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Introduction: Binding ties and tension between Washington and London

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INTRODUCTION

Binding ties and tension between Washington and London

In the current academic year I am on sabbatical from my position at University College London (UCL). Following three months on fellowship at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, in the autumn of 2016, I was a William J. Lowenberg Fellow in American Jewry and the Holocaust at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. I have also conducted research regularly at the Library of Congress and the National Archives in College Park, Maryland.¹ For the remainder of the winter and spring 2017, I will be a fellow of New York University's Remarque Institute. While lecturing outside Washington I enjoyed short periods of work at the Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas and the Firestone Library of Princeton University. The focus of my research has been on Eastern European and American Jewry's engagement with photography during the interwar period and the Second World War, and my project extends to cinematography and film.

Without expressly pursuing such a theme, my research has yielded numerous connections of signal importance between Washington and London, and particularly the roles of Jews in these relationships. A highly significant figure in the collections I have consulted on several aspects of photography and film-making from 1933 to 1947 is Lord Bernstein (Sidney Lewis Bernstein, 1899–1993), who has received sparse attention for his role in shaping the character of wartime film in both Britain and the United States. My research also points to Britain (and the Commonwealth) as critical in the conception of American film as revealed in the little-studied careers of Leonard Spigelglass and Leo Rosten.² Rosten, who is best

1 The acronym as used in the USA is NARA (National Archives and Records Administration), which is located in Washington, DC, College Park, and several additional sites.

2 Leonard Spigelglass, *The Scuttle Under the Bonnet* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962); Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish: a relaxed lexicon of Yiddish, Hebrew and Yinglish words often encountered in English, plus dozens of others that ought to be, with serendipitous excursions into Jewish humor, habits, holidays, history, religion, ceremonies, folklore and cuisine; the whole generously garnished with stories, anecdotes, epigrams, Talmudic quotations, folk sayings and jokes – from the days of the Bible to those of the beatnik* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968); Leonard

remembered as the author of *The Joys of Yiddish* and *The Education of Hyman Kaplan*, is – in my opinion – the unheralded giant of all things cinematic in the US during the Second World War, and Spigelglass was his closest collaborator. As the founding Chief of the Motion Picture Division of the Office of Facts and Figures, of what became the Office of War Information, Rosten exerted a huge influence over the development of film – from newsreels, to military instructional films, to Hollywood features – to serve America’s war aims. Rosten, who was born in Lodz and immigrated to the United States as a child with his family, studied for his masters at the London School of Economics and maintained a strong tie to Britain throughout his life, including a warm friendship with Chaim Bermant. Given that Britain had been at war with Nazi Germany for more than two years prior to Pearl Harbor and the US entry into the war, and much had been learned in Britain about how to use film effectively, Rosten strongly believed that it was imperative to learn from the British experience and to work with the British as much as possible. There is, thus far, barely an echo of Rosten in the historiography. Stay tuned, as we say, for the fleshed-out version of this history.

Apart from libraries and archives pertaining to my own research, my time in Washington happily coincided with the completion and inauguration of the Museum of African American History and Culture on the Mall. I was fortunate to attend the opening festivities, which included moving addresses by President Obama and former President George W. Bush, and I have since visited the museum twice.

Without deliberately hunting for connections, I noticed two striking references to Anglo-Jewish history in the new museum. The first was part of a display on the treatment of incarcerated African Americans in the early twentieth century, particularly the convicts “leased” by the turpentine industry in Florida. It featured a quotation from a “muckraking” investigative journalist, Marc Goodnow, who surveyed the conditions in 1912 and published his findings in a 1915 exposé. “In the turpentine convict camps of Florida are human beings”, Goodnow wrote, whose “degraded, debased, sordid” existence is “worse than any exile, worse than any slum district” – worse “even, than Whitechapel, London.”³ There was no other information surrounding this quotation. While I fully understand

Q. Ross [Leo Rosten], *The Education of Hyman Kaplan* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1937).

³ Marc N. Goodnow, “Turpentine: Impressions of the Convicts’ Camps in Florida”, *International Socialist Review* 15 (June 1915): 724.

the intention, I fear the comparison may be lost on the vast majority of museum visitors. But I am intrigued that the creators of the exhibition were animated by the notion that the most wretched place on earth, in the early twentieth century, was Whitechapel, inhabited largely by Jews – our beloved and now ultra-hip East End. Although it has become clichéd to indulge in competing degrees of victimization, I do not object to this characterization of the turpentine plantations, for black prison labourers, being “worse” than the slum dwellings and stupefying workshops of London’s East End. It stands to reason that most of Goodnow’s readership in 1915 would have found his comparison meaningful.

