UCL Hebrew & Jewish Studies
Departmental Newsletter
Editors' Note

DD: It will be with a heavy heart that I leave London in September. For a while, going abroad for a year seemed to be a good idea. Then I thought of all the great friends I’d made over the past two years at UCL, and I remembered how few of them will still be here when I come back from Croatia. Then I thought of my wonderful flatmates in Hayes, and wondered what should become of my room if I move out for a year. Finally, (and here my spirits dropped even further) I worried that being abroad would make it hard from me to maintain my editorship of this newsletter.

It’s been an honour and a privilege to help pass this publication to the next generation of students at the Department, and I feel confident in passing it to the very capable hands of Anna, who co-edited this edition!

So, I’ll be packing my bags in September. Maybe Zagreb won’t be that bad after all. I heard that the banks there recently wrote off a lot of people’s debt. And maybe they have newsletter there too? Nevertheless, my very best (belated) Purim greetings one and all, and thanks to the wonderful contributors who made this newsletter possible! (This is one of my favourite editions yet!) And many thanks to Belinda for her excellent proof-reading.

/David Dahlborn, Editor (…back in 2016-17)

AP: Hello to those who already know me and those who have no idea of who I am (yet): my name is Anna and I’m a co-editor of the newsletter this time. This came a bit unexpected for myself, but I’m now getting to feel at home with it. This issue is of special interest to me, because I participated in the Purim shpil in the beginning of March (as both Vashti and Mordechai – lots of fun therefore) – this is probably the point at which I got really interested in what is happening at the Department. As David has now revealed the deepest secrets of newsletter business to me, I hope I’ll be able to support it while he is away!

/Anna Piroženoka,
Co-Editor
As this issue of our Newsletter comes out in its customary, last-minute rush, I am glad to report on two most recent developments in the Department.

Firstly, the long-awaited REF2014 results were released in December, with excellent results for us in the Department. As I have explained in an earlier Newsletter, the REF (Research Excellence Framework) is a government-led assessment of all UK universities that is carried out every six years. Its brief is to assess the quality of research in the UK as well as its impact on wider society. The results of this exercise are used to rank universities and, for the government, to allocate research funding to the most deserving institutions (at least, that is what is meant to happen).

As with all statistics, there are very many different ways of analyzing the REF2014 results; but according to some ranking schemes, UCL has come top and – for the first time in history – the supremacy of Oxford and Cambridge has been smashed. This is what was reported in several broadsheets, and I am happy to go along with these reports!

Our Department, in particular, has done remarkably well, with excellent results across the board. Comparison with other universities is difficult, because we are the only Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies in the country. However, we were assessed together with other university departments of Theology and Religious Studies, and in this context, we were ranked 3\textsuperscript{rd} in the UK (after Durham and Birmingham) – at least according to the tables that were published in the first post-REF feature article of the Times Higher Supplement. As you can imagine, we

“Most important is whether and how these excellent results will improve our financial position over the next six years.”

New Lecturer appointed and Department hits top table rankings

Head of Department Sacha Stern brings us the latest triumphant news!

By Professor Sacha Stern
promptly printed these tables out, and pinned them to the notice board of the Department, on Foster Court’s third floor.

But how we compete against British theology departments is not that relevant to us. Most important is whether and how these excellent results will improve our financial position over the next six years. We should find out more about this at the end of this month. At this stage it is enough to conclude that our REF achievements reflect the high standards of our research and publications, and our strong commitment to public engagement and making a meaningful impact on wider society. This is all to the credit of our academic staff, but also of our administrators, students, and friends, who give us so much support.

The other great news is the creation in the Department of a new Lectureship in Jewish-Muslim Relations. Besides opening up fresh opportunities for research and teaching in the field of Jewish-Muslim relations, which will be of interest to students of all faiths and ethnic backgrounds from within the Department and from the outside, this new lectureship will provide a more general focus on the study of religion, Middle Eastern society, and inter-faith relations – areas which until now have been generally neglected, for historical and other reasons, at UCL.

