Adelstein's work represents the continuation of a tradition that has been well established by Alex Knapp and David Conway: the understanding of Anglo-Jewry through its music. Adelstein astutely provides an ethno-musicological reading of developments along gender lines in British synagogues. It is an important complement and corrective to the historiography concerning changes, and resistance to change, in Anglo-Jewish religious life.

Moving north from London to Bradford, we present an article on Bradford's contemporary Jewish history by Grace Idle. This is both a continuation from last year's journal, as well as the introduction of a new section of *Transactions* we hope will be ongoing: a public history forum.

The issue continues with a survey of work on collective biography by Michael Jolles, a stalwart member of the JHSE, and book reviews. The book review section begins with a review essay by the sub-editor of that section, Lars Fischer, of the last book by the late Jonathan Hess (z"l) of the University of North Carolina. In addition to recognizing the untimely death of Professor Hess, we also bring attention to the passing of Bill Williams, the author of the classic history of Manchester Jewry, who was an extraordinarily sweet and generous soul. The next *Transactions* will include reflections on the life and career of Bill Williams.⁸

8 Tony Kushner, "Bill Williams and Jewish Historiography: Past, Present, and Future", available at https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/398513/1/1.pdf_token%253D2Dyo%252BAFLHjgddkKwvUZrGrmhBgo%253D (accessed 2 Feb. 2019).

As is now a matter of *minhag* (custom), I wish to thank the many colleagues who have read submissions to this journal as well as books considered for review. My heartfelt thanks extend, again, to the contributing editor Jeremy Schonfield, copy-editor Katharine Ridler, production designer Tony Kitzinger, and book review editor Lars Fischer.

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