I spied a different type of association with London’s Jews in the sprawling, exuberant space of the museum devoted to African Americans in music. In one of several displays on the famed contralto Marian Anderson (1897–1993), one of her diaries is opened to a page in which she records that while in London, she had sat for a photographic portrait with a “Mr. Glass”, whom I assume is Zoltan Glass (1903–1982). Glass, originally from Budapest, was a refugee from Nazism who had been a leading photographer of the automobile industry and car racing before being forced out of Germany. On the most basic level, both the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Museum of African American History and Culture illuminate and confront racial discrimination and persecution suffered by their subjects.

The presence of these relatively recent yet august Washington institutions renders a shocking event in the nation’s capital all the more unsettling: merely hundreds of metres from these sites, a group explicitly aligned to Nazi ideology, the “Alt-Right”, met in the Ronald Reagan Building on 19 November 2016 to celebrate the election of Donald Trump and plan their agenda – now that one of their own is at the very centre of power. Indeed, one of the initial appointments of president-elect Donald Trump is Steve Bannon, the head of the far-right Breitbart “news” outlet, as his chief strategist. Bannon had expressly cast Breitbart as the mouthpiece of the Alt-Right. The concluding session of the meeting elicited rousing applause and cheers of “Hail Trump” – replete with Nazi salutes. It was unabashed antisemitism of the most grotesque sort. In my worst nightmare I never imagined that Nazism would become “current events” in Washington, DC, in 2016. The racist, misogynist, xenophobic president-elect failed to be troubled enough by this vile demonstration – in his honour – to “tweet” his objection. Trump has made it abundantly clear that twittering is the preferred medium for his most significant messages.

This dark episode leads, disturbingly, to a connection with present-day Anglo-Jewry. While it is important to maintain respect for the office of the president of the United States – which was shamelessly debased by Trump’s disgraceful, racist “birther” campaign against President Obama – the decision by the Board of Deputies of British Jews to send a congratulatory letter to Trump was appalling.⁴ It prompted a thoughtful, articulate response by a number of concerned young British Jews who protested to the Board in a letter of 9 November 2016. The absurd epistle of the Board to Trump, which managed to be both fawning and pompous, also runs counter to the hundreds of Jewish historians, internationally, who publicly expressed outrage at Trump’s campaign rhetoric and subsequent “victory”. The Board of Deputies chose to close its eyes and minds to “the repeated anti-Semitic expressions and insinuations during the Trump campaign. Much of this anti-Semitism was directed against journalists, either Jewish or with Jewish-sounding names. The candidate himself refused to denounce – and even retweeted – language and images that struck [Jewish historians] as manifestly anti-Semitic. By not doing so, his campaign gave licence to haters of Jews, who truck in conspiracy theories about world Jewish domination.”⁵ While Trump’s anti-Muslim and anti-Mexican invective is better known, the antisemitism of his campaign – despite idiotic protests that a (far-right) Jewish son-in-law immunizes him from antisemitism – was unprecedented for conjuring up antisemitic discourse in American presidential politics. Trump’s final campaign commercial featured the demonization of three Jews – Lloyd Blankfein, George Soros, and Janet Yellen – as the masters of dark forces conspiring to undermine America’s heart and soul. The Democratic party’s Senator Al Franken (Minnesota) was correct to say that it had a chilling “Elders of Zion feel to it.”⁶

We shall now turn from rage and outrage to the normal business of the journal – but the sickening echoes from Washington will occasionally re-enter the scene. *Transactions* is happy to be a forum, again, for a substantial guest-edited section in this issue, devoted to the history and impact of Solomon Schechter (1847–1915). The invited editor is Dr Theodor Dunkelgrün from Cambridge. His introduction to the symposium is below.