We are very glad to announce the appointment for this purpose of Seth Anziska, who is currently finishing his PhD at Columbia University. Seth is just the right kind of person for this job. He has lived and studied in different parts of Israel and the West Bank, as well as in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Syria, and is intimately familiar with different communal contexts and

“…the study and promotion of peaceful relations between Jews and Muslims has become all too important.”
the complexities of daily life in the region. He has recently been researching the Lebanon war of 1982. In this context, one of his projects, held in the Lebanon’s pavilion of the 2013 Venice Biennale, has been to bring into conversation the leading Lebanese visual artist Akram Zaatari with Hagai Tamir, a retired Israeli air force pilot who inspired a legend of wartime refusal during the 1982 war.

The creation of this new position, in a field that may still be regarded as ‘emerging’, was made possible through the generous funding of two charitable foundations, one Muslim, the Mohamed S. Farsi Foundation, and the other Jewish, the Polonsky Foundation. This cooperation is in itself a fine example of Jewish-Muslim relations. Alongside our other funders and supporters, to which we are also immensely grateful, the Farsi and Polonsky Foundations can rest assured that we will deliver ‘value for money’ – not only in terms of research and teaching from within the Department, but also of outreach work and public engagement on the level of wider society. In the light of the recent, tragic events in Paris and Copenhagen, the study and promotion of peaceful relations between Jews and Muslims has become all too important. Hopefully our Department, with this new lectureship, can make a positive contribution in this direction.

I cannot end this piece without confessing that no less exciting, for me, is my own research. In the last few months, together with my colleagues, I have discovered some amazing things – mainly from unknown manuscripts of the Cairo Genizah. Perhaps I will tell you more about this another time…
At the excavations around the Valley of Elah in Israel there was much excitement yesterday at the discovery of a human skeleton. It is in this valley that the boy David killed the Philistine champion Goliath with a single stone shot from his sling.

Preliminary examinations did not reveal much evidence as to the reason why the skeleton was found in this famous historical spot.

Archaeologists at the site summoned the help of Professor Aza Kochav* the eminent head of the Hebrew & Jewish Studies Department of a world famous university.

He carefully examined the remains and submitted his findings to the host of archaeologists, historians, academics and media awaiting his pronouncement,

“I have come to the conclusion,” he declared, “that the skeleton is that of a male, an Israelite who died here about 3000 years ago. Not only that, but I can tell you that he died of a heart attack”.

Those around him were amazed and asked him how he had come to that conclusion.

“Well,” said Professor Kochav. “I found a parchment rolled up and clenched tightly in his right fist. On it was written “10,000 shekels on Goliath to win!”

- Your Local Correspondent

Kenny Miller (Continuing Education)

*NOTE: The name of Professor Aza Kochav is fictional and made up from Yiddish and Hebrew.

1. “Kochav” in Hebrew means a “star”, or “stern” in Yiddish.
2. “Aza” in Yiddish means “such” ... {Sacha..?}

Make of it what you will...
A short note on Purim Shpils

The Purim shpiel has an enduring appeal but has meant different things to different people at various points in history. Tsila Ratner elaborates:

By Dr. Tsila Ratner

We all enjoyed Lily and her students performing a Purim shpiel in proper biblical Hebrew. As I was watching the mighty king and his dog, Esther who kept losing her crown, Haman, Mordechai and Vashti, I kept thinking of the subversive potential of the seemingly comic playfulness of Purim shpils and their poignant commentaries on the present. As we watched Haman about to be hung by a fragile plastic thread from the television screen, I thought: Execution by the media! What could be more relevant to the present pre-election campaigns!

