

Scotland's Jews: Community and Political Challenges

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- The Jewish community in Scotland numbered eighteen thousand in the 1950s but has now shrunk to around ten thousand, largely through emigration. The community is overwhelmingly concentrated in the Greater Glasgow area with around a thousand Jews in Edinburgh and smaller numbers scattered around the country.
- When the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999, with responsibility for almost all home affairs, the Jewish community set up the [Scottish Council of Jewish Communities](#) (SCoJeC) as a democratic representative body to speak on its behalf. SCoJeC monitors legislation and informs Parliament and civic and religious bodies on Jewish issues and attitudes.
- SCoJeC has been very successful in influencing Scottish government policy in areas such as family law, looted Holocaust art, the census, and health and safety issues. It also has responsibility for outreach work to scattered Jews in outlying areas, ensuring their access to Jewish facilities in the larger centers as well as arranging activities in remote centers in the Highlands.
- There has been historically little antisemitism in Scotland, and in particular good relations with the churches. Recently there has been a significant increase, much of it associated with events in the Middle East. Specifically, the Scottish trade union movement has pursued a policy of boycotting Israel despite a dialogue with the Jewish community aimed at understanding both sides of the conflict.

Jewish History in Scotland

Jews have been living in Scotland since the end of the eighteenth century. The first community was founded in Edinburgh in 1816.¹ Despite the arrival of German Jewish textile traders in Glasgow and Dundee in the mid-nineteenth century, the modern community in

¹ In recent years a considerable bibliography has developed on the Jews in Scotland. See, e.g.: Kenneth Collins, ed., *Aspects of Scottish Jewry* (Glasgow: Glasgow Jewish Representative Council, 1987); Kenneth Collins, *Second City Jewry: The Jews of Glasgow in the Age of Expansion 1790-1919* (Glasgow: Scottish Jewish Archives Committee, 1990); Kenneth Collins, *Be Well! Jewish Immigrant Health and Welfare in Glasgow 1860-1914* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2001); Kenneth Collins with Ephraim Borowski and Leah Granat, *Scotland's Jews: A Guide to the History and Community of the Jews in Scotland* (Glasgow: Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, 2008); Nathan Abrams, *Caledonian Jews: A Study of Seven Small Communities in Scotland* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009).

Scotland mainly derives from the more substantial East European immigration from 1891 to 1914.

As Scottish shipping companies became active transporting Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe to North America in the 1890s, tens of thousands of Jews passed through Scotland. Some settled in Dundee and Edinburgh, but most were attracted to Glasgow whose burgeoning population and industries had earned it the title of "Second City" of the British Empire.

By 1914 there were about ten thousand Jews in Glasgow and about 1,500 in Edinburgh, with smaller communities in Dundee and Aberdeen, as well as scattered groups throughout Scotland. The Glasgow community created a lively and impressive infrastructure of welfare, cultural, educational, and Zionist organisations, which was duplicated, on a smaller scale, in the other Jewish communities.

Despite the arrival of thousands of Jewish refugees in the 1930s and after the war, numbers peaked at around eighteen thousand in the 1950s. Since then numbers have decreased as a result of intermarriage as well as emigration to England and Israel.

Jews in Scotland and the 2001 Census

The Scottish census in 2001 included questions on religion for the first time. The Scottish census was more sophisticated than in England and Wales as it asked not only about respondents' current religion, but also their religion of upbringing. However, the questions uniquely were voluntary, and 5.5% of the total population ignored them while a further 27.6% responded that they had no religion.² Hence, the totals for all religious groups were considered to be undercounts.

Moreover, the Scottish question, unlike the English, asked what faith respondents "belong to." Thus, Jews who regard themselves as ethnically but not religiously Jewish, and certainly not as "belonging" in terms of membership or participation in communal activities, were excluded from this count, despite making calls on, for example, communal cultural or welfare facilities.

The number who identified in the census as currently "belonging to the Jewish religion" was 6,448 (48% male and 52% female). They accounted for 0.13% of the total population of Scotland and 7% of the non-Christian religious population compared to the 45% who were Muslim. On the other hand, 7,446 people said they were brought up as Jewish, and the total number who identified as either Jewish or Jewish by upbringing was 8,365.