4 See www.bod.org.uk/board-of-deputies-responds-to-letter-on-trump-statement, accessed 11 December 2016.

5 See www.jewishjournal.com/opinion/article/jewish_historians_speak_out_on_the_election_of_donald_trump, accessed 11 December 2016.

6 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2G9MR1n7E, accessed 11 December 2016.

Following the articles on Schechter, Jaap Colthof explores the early life and transformation of S. A. Hirsch from a juvenile criminal to a notable Jewish scholar. Jerry Pearlman offers a historical survey on the relationship of Jews to the English countryside. Carole Renard examines the relationship of Jewish women to the Suffragette movement. William Baker takes a historical turn in examining Wilkie Collins and his writings with regard to the Jews. Book reviews, handled by Lars Fischer, now appear increasingly in the form of review essays. In this issue we are pleased to have contributions by Griselda Pollock, Miri Freud-Kandel, David Dee, Nathan Abrams, Lisa Silverman, Laura Vaughan, Ava Kahn, Robert Stacey, Michael Leger-Lomas, and Michael Jolles. Many of those named are first-time authors for *Transactions*, and we are happy to expand the orbit of those involved in the work of the journal.

I also wish to use the introduction to volume 48 to announce and offer a preview of a splendid new addition to the riches of the JHSE. Tony Yablon has graciously donated a meticulously assembled collection of books, pamphlets, letters, and ephemera concerning the life and writings of Israel Zangwill to the JHSE. It will be available for the use of students and scholars and is housed at the John Klier Library of the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University College London. The collection comprises a substantial number of first and early editions of Zangwill's publications and a smaller set of papers. Lars Fischer has prepared an annotated inventory focusing on the letters (from which I have liberally plundered in the next several paragraphs). As a first example of what awaits the future users of this treasure trove, Fischer's guide to the Zangwill collection includes this exchange of Zangwill with Israel Abrahams:

Kilburn, 1 October 1895 [ms.]

Topic: The possibility of Max Nordau (or Zangwill) speaking at the annual dinner of the Maccabeans

[Text:]

Dear Abrahams,

Unfortunately Nordau has gone back to Paris but I've written to him as cajolingly as I could – for this, or some future dinner. He's rather taken to me, but I don't know if I shall succeed in drawing him across Channel [sic].

I fear, too, the super-normal pressure of my engagements will prevent me preparing anything for the Macs this time so Thanks for kind expressions.

Yours Regretfully

I Zangwill

Israel Zangwill, undated portrait photograph by H. S. Mendelssohns Studios, Notting Hill Gate, London, which is inscribed to Edith Ayrton 'For a Good Wife', and signed 'I Zangwill'. Yablon Collection, Jewish Historical Society of England



Fischer explains that “this letter nicely complements the established narrative regarding the friendship between Zangwill and Nordau. As is well known, Zangwill credited Max Nordau with his conversion to Zionism.” (Even more famously, Theodor Herzl was said to have “converted” Nordau to Zionism, when Herzl had been sent to consult Nordau as a medical doctor known for treating nervous diseases – for the purpose of having Nordau dissuade him from his hare-brained idea of a “return to Zion”.) Zangwill and Nordau were introduced to one another when Nordau visited his British publisher, Heinemann, in September 1895. Nordau later recalled, in a tongue-in-cheek third-person account:

At a formal dinner party at Heinemann’s, Max Nordau meets Israel Zangwill. Initially, they eye one another with some apprehension and only exchange a few sweet sour words about “Degeneration”, but the personal contact soon shows them that they are made to understand and not to oppose one another. Zionism – this is the name the new movement has taken – completely unites them. Max Nordau has barely returned to Paris when he receives a letter from Zangwill, in which he is emphatically asked to return to London to be welcomed and honoured at a banquet of “The Macabbeans”.

At the time, he was unable to oblige, but he did so late, and on this occasion the title of Honorary President was conferred on me.