Two Purim tales came to my mind. The first one is entitled ‘At King Ahasuerus’ House’ by the quintessential Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem, first published in Yiddish in 1901, translated into Hebrew by the author’s son in law, Y.D. Berkowitz and published in the collection ‘Tales for Children’ (1950). The second is the film Esther (1986) by the Israeli director Amos Gitai. The two tales cannot be more different from each other. They belong to two different eras of Jewish life. Taking place in a small Jewish shtetl in Eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century or before, ‘At King Ahasuerus’ House’ is told as a childhood memory of a Purim shpiel. ‘Esther’ takes place in Wadi Salib in Israel in 1986, the year before the outbreak of the first intifada, and is presented as a straight forward retelling of the megillah.

At the centre of Sholeh Aleichem’s story is a young boy, the grandson of the richest man in the shtetl. On Purim, the extended family gathers in the grandfather’s house, dining and watching a Purim shpiel performed by the poor town players ("קומדינצ’יקים"). The boy whose
upbringing is rigidly prescribed by what is considered proper and suitable to his family status, envies the joyful anarchism of the players, especially of Favele, the poor young orphan. He sneaks out of the house and joins the players on their way to the poor house of King Ahasuerus who is actually Kopele the tailor. There, in the dark and shabby little house he experiences joy and freedom as Kopele’s half naked children and ailing wife join in with the joking players. The boy’s disappearance is soon discovered; his father and melamed find him at “King Ahasuerus’ house” where they are invited to join the celebration and where they are being mocked by the witty players. The boy’s short lived joy comes to its end outside, where his father’s hefty slap brings him back to the his family’s world.

The humour and compassion of Sholem Aleichem’s masterly telling and the somewhat customary reversal of fortunes whereby the rich is made miserable and the poor is made happy, seem quite innocent and benign. Underneath the surface one can find the author’s sharp critique of social and class tensions in the shtetl’s world which in turn reflects on our society.

The critique in Gitai’s film is more visible, although true to the Purim shpiel tradition it assumes an impassive appearance. Without digressing from the megillah’s story, the film draws unsettling analogies between the politics of Ahasuerus’s empire in the past and Israel’s
in the present; between the Jewish minority in Sushan and the Palestinians and other minorities in Israel. As mentioned above, the film was made about a year before the eruption of the first intifada, as tensions in the occupied territories were rising. Choosing Wadi Salib, a neighbourhood near Haifa, for the film’s location is heavily loaded with political meanings. In 1948 its Arab/Palestinian inhabitants left or were urged to leave and the state placed new Mizrahi immigrants in the empty houses. In 1959 the residents’ demonstrations against their discrimination in Israeli society turned into violent riots involving clashes with the police and the army. Most of the area was destroyed during the riots. Unlike Gitai’s earlier documentary entitled Wadi Salib (1979), the film focuses on the megillah story as a universal myth, avoiding explicit views on the present. Nonetheless, the theme of reversal of fortunes in the megillah, the scenes shot against the background of the ruins of Wadi Salib and having a mixed cast of Jewish and Arab-Israeli actors (Mohammad Shakri as Mordechai; Juliano Mer-Khamis as Haman), strongly reverberate with the harsh political situation.

Sholem Aleichem’s tale of coming of age in the shtetl and Amos Gitai’s Esther, could not have been more different from each other. However, both are true to the carnivalesque spirit of the Purim shpiel which moves between masking and disclosure, benign humour and sharp critique, innocence and parody. No wonder it is a tradition that resists fading.

Could you identify the characters in the following Purim shpiel.
Department Performs Perfect Purim Shpil to Standing Ovations

On Wednesday, 4 March the Department held a Purim party, which included a Purim shpil and Megillah readings. For those of you who missed it, or want to re-live the great memories, here are some pictures from the event.

Pictures by Belinda É. S. & Georgia Panteli

Above: Vashti’s banquet: the beginning of the story.
Above: The wedding of Esther and King Achashverosh. Below: the plot of evil Haman (boo!).
Note the dog under the table: a clever allusion to the Ugaritic myth of El’s divine feast.
Above: the audience follows the reading.

Below: the Megillah reading.
The end of term 2 is approaching, and for me it is the first year of a most exciting degree: BA Ancient Languages.

