

Dublin

Jewish Dublin — real and fictitious — is blooming

by Jack Goldfarb
Special to NJ Jewish News

If Leopold Bloom, hero of James Joyce's classical novel *Ulysses* could see his native Dublin today, he would gasp at the goings-on. O'Connell Street, Dublin's main drag, buzzes with cell-phone chatter, hordes of tourists munch burgers and souvlaki in fast-food eateries, and swarms of bag-laden credit-card shoppers pour from the malls on adjacent Henry Street.

They call it the "Celtic Tiger" — Ireland's roaring economic boom, luring thousands of Euro-workers, immigrants from distant continents and hosts of expatriates back to the Emerald Isle. Though a small number of young Jews have also arrived here to work in professions and high-tech industries, the native Jewish community has suffered a steady decline in numbers in recent years.

Asher Benson, the Irish-Jewish community historian, laments the decline of the 300-year-old Jewish community from its 6,000-member peak in the 1940s to about 1,300 today.

"Some have left for social reasons," says Benson, himself a London-born "blow-in" (immigrant), "but many were activist Zionists. Fact is, there are more Irish-born Jews in Israel today than in Ireland itself."

The first mention of Jews in Irish history appears in the *Annals of Innisfallen*, dated 1079. "Five Jews came over the sea with gifts" seeking permission to enter the country. But an Irish king named Tairdelbach turned them away. Apparently the Jews impressed him because shortly afterward, the *Annals* say, the king set off on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

In the mid-17th century, when Oliver Cromwell's reforms were encouraging Jews to return to England after a 450-year absence, a serious proposal was made to establish Ireland as a national homeland for the Jews.

James Harrington, a prominent scholar and gentleman-in-waiting to King Charles I, suggested solving the Irish and Jewish "problems" by leasing Ireland to the Jews. Let them have a land, he said, where they could make their own laws and practice their own rituals. They "could combine their skills as merchants and ancient skills as farmers." In his book *Commonwealth of Oceana* Harrington detailed his plan to attract Jews from all over the world.

Although Harrington's "homeland" idea was never accepted, Jews began arriving in Ireland, then under English rule, and established their first synagogue in Dublin in 1661. Mostly ex-Marranos from Holland, they were often referred to by the locals as "foreign Protestants."

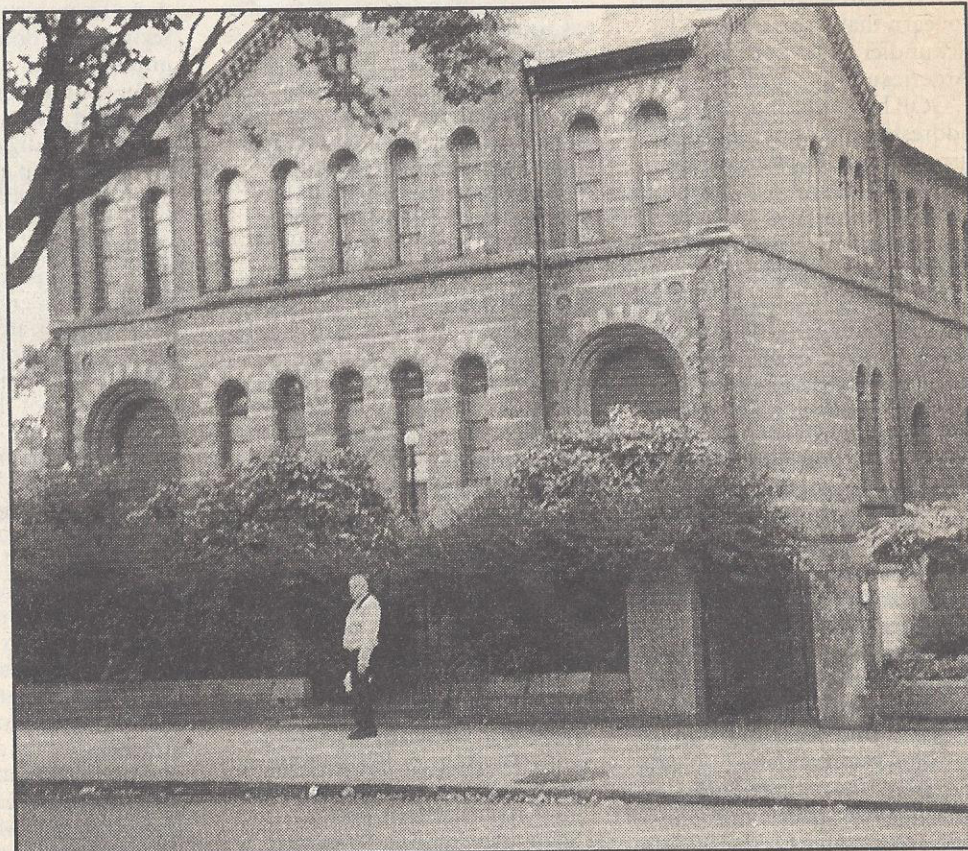
A more recent immigration between the years of 1880 and 1910 brought several thousands of Jews from Russia and the Baltic states fleeing pogroms in Eastern Europe.