Zangwill never tired of crediting Nordau with his turn to Zionism. But above all it was an honest friendship that connected the two men, a relationship that resulted from a profound mutual understanding and admiration. “The Children of the Ghetto” and “The King of Schnorrers” were said to be genuine revelations for Max Nordau.⁷

Israel Abrahams graduated from UCL in 1880 and taught at Jews’ College before being appointed Reader in Talmudic and Rabbinic Literature and, subsequently, the curator of Orientalia at the University Library in Cambridge. Lucien Wolf called Abrahams “the soul of the new movement” that led to the creation of the JHSE.⁸

I shall conclude this section with further tie-ins to Washington, DC, reflecting on a shimmering past and foreboding present. Certainly, Ronald Reagan would have harshly condemned the meeting of the “Alt-Right” that occurred in the bowels of a building meant to honour him. One of the public officials memorialized in the Reagan complex mall facing 14th Street is Oscar Straus, the brother of Nathan Straus, another of Zangwill’s correspondents. Oscar Solomon Straus (1850–1926), “Statesman, author, diplomat”, was the first Jew to serve as a Cabinet Secretary in the United States, appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt, and he was President of the American Jewish Historical Society, beginning his term in 1895. Among other well-received works, Oscar Straus wrote a biography of Roger Williams.⁹ A Puritan, Williams was nevertheless a steadfast proponent of religious freedom and the absolute separation of church and state. The memorial to Straus is graced by a huge fountain (by Washington standards) flanked by two groups of statues, one labelled “Justice” to denote the religious freedom which permitted a Jew to serve in the highest levels of government, and the other, “Reason”, to illustrate the guiding principle of Straus’s life.¹⁰ “The voice of reason”, as Straus is quoted on the memorial, “is more to be regarded than the bent of any present inclination.” On the opposite side is Straus’s admonition that “our liberty of worship is not a concession nor a privilege but an inherent right.” It is deplorable that the Board of Deputies of British Jews

7 Max Nordau, *Erinnerungen: Erzählt von ihm selbst und von der Gefährtin seines Lebens* (Leipzig: Renaissance-Verlag, 1928), 179, 180.

8 See Joe Hillaby, “The Founding Fathers of the Jewish Historical Society of England (JHSE): A Tribute”, *Jewish Historical Studies* 45 (2013): 155.

9 Oscar S. Straus, *Roger Williams: Pioneer of Religious Liberty* (New York: Century, 1894).

10 See www.dcmemorials.com/index_indiv0000644.htm, accessed 11 December 2016.

has planted itself on the side of “inclination” in its appeal to Trump, as he frequently fulminated to bar Muslims from the shores of the United States because of their religion and threatens them, en masse, with interment and expulsion.

Fischer’s entry for Zangwill’s connection to Nathan Straus reads:

I.14 Straus, Nathan

I.14.1 East Preston, 12 December 1912 [ms.]

Topic: the prospects of, and Straus’s support for, *The War God*

[Text:]

with enclosures

Private

My Dear Straus,

I was very delighted with your letter of the 1st inst, & the proof it gives of your zeal for the cause & for me & my work.

I am still expecting “The War God” will be resumed for a run, but of course a [?] subvention would make this a certainty. And it should be remembered that it would be quite impossible for Carnegie with all his millions to have secured such a platform as I secured, unaided. [Herbert Beerbohm] Tree could not be bought except through art. Even now he knows nothing of our correspondence & tells me he is far from finished with the play.

But what I am anxious to secure is that [Arthur] Bouchier, who has a theatre of his own, remains with Tree, & hence money might serve. And one could advertise more boldly.

Of course Carnegie is perfectly right in saying that success cannot be forced but that is, if you have the wrong play. This play has already proved itself a certainty – I send you a few more letters or notices – & is talked of everywhere. Such a play *can* be forced – the whole history of opera & drama proves that supply creates demand e.g. Wagner’s works. Even *Carmen* failed at first. And “The War God” has not even failed. And it will probably succeed “in the long run” both here & in America, even if your efforts fail, though I shall always be grateful for them. Sincerely Yours

Israel Zangwill

I.14.2 East Preston, 13 May 1912

Topics: the possibility of a meeting during Zangwill’s travels on the continent; the death of Isidor Straus and Ida Straus, née Blun, on the *Titanic* [Excerpt]

I wrote to your brother Oscar our heartfelt sympathy in your family tragedy, & was only prevented by ignorance of your address from writing to you what indeed the whole world has been feeling, for the heroic & idyllic side of the Straus tragedy has enriched the imagination of the world.