When I stumbled upon this degree one and a half years ago, I knew it immediately that this was the one I was looking for, even if without realizing it. I was always interested in ancient history, but I was (and am) also very passionate about languages and eager to dedicate my studies to linguistics more than anything else. So this degree was just perfect for me.

I don’t know the stories of other Ancient Languages students and why exactly they came to choosing this degree, but I can see that they are all (all four! 😊) broad-minded and very gifted linguistically. It is often surprising to see how many ancient and modern languages they have at least basic knowledge of. Each one of them has something interesting to tell or contribute during classes.

Apart from Biblical Hebrew, Latin and Greek, which form the core of the degree, my coursemates study Sanskrit, Egyptian, Akkadian, and a couple of modern languages as a supplement. For the next year, Ugaritic and Sumerian are considered by some. It fascinates me how diverse and versatile this degree can be, especially since students can choose subjects not only from other departments, but even from other London University colleges.

Another feature of the degree is Introduction to the Study of Language, a compulsory course from the Department of Greek and Latin. It is only worth 0.5 credits, but it is of great help when studying languages. It gives an insight into linguistics as a science and its branches: historical linguistics, morphology, phonology, sociolinguistics… I’ve been greatly enjoying this course so far, and so have others, as far as I can see. I think it is a really valuable complement to language-learning.

I should also say that the friendly and cozy atmosphere at the department, created by both students and staff, impressed me, and I would like to specially mention Lily Kahn, who is such a positive and helpful coordinator that it makes me feel even more happy about my choice of degree.
Don't laugh! And don't dare to yawn:
More news about the EAJS!

François Guesnet makes a passionate pitch for why we should all care about the EAJS.

By Dr. François Guesnet,
Secretary of the European Association of Jewish Studies

Since the last Newsletter, some quite important developments have taken place in the European Association for Jewish Studies. This association, now boasting of almost eight hundred full, associate and student members, has agreed to inaugurate a new partnership with its big sister on the other side of the Atlantic, the Association of Jewish Studies. AJS is perhaps best known for the huge yearly meetings, taking normally place in the season of blizzards and snowstorms on the East Coast of the US. More importantly, AJS organizes the largest job market in Jewish Studies. Now, members of EAJS will have a significantly reduced membership fee when joining AJS. Vice versa, EAJS offers reduced dues for AJS members who wish to join the European crowd.

In my last article, I reported about the very promising funding program, the 'EAJS Programme in European Jewish Studies' which will run for three years. The first round of applications is just over.

Now, I'm very glad to announce that EAJS has received another significant grant to support academic events in Jewish Studies across Europe. We will now be able to fund conferences of various dimensions, but also summer schools. Grants of up to €10,000 are available. The first call for submissions will be going online while I type these lines, and should be accessible when you hold this precious Newsletter in your hands.

http://eurojewishstudies.org/

This new program should make you realise that now more than ever, it really makes sense to become a member of EAJS, especially if you are a student, as you won't have to pay any membership fees. This is really a good deal, especially considering the wealth of information available through the funding information, the information about events, publications and other important development which the EAJS Newsflash provides every month.

And I promise I won't stop my articles about EAJS until the very last student in this Department is a member! So hurry up!!

Make Dr. Guesnet happy and visit:
http://eurojewishstudies.org/. (It'll be worth it – Ed.)
Then and Now: reflections on changes in the university experience over 40 years

For many current undergrads it is hard to imagine university without stress, overcrowded libraries and £9,000 fees. Here, Chris Richardson offers valuable insight into what University used to be like.

By Chris Richardson

In a few weeks I will finish the course I am taking as an HJS Continuing Education student. A few weeks later – a quite unrelated event – there will be a general election and we may have a new Prime Minister. Coincidentally the start of my tertiary education was also followed closely by an election. But on that occasion the PM stayed put. His name was Harold Wilson. Yes, it was that long ago.