However, this figure is certainly an underestimate. If Jews ignored the voluntary religion questions to the same extent as in London or Leeds (13%),³ then the Jewish population would be around 9,450. Estimating those who might regard themselves as ethnically rather than religiously Jewish, extrapolating from the Canadian census, which permitted people to identify themselves separately in both ways, would add a further 27.6%, bringing the Scottish total up to around 11,700. On the premise that Jews responded "no religion" in

² *Analysis of Religion in the 2001 Census: Summary Report 2005* (Scottish Executive), Theme Tables on Current Religion (T25) and Religion of Upbringing (T26) (Edinburgh: General Register Office for Scotland, 2003).

³ D. Graham, M. Schmool, and S. Waterman, *Jews in Britain: A Snapshot from the 2001 Census* (London: Jewish Policy Research, 2007).

proportion to the wider Scottish population (33%), the Jewish Policy Research Institute arrived at a total of around 12,720.⁴

Overwhelmingly Scottish Jews described themselves as white (97%). About 70% were born in Scotland, and 16% in England. Of those born elsewhere 3% each were from the United States and the Middle East. So Scottish Jews are no longer an immigrant community, and indeed the census of England and Wales recorded 2,782 Jews by religion who were born in Scotland.

Jews in Scotland are concentrated in a few urban areas. About half live in the Glasgow suburb of East Renfrewshire where they made up 3.5% of the population. A further 1,119 Jews are in Glasgow City (17% of the Scottish total), and 790 in the City of Edinburgh (12%).

More than 20% of married Jews had non-Jewish partners, the highest endogamy rate for any non-Christian religious group. However, of the 234 opposite sex cohabiting couples where at least one partner was Jewish, fewer than one in ten (8%) were between two Jews, and for 32% the other partner was the Church of Scotland.

The Jewish community in Scotland is more aged than wider Scottish society, and some 2.5% live in a medical or care establishment - the highest proportion of all religious groups in Scotland. Thirty percent of Jews were of pensionable age, compared to 19% of the general population. The difference is even more marked for those aged seventy-five and over, as 16% for Jews compared to 7% nationally, and the comparable figure of 12% in England confirms that younger Jews tend to emigrate.

In line with historical Jewish employment patterns, 27% of those working were self-employed, compared to a national proportion of 11%. Jews had higher educational qualifications, and more than twice the proportion of Jews were in higher managerial and professional occupations than in the wider community.

Jewish Identity

The expert on English literature David Daiches once commented, in his stirring evocation of an Edinburgh Jewish childhood, that he never considered that there was any dichotomy between the Jewish and Scottish worlds, and indeed that his family inhabited both worlds simultaneously.⁵ For example, Scotland's Jews have been proud to adopt some Scottish imagery as their own: the Glasgow Jewish Lads' and Girls' Brigade has long been proud to have the world's only Jewish bagpipe band, and Scottish Jews host traditional Burns Suppers complete with (kosher) haggis.⁶

Although the Jewish presence in Scotland has never been great in numerical terms, always less than half of one percent, the Jewish contribution to the professional and cultural life of Scotland has been widely admired and appreciated. Jews and Scots have shared much in their attitudes to life: a strong belief in education, a reverence for the Hebrew Bible, and the struggle to maintain distinctiveness in a sometimes unfriendly world.

⁴ *Jewish Policy Review News*, Spring 2003.

⁵ Collins with Borowski and Granat, *Scotland's Jews*, 9.

⁶ See Kenneth Collins, "Maintaining a Jewish Identity in Scotland," in John Beech, Owen Hand, Mark A. Mulhern, and Jeremy Weston, eds., *Scottish Life and Society: A Compendium of Scottish Ethnology*, Vol. 9, *The Individual and Community Life* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2005), 486-496.