I am deeply touched by your devotion to our people & shall be glad indeed to confer with you on Palestine or any other aspect of the *Judenschmerz*.

Looking forward to our meeting,

Most sincerely yours

Israel Zangwill

Fischer's guide reminds us that Nathan Straus co-owned the New York department stores Macy's and Abraham & Straus (with his brothers Isidor and Oscar). Together with his wife, Lina Guthertz Straus, Nathan Straus also played a crucial role in demonstrating the health benefits of pasteurized milk and was involved in a number of philanthropic projects. From 1910 onwards he became increasingly interested in Zionism and in 1912 visited Palestine. The death of Isidor Straus and his wife, Ida Straus, *née* Blun, on the *Titanic* affected Nathan badly and he began to withdraw from the family business to devote his time exclusively to philanthropic and Zionist activities.

The death of Mr. and Mrs. Isidor Straus attracted an extraordinary measure of attention in the United States because Ida Straus had apparently chosen to stay on board with her husband although she was offered a place on one of the life-boats. Hyperbole abounded. The *Washington Post* not only claimed to know what their last words to one another had been, but also took a didactic approach:

"We have lived together for a good many years, and I shall not leave you now," she said. With what emotions they spoke their last farewells as the sinking vessel settled beneath the waves the world will never know. United in death as they had been in life, they made their last hopeless struggle together, and, finally succumbing to the inexorable forces of nature, sank to their grave upon the ocean's 3,000 feet below.

It is good to remember that although stories of marital infidelity fill the columns of the newspapers, there are countless happy marriages . . . As an example of devoted womanhood Mrs. Straus will be held in perpetual remembrance.¹¹

The initially planned memorial meeting for Isidor and Ida Strauss on 23 April 1912 had to be postponed because

a vast outpouring of residents of the East Side who wished to pay tribute . . . defeated the purpose . . .

Fully 40,000 persons, according to the police estimate, crowded the streets around the Educational Building at East Broadway and Jefferson street . . .

11 *Washington Post*, 21 April 1912, p. ES4.

The crowds began to gather at 3 p.m. and by evening had grown to such dimensions that the police on guard were swept off their feet.

It was necessary to call out the reserves to dispel the crowds, after the decision to postpone the meeting indefinitely.

The memorial for the couple eventually took place at Carnegie Hall on 12 May. In its report, the *New York Times* spoke of “A Sublime Sacrifice” and Andrew Carnegie referred to Isidor and Ida Straus as “two angelic natures”. Supreme Court Justice (of New York State) Samuel Greenbaum eulogized that

a lesson terrible, yet sublime, was preached there in mid-ocean, and manhood was ennobled and glorified; and, of the many acts of self-effacement there enacted, none was more touching or inspiring than was the passing away of Isidor and Ida Straus. When we who knew and loved these noble souls heard of the disaster, we said to each other in hushed tones that if perchance both could not be saved both had gone. That was the inevitable result of the lives that Isidor and Ida Straus had lived.

Greenbaum, too, is a connecting thread to Anglo-Jewish history. Born in London in 1845, his parents emigrated to New York when he was a child. Greenbaum served as a trustee of New York’s Public Library, the League for Political Education, the Jewish Welfare Board, and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.¹² The Episcopal Bishop of Tennessee, Thomas Gailor, likewise suggested that the “picture of Isidor and Ida Straus, hand in hand upon the Titanic’s deck, in the darkness and chill of night, surrounded by the weird and desolate waste of sea – but under the white and welcoming stars – that picture will not soon fade from the minds and hearts of the American people”.¹³

When the leading New York Republican, Edward Lauterbach, who was closely associated with the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, unveiled a commemorative window for Isidor and Ida Straus in the synagogue of the Montefiore Congregation on 26 May 1912, he referred to Ida Straus’s apparent decision to stay with her husband as “a display of courage, of devotion, unequalled in the history of the human race”. Rabbi Dr. Nathan Krass suggested that “the life and death of Isidor Straus have dealt a fatal blow to anti-Semitism. He has proved to the world what the real type of Jew is”.¹⁴ (Alas, if only it had been such a fatal blow.)