My first university life revolved round a history degree at Manchester University after leaving school, followed by a career in financial services. The second began in my 50s when I embarked on another bachelor’s degree at London University - not UCL, though since my second BA graduation I have continued studying at UCL and other sister colleges. Manchester in the mid-70s was thought of as, to use the language in currency at the time, solid provincial redbrick – not labels fashionable today. It would be recognizable in some ways in the novels of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge. You could even still pick up a whiff of the civilities and eccentricities of the Lucky Jim era, certainly in the Arts Faculty. A few lecturers still paraded in gowns. First name terms were far from the norm; you rarely came across what we now call a mature student. And a foreign student (at least in my hall of residence) was someone from the other side of the Pennines. Anyone from the south, like me, was less a foreigner than an extra-terrestrial.

Unsurprisingly, if one had to pick out the ways in which universities today are different from what they looked and felt like 40 years ago, they would reflect broader developments in our society, added to the obvious fact that student populations have become very much more diverse and grown hugely in number. Everything feels more professional, rules-based, exacting. Much as one reads of grade inflation I would say that standards overall have risen: good marks certainly have not become easier to come by. Academic staff and students seem to be working harder. There are positives and negatives in all this.

1 OK, full confession: I was a banker. But look, 40 years ago that was still a socially acceptable occupation.
Take for example that hardy perennial of humanities disciplines, the essay. **Then** the subject would be given out orally by the lecturer/tutor; a rough deadline was given; a reading list pointed you to a gap on the library shelf where the book you wanted had perhaps once resided, so creative imagination was a vital skill; if you missed the deadline, your tutor might gently remind you of the fact while passing in the corridor; getting the word count right (usually 2000 words) involved a form of Dead Reckoning (six sides of A4 seemed about right depending on the handwriting); when finished it was lobbed into the tutor’s cubbyhole (not recorded); it would work its way back to you unhurriedly; “feedback” comprised a mark expressed in an elegant but incomprehensible formula involving letters of the Greek alphabet, and plus and minus signs interspersed with question marks, and a cryptic comment scribbled in Doctor’s Prescription script.

**Now** of course Turnitin and the other VLE accessories have enhanced, but also regimented, every step of that process. Plagiarism is a constant issue/threat. Which I guess is fairer all round: if rules are not properly enforced someone is going to exploit them; whether essays generally are any the better for all the process now involved is open to question.

Teaching time has unquestionably reduced big time, and I sense this is driven more by the financial factors – above all staff/student numbers – than by pedagogical need. My first year timetable at Manchester was not so different from my last one at school. You “went in” early every day and, by and large, you stayed in – with a few “frees” in between your lectures and seminars. Now – depending on the subject – a student’s visit to the university is like an appointment with the dentist: you go to it, do the necessary, and come back. Hopefully the experience is more enjoyable! And whatever happened to the third term as a teaching event?

In one sense the distance between staff and students has reduced: there is less deference; first name usage has become the universal

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2 Everyone in the History department wrote by hand; except me – I had a typewriter! Was I one cool dude.
norm; electronic communication has made contact easier and quicker. In other respects the distance has perhaps grown. Staff/student socialising was more common then. Not, I think, because people have become less sociable or friendly, but because different norms prevail about privacy and because there are greater pressures on people’s time; not to mention some issues and sensitivities that barely existed in the 1970s.

In terms of money and debt the world of 40 years ago will be unrecognizable. The tab for my university experience was picked up almost entirely by the London Borough of Barnet; my parents were assessed for a termly financial contribution that today would buy lunch for two. It wasn’t that there were no financial pressures: I still had to take temporary jobs through all my vacs to stay afloat. But the problem of debt for most of us did not arise. In that sense at least I truly belonged to a lucky generation.

In summary, what I have seen on the my return to what people now like to call The Academy is a university model that in its fundamentals hasn’t changed but is being worked ever harder. The value of a university education is being increasingly questioned. Given the costs involved and the pressures of the employment market that is understandable. But in the process the idea of university as a contribution to an individual’s broader personal formation is getting lost, which is a great pity. If you had asked me in 1974 why I wanted to go to university my true gut-based answer would have been: because I wanted to have fun. I expected university to provide this and by and large it didn’t disappoint.