The Scottish approach in the assimilation of its minorities has been described as analogous to the tartan in which alternating bands of color combine to form an intersecting pattern in which each color remains individually visible while contributing to the overall design.⁷ It is not just that there are many threads in the tartan, but that the weave of the tartan is what holds it together. A cloth of parallel threads is no cloth, and readily falls apart. It is the warp and the weft, divergence, difference, and even disagreement that hold society together.

Scottish Devolution

Following the 1997 UK general election, the UK Parliament passed the Scotland Act, which famously began, "There shall be a Scottish Parliament." Under the devolution settlement, matters such as education, health, law and policing, agriculture, sport and the arts, economic development, the environment, heritage, tourism, social work, and statistics are the responsibility of the Scottish government - until 2007 known as the Scottish Executive - and legislated on by the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh.⁸

Matters reserved to the Westminster Parliament include the constitution, foreign policy, defense and national security, taxation, trade and industry, and employment, as well as equal opportunities, immigration, nationality, and fertility and transplantation. The complex relationship between the two jurisdictions is still the subject of ongoing debate.

The Scottish government is headed by a first minister, and, following a reorganization by the current minority Scottish National Party (SNP) administration, has ministers - referred to as "cabinet secretaries" - responsible for Health and Wellbeing, Housing and Communities, Finance and Sustainable Growth, Education and Lifelong Learning, Justice, Rural Affairs and the Environment, and Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution. The post of secretary of state for Scotland, held by a Scottish member of the Westminster Parliament, remains in the UK cabinet, and is currently held by Jim Murphy, whose constituency of East Renfrewshire is home to the majority of Scotland's Jews.

Devolution and Scotland's Jews

To meet the needs of Scotland's Jews in dealing with the new political reality following devolution, the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) was established in 1999.⁹ It developed from the Scottish Jewish Standing Committee, which had been formed more than a decade earlier to maintain contacts between the various Jewish communities across the country, and has delegates from all the formal Jewish communities in Scotland and the informal network of Jews in the Highlands and Islands, as well as Jewish students at the dozen or so Scottish universities. The Edinburgh community sends representatives of both the Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation and the recently formed Liberal community, Sukkat Shalom. The much smaller communities in Aberdeen and Dundee also participate in SCoJeC policy and activities.

⁷ Ephraim Borowski has more fully elaborated this theme in his Baillie Lecture at New College, Edinburgh; see www.scojec.org/misc/2006/06xi28_baillie/baillie.html.

⁸ See, e.g., Philip Schlesinger, David Miller, and William Dinan, *Open Scotland? Journalists, Spin Doctors and Lobbyists* (Edinburgh: Polygon at Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

⁹ See Collins with Borowski and Granat, *Scotland's Jews*. SCoJeC maintains an extensive website that also has archives of its informative newsletter at <http://www.scojec.org/>.

The Glasgow Jewish Representative Council was founded in 1914 and is the oldest body of its kind in Britain with a long history of involvement in civic engagement and interfaith activity, itself representing more than forty-five affiliated organizations. Although it represents over two-thirds of Scotland's Jews, it has had a narrower remit since devolution and now deals mainly with local issues in Glasgow and East Renfrewshire organisations.

SCoJeC also includes co-opted experts, and involves relevant communal organizations in forming policy. Its Executive Management Board is supported by its director, Ephraim Borowski, who works on a voluntary basis, and a public affairs officer, Leah Granat. Borowski was awarded the MBE (Member of the British Empire) for services on behalf of the Scottish Jewish community in 2008. SCoJeC has been successful in obtaining grants from the Scottish government and other bodies for outreach to scattered Jews, especially in rural areas, and these have supported the appointment of short-term community workers. SCoJeC is affiliated to but independent of the Board of Deputies, the representative organization of British Jewry, and often has different priorities in setting policy.