12 See www.nycourts.gov/courts/ad1/centennial/Bios/sgreenbaum2, accessed 11 December 2016.

13 *New York Times*, 13 May 1912, p. 3.

14 *Ibid.*, 27 May 1912, p. 11.

To what extent the fate of the Straus couple on the *Titanic* seized the public imagination is demonstrated from an intervention by Virginia Brooks McKelway, a law graduate from New York University and acquaintance of the family. Lest anyone find fault with “Mrs. Isidor Straus” after all, she wrote to the *New York Times* to explain that “With her strong sense of duty, I feel that Mrs. Straus, had her children been very young, or poor, or crippled, would have said at the last, in that same calm spirit that possessed her: ‘Isidor, the children need me, so I will go.’ That not being the situation, she smilingly chose what seemed to her the better part.”¹⁵

Zangwill stayed with Nathan Straus when he came to New York in October 1923 under the auspices of the American Jewish Congress to give his address which many consider notorious, “Watchman, What of the Night?”, at Carnegie Hall.¹⁶ Zangwill summoned the prophecy of Isaiah (21:11), imploring his audience to resist fixing their imaginations exclusively on Palestine in seeking refuge for Jewry reeling from the conflicts that came on the heels of the First World War and the Russian Revolution. As Straus’s obituary later recalled, Straus “took violent issue” with Zangwill on his occasion. “‘The Zionism of Mr. Zangwill is counterfeit Zionism’, he said. ‘I speak from experience; he speaks from hearsay. I have devoted my life to this one cause and I am not going to have any one be misinformed. I have been in Palestine. I have lived in Palestine. My mind is there, my money is there, my heart is there.’”¹⁷ Yet, upon Zangwill’s death in 1926, Nathan Straus lamented that “We have lost one of our greatest writers and one of the greatest men in Judaism.”¹⁸

Concerning his own affairs of the heart, Zangwill was fiercely devoted to his wife Edith, with whom he shared a commitment to women’s suffrage. Both of them were vehemently denounced for supporting the militant tactics of the Women’s Social and Political Union. The attacks on Zangwill prompted this response: “ladylike means are all very well if

15 Ibid., 22 April 1912, p. 10.

16 On this episode, see Meri-Jane Rochelson, *A Jew in the Public Arena: The Career of Israel Zangwill* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 211–14.

17 *New York Times*, 12 January 1931, p. 1.

18 “All Jewry Mourns Death of Israel Zangwill, Famous Writer and Defender of His People,” 3 August 1926, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, available at: www.jta.org/1926/08/03/archive/all-jewry-mourns-death-of-israel-zangwill-famous-writer-and-defender-of-his-people, accessed 11 December 2016.

you are dealing with gentlemen; but you are dealing with politicians.”¹⁹ A notable testimony to Zangwill’s multifaceted partnership with Edith is the striking (undated) photographic portrait by H. L. Mendelssohn in the Yablon Collection, dedicated by Zangwill “For a Good Wife”. Perhaps we can credit Zangwill as a precursor to the hipster culture now on view in the East End, replete with headgear, glasses, and liberal politics that are again conspicuous in the cafés of Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road.

As previously, I wish to thank Katharine Ridler for her tremendous work editing and copy-editing, to Jeremy Schonfeld, the invaluable Contributing Editor of *Transactions*, and to Theodor Dunkelgrün, for conceiving of a special edition devoted to Solomon Schechter and serving as guest editor.

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¹⁹ This was featured in a recent Jewish Museum, London, exhibition; see www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-sister-suffragettes-on-display-in-new-uk-exhibition, accessed 11 December 2016.