I do hope that fun remains a large part of today’s “first/only time” undergraduate experience. They certainly seem to be working a lot harder than I ever did. It was a shock when I phoned my son recently, in the first year of his own university life, one Sunday morning. I called late, hoping I would not intrude on the hangover I expected him to be nursing. He whispered in reply that he couldn’t talk because he was in the library!

In the library? On a Sunday morning? No one did that sort of thing when Harold Wilson was the Prime Minister.

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History Essay: Tailors, antisemitism and solidarity in the East End, 1889-1914

In the late 19th century Eastern Jewish immigrants in London faced high degrees of antisemitism in society. But how did working class actions bridge the gaps between Jewish and Gentile Londoners?

By Gustav Sternhamner

Despite the levels of antisemitism in British society between 1889 and 1912 there were many cases of cooperation between Jewish and Gentile workers’ trade unions. Stemming from the coinciding rise of British ‘New Unionism’ and the arrival of thousands of Eastern Jewish immigrants to London after 1880, this interesting historical paradox presents an ambiguous relationship between Jewish immigrant workers, particularly sweated tailors, and the British labour movement. The increasing Polish and Russian Jewish population in the East End of London, which by 1903 numbered roughly 120,000 people, faced xenophobic prejudice from many sections of society over fears that English workers would be “displaced” or have their wages reduced by alien “competition”. Contrary evidence, meanwhile, includes great displays of solidarity between Jewish and Gentile workers in the face of a common enemy. Both the social establishment and working class voices expressed xenophobic and antisemitic sentiments; when asked about the poor slums of Tower Hamlets, even a socialist such as Ben Tillett, a leader of the 1889 dockworkers’ strike, reportedly claimed that ‘it was from these quagmires of degeneration that the hyenas of the revolution emerged.’ At the same time, dockers offered support and solidarity to striking East End Jewish tailors in late 1889 by donating to them £100 of their strike fund. Explaining this relationship requires looking in greater detail at both the nature of antisemitism in Britain, as well as the instances of Jewish and Gentile trade union collaboration in London around the turn of the 20th century.

Antisemitic sentiments were certainly not uncommon in London around this time. Even with the full political emancipation of Jews in Britain in the 1870s, racial prejudice against the Jewish establishment in London was not completely eradicated. This is evidenced, for instance, by Gladstone’s remark that Disraeli might, during the Eastern crisis of 1877 ‘be willing to risk his Government for his Judaic feeling’. When discussing British antisemitism after the 1870 it is, however, important to consider the distinction between the long-established Anglo-Jewish community, who were well assimilated and politically
emancipated in British society, and the new arrivals from Eastern Europe, who bore the blunt of British xenophobia. That said, Britain stands out in the history of antisemitism as a country in Europe where political antisemitism was comparatively weak. Counting incidents of communal violence against Jews, the only documented case between 1870 and 1914 took place in 1911 in South Wales, far from any major concentration of Jewish migrants. Nevertheless, there were currents of popular antisemitism in both the social establishment and the labour movement leadership, and among working Londoners.

Eastern Jewish immigrants were typically demonised as dirty, selfish, taking British jobs and homes and lacking in solidarity and class consciousness. Cyril Lewis and Harry Samuel Barnett’s study of “the racial character” of the Jews of London is a typical example; characterising the Jewish worker as an ‘individualist, whose ambition is usually for himself rather than for his class’, their study also blames the Jews’ ‘peculiarity of character’ for the existence of the sweating system. Albeit weary of sweeping generalisations, Llewellyn Smith’s report into the position of East End Immigrants also stressed an ‘extreme “elasticity” or indefiniteness of his standard of comfort’ that lead Jewish workers to undercut Gentile wages. Smith also accused Jews of undermining work done by English trade unions. Beyond the above quote from Ben Tillett, antisemitic positions were taken by many trade union leaders. These included George Edwin Grey, Secretary of the National Union of Boot Clickers, who declared to the Royal Commission of Labour that: ‘they [Jews] spend nothing in soap … As for clothing, what they wear is filthy.’ Grey’s argument that Jews undercut wages called for immigration control to stop England from becoming a ‘refuse heap’. Such positions were evidently shared by other unions, as demonstrated by the TUC’s consistent support for anti-immigrant legislation between 1900 and 1905, when the Aliens Act was introduced.