Political Issues

During the ten years since the establishment of the Parliament in Edinburgh, there have been a number of issues of key importance to the Jewish community in Scotland. For example, although currently there is no shechitah (Jewish ritual slaughter) in Scotland, SCoJeC has made regular successful submissions in defense of shechitah since a ban in Scotland could set a precedent for elsewhere. SCoJeC has also ensured that the Scottish government's input into UK legislation on looted Holocaust art took a more robust approach than originally envisaged. It is currently pressing for the acceptance of MRI scans in place of surgical postmortems, which would allow a noninvasive method of identifying cause of death where uncertainty exists and which would be in keeping with halachic requirements. SCoJeC is also engaged with the government on matters relating to security, discrimination, and equal opportunities.

The council has been particularly active in health and civic rights issues, but its most important and most successful intervention has been the introduction of legislation in the Family Law (Scotland) Act to assist Jews who require both a civil divorce and a religious *get*. The legislative process, from first green paper to draft proposals to final enactment took many years of planning, contacts, letters to all MSPs, and a visit by the chief rabbi to ensure that cabinet members and senior members of the opposition parties all understood the significance of this measure for the Jewish community in Scotland.

During much of this time there were almost daily contacts with civil servants and the parliamentary committees. It was gratifying that the *get* clause was passed by an overwhelming majority in November 2005, but even then SCoJeC's involvement continued, since further complications in drafting the necessary Statutory Instruments delayed the implementation of the new procedures until February 2007.

SCoJeC has also monitored the Parliamentary Petitions process, which allows members of the public to bring any topic to the attention of Scottish lawmakers. Many positive issues are brought up in this way, but the procedure has also been used by Palestinian supporters to table vexatious petitions, and the council has drawn the attention of MSPs to information from the local police who associated antisemitic graffiti near the Parliament with the discussion of one such petition.

Within the community, the council is also the umbrella organization dealing with the practicalities of child protection, registration of marriages and deaths, and immigration

issues on behalf of communal organizations, and arranges periodic briefings on new legislation affecting the community.

Its reputation for involvement in the widest spectrum of Scottish issues has ensured widespread support for Jewish concerns when and wherever these have been raised.

At the 2007 General Meeting of SCoJeC, George Reid, the former presiding officer of the Scottish Parliament said, "I want to thank the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities for grasping the outstretched hand of the Parliament, and for getting involved.... You bring common sense and decency to everything you do. And you do engage - how you engage!"

Interfaith Relations

All interfaith activity serves a positive purpose in breaking down barriers and forming friendships. However, true dialogue requires the sharing and probing of disagreements, and not merely superficial ones, and interfaith enterprise is fraught with difficulty because each, deep down, believes that the other is fundamentally wrong.

In the absence of a Scottish parliament from 1707 to 1999, the annual General Assembly of the Church of Scotland functioned as a focus of national sentiment. Mission was at the heart of the earliest relationship between Scots and Jews.¹⁰ Although unsuccessful, this created a belief in the Jewish community that Scottish Christians denigrated Judaism itself and were mounting an attack on the very core of Jewish identity - the glue that had held together a people scattered through generations of Diaspora. However, despite this, the Jewish community has generally enjoyed good relations with the mainstream churches since the main period of immigration at the end of the nineteenth century.

Relations between the Jewish community and the Church of Scotland deepened after an approach to the then chief rabbi, Lord Jakobovits, in 1981, for the establishment of a dialogue group. This indicated that mission was no longer the Church's preferred mode of communication. This small group enabled all participants to understand the concerns of the others, and arranged periodic larger seminars. It later expanded to include other Christian denominations, and Jews and Christians presented papers on, for example, divine grace, land and faith, and understanding early Christianity in the context of contemporary Judaism. In May 1984, Henry Tankel became the first Jew to address the General Assembly when he reported on the dialogue group. Although this group no longer exists, the Church maintains good relations with SCoJeC through regular meetings with its Church and Society Council.

SCoJeC facilitated a genuinely interfaith Holy Land pilgrimage in 2008. With financial backing from the Scottish government and the support of the Church of Scotland and BEMIS (the Scottish ethnic-minority umbrella body), thirty-two representatives of twelve denominations of seven different faiths spent a week together to foster better understanding of each other's faiths and to counter concern that Middle East tensions may sometimes impede the development of good community relations in Scotland.

