Travel And Adventure: No blarney â€¦ museum chronicles Ireland's Jews

by Marilyn Zeitlin

She stood holding a prayer book and reading aloud. She wore an emerald green dress and her hair, shiny auburn, rested on her shoulders and sleeves. From a side view, I could see freckles on her face. She was the quintessential, pretty Irish lass. And she was reading Hebrew from her prayer book. Elsa Humphreys had driven from Belfast to Dublin because "the synagogue in Belfast is too Orthodox," she told me. She preferred a more "progressive" service.

JEWISH MUSEUM - This unobtrusive building with signs in Hebrew and English is the Irish Jewish Museum in Dublin. The Hebrew sign says: 'The Great Synagogue.' CNS Photos by Marilyn Zeitlin.

UNDER THE CANOPY - A wedding exhibit at the Irish Jewish Museum in Dublin depicts a couple under a canopy.

CURATOR - Raphael Siev is the curator of the Irish Jewish Museum in Dublin. Irish Jews have lived in Ireland for centuries. There were about 50 Irish Jews reading and singing in Hebrew - adults and children - led by a three-woman choir. It was only after the service, when people spoke to each other in English, that I knew this was "The Emerald Isle," because their accents, in English, were so Irish!

Irish and Jewish - it seems almost a contradiction in terms in a country that is more than 98 percent Catholic. But Irish Jews have lived in Ireland for centuries.

Not many know that Chaim Herzog, the son of Ireland's chief rabbi, was a past president of the state of Israel. Nor that Jews have long played a part in the politics of Ireland: The first Jewish mayor of Ireland goes back to 1555, in County Cork; in 1899, Sir Otto Yaffe (Yaffe is the Hebrew word for pretty) was lord mayor of Belfast, and Robert Briscoe was lord mayor of Dublin in 1956 and 1961. On one of my trips to Ireland, I interviewed his son, Ben Briscoe, a charismatic member of the Irish Parliament from 1965 to 2002.

And on St. Patrick's Day, as in past years, Irish Jews will be marching in New York City's parade; they're easy to identify with their bright green skullcaps.Jews had come to Ireland after the Sephardic expulsion from Spain and Portugal in the late 1400s. Records indicate that a synagogue existed in Ireland in 1660 (this is the earliest known). The main influx of Jews was a result of Jews fleeing Eastern European anti-Semitism between 1880 and 1910. The Jews who came were workers, merchants, craftspeople and professionals. The immigration to Ireland of Nazi-era survivors was minimal.

When I visited Ireland in the late 1980s, many Irish Jews expressed sorrow that the small Jewish community of some 2,000 would soon dwindle, as the young would seek opportunities abroad. But surprisingly, Ireland's economy has improved dramatically since then, and many global corporations are opening subsidiaries in Ireland. And the executives hired- mainly from the United States - are Jews who are making Ireland their permanent home. So the figure of 2,000 Jews is "about right" as of today, said one member of the Jewish community.

On one trip to Ireland, I met a bus driver wearing a silver Star of David around his neck. I asked if he was Jewish. "No," he answered, "but we wear this because millions (of Jews) are not able to wear it. They died in the Holocaust. And remember," he added, "the real founder of our church was a Jew."

In a pub, one man told me that the Irish have always felt a kinship with Jews - "we are both persecuted people." Walking past a Dublin bed-and-breakfast, I noticed that its name was "Shalom." I stopped inside to ask why. Vera Flynn, the owner, said "Shalom is the Hebrew word for peace. We thought it was rather nice."

On the other hand, a new book "Kristallnacht: Prelude to Disaster" by Martin Gilbert, reportedly tells of Ireland's inaction in helping Jews escape the Nazis, and Irish officials' lack of sympathy for victims who sought refuge.

Some months ago, I revisited the Irish-Jewish community in Dublin. Raphael Siev, curator of the Irish Jewish Museum, acted as my guide. This was not my first meeting with Siev. I had interviewed him in the late 1980s, shortly after the museum was established; he was curator then. Siev manages a group of volunteers in preserving and caring for the displays and memorabilia associated with the Jewish communities of Dublin, Belfast, Cork and Limerick, among others.

Siev's orange-red hair and beard are now heavily sprinkled with gray. He is the same informal scholar I met earlier. He dresses in work clothes and has the same familiar manner of movement and speech. Outside the museum, he greeted passersby, and a woman with a shopping bag, returned his greeting with a "top of the mornin' to you."

The museum, which also houses an old synagogue, is a familiar landmark on the street, though its brick building is unobtrusive except for the Hebrew and English signs in front.

"The area used to have Jewish families" he says, "but they have moved to the suburbs for more room and green grass for the kids to play on." Siev's own family came to Ireland from Lithuania in the 1800s.

As I toured the museum, in Dublin's Portabella section, I noticed the large stained glass window with the Star of David, a relatively new acquisition. There were new showcases exhibiting beautiful prayer shawls and green yarmulkes - the skullcap worn by men in the synagogue, the color green says "proudly Irish." There were silver candlesticks for the Sabbath, the holy scrolls and photos of past Irish chief rabbis.

James Joyce is represented: there are photographs of some of the Jewish characters mentioned in "Ulysses"; the museum brochure says, "Many people visit Dublin to follow in the footsteps of Leopold Bloom. ..." Art and crafts by Jewish artists, and historical data on the Irish Jews are displayed.

The upper floor shows some of the original synagogue founded here. There is a wedding canopy displaying figures of a Jewish bride and groom, and there are scenes of Jewish families in Ireland during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of the valuable religious and cultural items, have been donated by Jews from near and far. As Siev explained, the items and records were getting lost; the museum preserves what it can. Frequent visitors to the museum come from Europe, the United States, Canada and South Africa.

Sadly, Siev points to cracks in walls and ceiling and shows a chimney he fears will soon collapse unless funds are found to make repairs. He sighs. "Our needs, like our community, are small, but we must preserve our heritage."

IF YOU GOThe Irish Jewish Museum and Heritage Centre is at 3/4 Walworth Rd., (off Victoria Street),

South Circular Road, Dublin 8. Call 011-353-1-490-1857 (curator's office) or 011-353-1-453-1797 (museum office). Open on Sunday, 11 a.m-2:30 p.m. through April. May-September, Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday, 11 a.m.-3:30 p.m. No admission charge but contributions accepted. The neighborhood that surrounds the museum is peaceful, with its waterways and swans, quiet residential streets and the friendly Irish residents always pleased to help a confused tourist in need of directions.

Marilyn Zeitlin is a freelance travel writer. Â© Copley News Service

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