Reliably gauging levels of antisemitism among working people in London is slightly harder. One antisemitic Londoner was quoted in the Church and Synagogue quarterly in 1896, opining
that, ‘...they [the Jews]’re a dirty lo, I ‘ates ‘em; they woks all day and ‘arf he night, and as to wittles they eats ‘ardly nofink, ‘arf a ‘erring ‘ll larst a ‘ole family more nore a week [sic]’. This colloquial transcription runs close to the line of the unions and the social establishment which, considering that *Church and Synagogue* was the organ of the Parochial and Foreign Mission to the Jews, may cast doubt over its authenticity. The rise of the British Brothers’ League in 1901-2 offers another clue to working class antisemitism. Describing the East End as ‘the dustbin of Europe’ and issuing chants such as ‘go back to Jerusalem’, the BBL certainly presented a threatening popular voice of antisemitism in London, claiming, at its peak, to have attracted around 12,000 members. It must, however, be remembered that the League was, largely, founded and organised by a group of Conservative MPs, who employed brawny stewards to supress crowd dissent at their mass meetings. Descriptions of England and working class antisemitism by Jewish immigrants themselves could report serious and wide-spread hostile feelings. The *HaMeliz* weekly in St. Petersburg, for instance, wrote in 1892 that ‘... the spirit of the native workers and farmers is very bitter against the aliens [the Jews] ... in a very terrible and alarming way.’ Conversely, investigating the East End sweatshops in 1888, Beatrice Webb described convivial relationships between Jewish and Gentile workers, both male and female, on the shop floor. Webb noted no antisemitic hostility in a sweatshop where Jews and Gentiles worked side-by-side. Thus, although Jewish workers undoubtedly faced antisemitic discrimination from significant segments of society and the labour movement, the prevalence of genuinely popular working-class antisemitism is certainly ambiguous.

Actual relations between Jewish and Gentile workers in the world of labour reveal a varying, but remarkable contrast to this racial prejudice. In 1914, 5,600 out of 8,300 (or 65 percent) of unionised tailors in London were “individualistic” Jewish sweatshop workers, despite Jews only making up a third of the workforce. On the turbulent road to 1914 Jewish tailors often stood alongside Gentile workers while on strike for better conditions. The tailors general strike of 1889 – the first
mass strike by Jewish tailors in London – presented a notable degree of unity between not only English and Jewish workers, trade unionists and revolutionaries, but also between East End strikers and the shopkeepers. Not only was the strike supported by the dockers who had inspired it, but joint parades and rallies, vital to strike morale, were also joined by Gentile strikers and socialists. Addressing a mass strike meeting close to the conclusion of the strike, SDF member and union organiser James Macdonald, whose tabled resolution was translated into Yiddish, described how ‘[i]t was recognised now that Jewish tailors were striking a blow at a great grievance, and they would find that “labour” would support them.’ The next year, Jewish shoemakers joined forces with 10,000 English workers in a strike demanding the end of sub-contracting in their industry. Within a few weeks the employers caved in and leaders of Jewish and Gentile unions alike lauded their unity. In spite of post-settlement disagreements, this cooperation demonstrated that Jewish and non-Jewish workers were not inherently separate. Once again, in 1891, 1,700 Jewish workers joined a 10,000 strong stoppage by English boot and shoe workers. In this instance, however, the collaboration ended in disagreement over the extent of the strike demands and accusation of Jewish workers of breaking the strike by the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives. A joint strike by Jewish and Gentile tailors in the East End in 1906 was equally successful, but ended, likewise, in dispute between Jewish workers and the English union leadership. The East End branch of the Amalgamated Society of Tailors (AST) fell out with the national executive. This resulted in the general secretary of the AST telling his Jewish members in the East End that if they ‘are not happy they should leave the AST, it will survive.’