Today's dwindling number of Irish Jews staunchly maintain their communal institutions. Several synagogues flourish in Dublin, although the century-old landmark temple on Adelaide Road recently closed. In the Stratford Day School, Jewish children are now a minority, and the Edmonstown Golf Club, once a bastion of Jewish sportsmen, today shares its membership with many non-Jews. In a nod to ecumenism, the club closes on Christmas as well as Yom Kippur, but still doesn't offer pork or shellfish on its restaurant menu.

The Irish Jewish Museum, located in the once heavily Jewish south Dublin district of Portobello, is the treasure house of Jewish history in Ireland. Curator Rafael Siev and historian Asher Benson have rescued from oblivion hundreds of artifacts, memorabilia and records of the slowly shrinking community.

Housed in a reverently preserved old synagogue on Walworth Road, the museum plans to expand its facilities with digitized archives and a video library.

Poking through a batch of stored material in a back

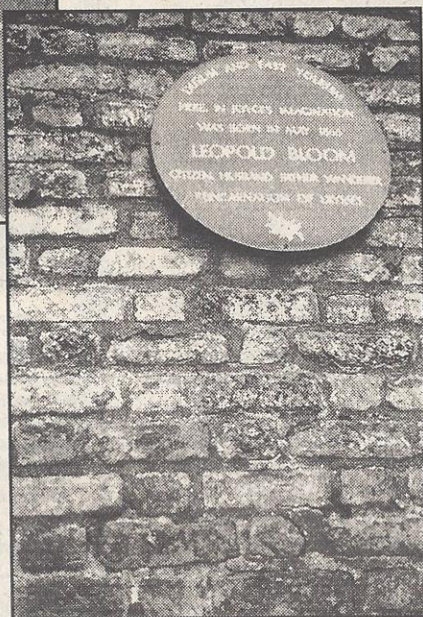


The century-old landmark temple, now closed, on Adelaide Road

Photos by Jack Goldfarb



A statue of James Joyce (1882-1941), Ireland's greatest writer



A plaque on the house where Leopold Bloom was "born"

corridor of the museum, I came across a precious sepia photograph of the 197 delegates to the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in August 1897. Theodor Herzl's imposing figure and solemn expression, caught by the camera, reflect the hope and yearning of those who gathered for that historic event which ultimately led to the establishment of the state of Israel.

Today's staunchest supporters of Israel in Ireland are the 544 members of the Ireland-Israel Friendship League. Headed by Brian Quinn, former editor of a leading

Dublin daily, the activist group of eminent clergy, dignitaries and educators — 50 percent of whom are Jewish — work to promote closer ties with the Jewish state through culture exchanges, lobbying and ecumenical programs. In the past, this was not an easy task; Ireland, an important exporter of meat and produce to Arab countries, tended to adhere to the Arab League boycott. The Irish Republic was also influenced by the Vatican's position on Jerusalem. But when papal relations with Israel began to improve several years ago, Ireland officially exchanged ambassadors with Israel.

Joyce (1882-1941), Ireland's greatest modern author, created the country's most famous Jew, Leopold Bloom, the central figure in his seminal novel *Ulysses*. The monumental work has been called an "epic of two races — the Irish and the Israelite." According to Joyce's biographer, Richard Ellmann, the author's favorite topic of conversation was the similarity of Irish and Jewish character and destiny.

Joyce's portrayal of Bloom, nevertheless, provoked its share of criticism when *Ulysses* was first published 80 years ago. To one Harvard student who wrote to object to his characterization, Joyce responded that he was in complete sympathy with Jews.

He noted he had helped 16 Jews escape from the Nazis. He admired their strong family ties and praised Jews for a "heroic sacrifice on their part when they refused to accept the Christian revelation." It is said Joyce spoke some Hebrew and could even sing a few lines of "Hatikva."

Today Leopold Bloom remains as "real" as he is legendary and has even merited a plaque on the house where he was born "in Joyce's imagination" at 52 Lower

Clanbrassil St.

Imbedded in pavement all across Dublin are 14 bronze tablets immortalizing the sites of Bloom's encounters with the motley characters of *Ulysses* on that singular day of the book's actions a century ago.

In fact, on that day, June 16, every year in Dublin as in many other cities around the world, thousands of *Ulysses* aficionados celebrate "Bloomsday" by dressing up in Edwardian costumes and staging elaborate pageants and Joycean readings. The festivities bring to life again Leopold Bloom, the enduring, introspective Irish Jew, a Semitic *Ulysses* often regarded as a symbol of the modern everyman.

Jack Goldfarb lives in New York City.



Joan Finkel, Dublin Jewish community leader, at the Edmonstown Golf Club