The program was drawn up with the help of Eliyahu MacLean and Sheikh Aziz Bukhari of the Jerusalem Peacemakers, an informal interfaith network of Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders committed to dialogue and reconciliation. The pilgrimage included a tour of the Old City of Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, the Bahai Shrine in Haifa, meetings at the Knesset and in Ramallah, prayers at the Great Synagogue and Al-Aqsa Mosque, and an interfaith service at St. Andrew's Kirk. The pilgrims did not shirk the difficult issues, for example,

¹⁰ Kenneth Collins, "Jews and the Medical Missions," in Collins, *Be Well!* 154-172.

meeting with both Israelis and Palestinians in Hebron to learn about the realities on the ground.

The Scottish presence in the Holy Land began in a usually futile attempt to convert the Jews. Recently, however, the Church of Scotland has redeveloped its facilities in Tiberias into the upmarket Scots' Hotel, and when a burial ground was found at the site, the Church took exceptional measures to avoid the possibility of desecrating what might have been a Jewish cemetery of the Byzantine era. Yet, nevertheless, the Church has also considered the possibility of boycott and divestment.

After consulting widely, including with members of the Jewish community, the General Assembly in May 2006 committed the Church to continuing to encourage pilgrimage to Israel and to investing in its facilities in Tiberias,¹¹ and more recently it has sold some properties in Israel to fund further expansion of the hotel complex.¹² Other "Deliverances" (resolutions) have called on [Hamas](#) to recognize Israel's right to exist, advocated investment in the West Bank while calling for the labeling of West Bank settlement produce, and encouraged direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians for the establishment of two viable states.

The Jewish community also has a cordial relationship with the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, which was cemented by a tree-planting ceremony at the official residence of Cardinal O'Brien to mark the fortieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council's declaration on good relations with other faiths. More generally, the community was instrumental in the establishment of the Scottish Inter-Faith Council and remains involved in its activities, as well as participating in regular meetings of Scottish faith leaders.

Jews have no problem in understanding that Scotland is undoubtedly predominantly Christian in its history and perhaps its origin, and even today in its culture. Still, that does not oblige Jews to see it through Christian eyes. The Jewish community insists on the right to speak for itself and has to remain vigilant against those, however well-meaning, who misunderstand or misrepresent Judaism or Jewish material, particularly in the burgeoning literature of "diversity manuals."

Trades Unions

The Jewish community has maintained links with the Scottish trade union movement for about twenty years. These began with a joint day seminar held about twenty years ago by the Glasgow Jewish Representative Council and the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), and there was strong Jewish-community representation at the civic service marking the centenary of the STUC in 1997.

Since its formation SCoJeC has met regularly with the STUC to discuss equality issues related to Jewish rights at work and antisemitism. Meetings have been conducted in a positive atmosphere; for example, the STUC has provided kosher refreshments at meetings in its premises. Discussion of Israel was initially limited but more recently has come to dominate the agenda. SCoJeC has informed the STUC of concerns about the conflation of Jews, Israelis, and the state of Israel, which has led to physical and verbal attacks on Scottish Jews and Jewish organizations by people purporting to be protesting Israeli actions.

¹¹ Assembly Update Transcript 4, 16/5/06. Minutes of Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 23/5/2006.

¹² http://stream1.churchofscotland.org.uk/generalassembly/pdf/DA_Fri_pm_Review.pdf

However, following the visit of a large delegation to Israel and the Palestinian territories, the STUC announced in April 2009 that it supported a boycott and divestment from Israeli companies and called for sanctions against Israel. STUC general secretary Grahame Smith said the aim was to "campaign for economic, political, and social pressure to be brought upon the Israeli Government, and world powers, to reach a peaceful and just two state solution for Palestine and Israel."¹³

The report of the STUC delegation itself showed considerable bias in the way that information was presented and their decisions were made. For example, the STUC visit to Sderot elicited only a comment that better bomb proofing ought to be provided rather than concern about the bombs arriving from the other side of the border, and the video the delegation screened at the STUC Congress showed scorched tarmac as the only effect of the bombardment. In addition, the STUC argument for boycotting Israeli academics is based on the view that academics, like other Israeli citizens, have been militarized through military service.