These differences notwithstanding, the greatest display of solidarity between Jewish and Gentile workers occurred during “the second forward march of labour” of 1911-2. Within a year of 1911 and a walkout by seamen and firemen – who, just like match girls, dockers and sweated immigrant tailors, had been considered unorganisable – close to a million workers struck across numerous industries. It
took until May 1912 for 13,000 immigrant tailors to decide to stop work, but when they did lessons of previous years had clearly been learnt. Several joint strike meetings were held in London and as the Jewish tailors emerged victorious a campaign, led to a large extent by the German anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker, rushed to offer relief to the starving families of London dockers, who were still on strike. Members of Jewish tailors’ unions not only collected funds and supplies for the dockers but also took over 300 children into their homes to care for them until the strike was over. The strike and solidarity of 1912 and the amalgamation of the Jewish tailors’ unions into the United Garment Workers Trade Union which followed vigorously discredited the stereotype of the blacklegging Jew.

Several explanations can plausible reconcile these presentations of antisemitism and communal cooperation. Regarding the historical context, the Zeitgeist was on the side of the protesting East Enders. The immigrant tailors and their British colleagues were not the only workers to strike and win in 1889 – a year when 11 million working days were lost to strike action and 80 percent of walk-outs resulted in victories or concessions won by the unions. In a broader economic perspective, the success of Anglo-Jewish solidarity in London also fits into the pattern of economic expansions during 1889-93 and 1910-13 that produced low unemployment levels favourable to unions. Although no explanation in itself, it lends support to the view that mutual solidarity could have sprung from sheer pragmatism. The great waves of protest that swept London in 1889 and 1911 necessitated all-encompassing general unions, the concept at the heart of ‘New Unionism’. Additionally, the very nature of the sweating industry and the prerequisites for organising within it, was a result of technological innovations which thus shaped the new “forward marches of labour”. While antisemitism and alliances of convenience in the class struggle are not mutually exclusive concepts, it is also interesting to note that if, as argued by some scholars, ‘modern racism has been generated through a ‘top-down’ process’, it could be concluded that Jewish and Gentile workers were happy to get along with and support one
another, regardless of the surrounding antisemitic and xenophobic discourse. Here, Beatrice Webb’s observation of Jews and Gentiles working for the same mistress is particularly telling, since it suggests that on a shop floor level everyday prejudice was easily overcome. Finally, it must be remarked that although some examples of antisemitism and solidarity have been discussed here, the London labour movement at this time was diverse enough to encompass almost any combination of concurrent views on Jewish and Gentile relations. Antisemitic slander was also occasionally voiced by Jewish trade union organisers and relations, such as Joseph Finn in 1884, and relations, furthermore, changed overtime – as exemplified by the strike of 1906.

Clearly, although xenophobia, anti-alienism and racism still plagued British society through the interwar period and beyond, the dividing lines which separated Jewish and Gentile workers in society and the labour movement gradually dissolved. Seeing the evidence presented here, it would also seem as if the years of ‘New Unionism’ struggle in the East End significantly influenced the building of links between Jewish and non-Jewish workers. Indeed, the process that transformed London from what Eric Hobsbawn called a ’trade-unionist desert’, divided along ethnic lines, into a city of strikes, union amalgamation and solidarity marches was, in itself, no simple matter. Studying relationships that divided and united workers of different ethnic backgrounds adds an additional dimension to our understanding of this transformation. In a situation of such complexity and breadth it is impossible to cover all facts and interpretations of the relationship of East End immigrant tailors and the English trade unions. Perspectives on gender or popular culture – excluded here for lack of space – would also deepen our knowledge. New evidence and interpretations can always be provided. Hopefully this essay has managed to cast some light on how racial prejudice could hinder cooperation and, more importantly, how it could be overcome. □