In fact, subsequent reports indicated that the STUC had already decided on a boycott and divestment policy and their visit was intended to confirm the decision. Indeed, STUC assistant general secretary Mary Senior noted that "It was important to have...the consultation and the delegation. That helped to bring all of our affiliates on board," and "if the vote had been held two years earlier, it might not have passed."¹⁴ She also commented on the meetings between the STUC and SCoJeC: "We must never underestimate the Zionist lobby. And we must be prepared to stand up to their accusations of antisemitism.... This dialogue has been difficult given their accusations of the conflation of Israel and Judaism. I am clear that it is Zionists that are guilty of conflation, in their blinkered antisemitic accusations towards us."

Antisemitism in Scotland

As measured by recorded antisemitic incidents the level of hostility faced by Scotland's Jews is appreciably low. In 2008, only 10 out of 541 antisemitic incidents recorded in the UK (1.8%) occurred in Scotland.¹⁵ However, in January 2009 during Operation Cast Lead in [Gaza](#), there were 16 recorded incidents in Scotland out of 252 for the whole of the UK (6.3%), and the figure for the whole of 2009 increased to 30. Events in the Middle East, often accompanied by popular conflation of Israelis and Jews, have a habit of leading to outbreaks of antisemitic activity. These include antisemitic daubing at synagogues and cemeteries as well as threats and verbal abuse.

Other forms of antisemitic behavior are less common, and the profile of the hard Right in Scotland has been negligible. Recently, though, the ultra-Right British National Party has announced that it will contest the 2010 general election in East Renfrewshire, the only Scottish seat with a significant Jewish presence. The Community Security Trust¹⁶ works

¹³ Report of the STUC Delegation to Palestine and Israel, 28 February - 7 March 2009, see www.stuc.org.uk/news/636/scottish-trade-unions-call-for-boycott-of-israel and <http://www.stuc.org.uk/files/Palestine/Delegation%20Report%202009.pdf>.

¹⁴ Mary Senior, speaking at ISM France conference, 30 June 2009, reported at www.scottishpsc.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2953:it-is-not-the-stuc-and-those-that-support-bds-that-are-the-racists&catid=523:news&Itemid=200466.

¹⁵ Annual Report of Community Security Trust, London, February 2010; see www.thecst.org.uk/docs/CST-incidents-report-09-for-web.pdf.

¹⁶ A British Jewish organisation that works to ensure the security of the British Jewish community.

closely with SCoJeC to monitor extremist activities, and advises the local Jewish community on security.

In recent years much of the focus of antisemitic behavior as perceived by Jews in Scotland has been associated with support for the Palestinians, and with certain comments that have appeared on online newspaper pages. SCoJeC has successfully brought this to the attention to the authorities; a prosecution has been initiated and the newspapers concerned now moderate their discussion forums more effectively. The Jewish community accepts that many people hold critical views of Israel that most of the community does not share, but when fair criticism shades into extreme incitement it is expected that firm action will be taken.

In line with the Macpherson Report on the racist murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence in London, the accepted definition of racism is whatever is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person. Unfortunately, many on the Left who are most sensitive to identifying racism against others are swift to dismiss Jewish sensitivities as mere Zionist propaganda. The Jewish community in Scotland has repeatedly had to point out that applying different standards to Jews is itself a form of antisemitism.

Conclusion

Jews and Scots have both gained from their encounters of the past two centuries. There remains a tolerance and respect based on shared traditions, and the years have brought each a better understanding of the sensitivities of the other. The key issue today for Jews in Scotland is the maintenance of Jewish identity in an open society where, until recently, antisemitism has hardly featured. With few younger Jewish activists around, the problems of providing a Jewish environment for the Scottish Jews who remain will become acute. Still, the Jewish line has been remarkably persistent, and Jews in Scotland have good cause to be proud of the twin strands of their identity - once described as "the mosaic in the tartan."

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