

*The Strange Case of
Israel Lipski*

A Story of London's East End in 1887

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INTRODUCTION

THE OLD MAN with mutton-chop whiskers whose job it was to meticulously log the hourly readings in a stiff-backed journal marked "Greenwich Meteorological Bureau" almost had a heart attack. Rubbing his eyes in disbelief, he stared at the precision built Negretti & Rossi thermometer as if it had gone truly mad. Suddenly, in the past hour, the mercury had risen to a remarkable 139 degrees. Of course the thermometer had been basking outside in the ferocious sun - but 139? This was England, after all. Not India.

Jubilee Summer, the summer of 1887, was hot and dry. A few rainy mornings in early June had given way to cloudless skies, scorching days - the thermometer had gone crazy on the 14th of the month - and a terrible drought. But the cracks which erupted in the water-starved soil was the farmers' problem. In the City the brilliant sunshine, the most ever recorded for a single month in the island's history, was looked upon as a celestial sign, a further indication, if one was needed, that God looked down with favour on the bountiful half century presided over by Her Majesty, Queen Victoria.

And a glorious fifty years it had been. Not only was Victoria the mistress of both land and sea throughout a good part of the world, but, from the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1856, England had begun an unrivalled epoch of peace and prosperity. As the Council of the Society of Arts had said on awarding her the Albert Medal, "In no similar period during the world's history has there been any such progress in the practical arts and science which have had so beneficial an effect on the material comfort and happiness of the human race."

When she had come to the throne, the first London railway was still unfinished, the telegraph had been a crude and doubtful experiment, no vessel had yet steamed across the Atlantic, the powers of electricity were barely known, the first Daguerreotype portrait had yet to have been taken, and people were just beginning to light cigarettes with a match. Yet, by the time of her Golden Jubilee, the wealthier homes in London had been electrified, several telephone companies were competing to send voices instantaneously from one office to another across town, the petrol engine was just moments from factory production, 'Type Writers' were perched heavily on stenographers' desks, and the hand-held camera using light sensitive film was being offered up as the device which would change the way we viewed the world.

A glimpse of this economic miracle can be captured in a rather amazing statistic: for the year 1887, of the top ten world ports, measured by gross tonnage received, Britain had four. London was number one, Liverpool came third, right behind New York City, Cardiff was sixth and seventh was Tyne. In that year over 361 million tons of raw materials such as cotton fibre, metal ore, raw wood and hides were heaped onto British docks to be brought by goliath steam engines north, toward the towering smoke stacks and brick towns blackened with soot. There in the hungry factories of Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield and Leeds, the raw stuff from African mines and American plantations was churned into the goods that made Britain the envy of the world. Reconstituted by the manufacturing processes which England had conceived in the century before, the matter which had so recently arrived was now packed neatly into crates, sent back to the ports and shipped again to Europe, Asia, the Americas - wherever the crow could fly or the eagle soar - 221 million tons of machinery, hardware, books, cloth

and pottery, bound for the boutiques of Paris or the last haberdashery at the edge of the world.

As the seat of Empire, London of 1887 was the most populous city on earth. When Victoria had started her reign fifty years before it had little over one and a quarter million inhabitants. By the time of the Jubilee the population had nearly tripled to four and a quarter million. In fifty years the city had been transformed from an isolated capital of an island stronghold to a cosmopolitan metropolis. One by one the old gabled shops had fallen along with the quaint inns and galleries, court-yards which had defined life in Elizabethan days, to be replaced by the grander, more pretentious edifices of imperial commerce. Old ecclesiastic landmarks, many designed by the likes of Wren, had been swept away to make room for imposing structures built of limestone and plate-glass.

Great new avenues opened up that year, like Charing Cross Road which linked Trafalgar Square to Oxford Street. Wide thoroughfares had been constructed to accommodate the ever increasing traffic and to give the city a more European feel - the numerous horse drawn tram lines, public carriages and omnibuses layering the new boulevards with steady deposits of manure which lent the Victorian city its distinctive redolence. London, however, proudly laid claim to the brilliant solution for getting its new army of bureaucrats from the rapidly expanding suburbs into the centre without contributing to the already monumental piles of horse droppings by constructing the world's first underground railway.

It was a time of dynamic energy and change. The defeat of Liberals in 1886 had opened the door to rampant economic buccaneering. The temperance movement, which had set their hopes on one more victory for Gladstone's moral

crusaders, suffered a great setback with the resurgence of the Tories. Beholden to the breweries for providing them with their enormous campaign chest, Salisbury and company unleashed their prime benefactors who began knocking down what remained of old London to build a new kind of drinking establishment. Rich with polished mahogany and logos ornately etched in smoky glass, these new pubs were at the forefront of a massive speculation in property which, more than the Dickensian reform movement, was responsible for the tearing down of the worst of London's slums.

In every conceivable way, London was getting wired. Dozens of tiny, competing electrical companies were frantically stringing lines from noisy generators placed, willy-nilly, in the most unlikely parts of town, to those offices and homes that saw themselves as the vanguard of a new age, the first to suffer the harsh glare of the light bulb. Side by side, telephone lines were being draped, often dangerously close to the generator wires, causing massive distortion in the precocious phone transformers. ('If you have trouble hearing, try jiggling the receiver,' read one company's instructions to the uninitiated subscriber.)

The age of consumerism had begun. New product ideas hit the papers with each edition: everything from baby bottles with built in thermometers to sugar substitutes - like saccharine to help the buxom lady trim her pounds. Suddenly a new career had sprung up - the sales consultant - and London found itself with hardly a square foot of brick wall bereft of advertising slogans which, in contemporary serial fashion, repeated their phrases over and over again, ad nauseam.

But even though the coffers of the rich were stuffed to overflowing, all was not sweetness and light. Impressive as Britain's mercantile figures looked, trade had actually

contracted from the proceeding year which itself had been a year of recession. “Perhaps no one cause in particular can be assigned for the continued depression of British commerce,” wrote a contemporary economist, “but the falling off is so great that there must be some cause for it. The amount is now becoming very serious and it is affecting all classes of the community...”

Some more than others, he might have said. Another financial correspondent wrote: “The depression in our agricultural industry is causing great distress among the labouring community who, finding themselves unable to subsist in the country, are crowding into towns and in consequence, the complaints and absence of employment have been loud and bitter.”

The boom-bust cycle of capitalist economies had yet to be thoroughly analysed for economics was still a gentleman’s art. In fact, by 1887 Marx had only just been translated into English and John Maynard Keynes was trying on his first pair of trousers. But the realities of an unfettered marketplace based on an increasingly competitive trade with a newly industrialized Europe didn’t need much probing to see what was staring them baldly in the face.

Like all recessions it had hit the farmlands first. Thousands of agricultural labourers were leaving the countryside every year in search of work. Most of them took the opportunity of subsidised emigration programs, enduring the agonised weeks of steerage in order to settle in the far corners of the dominion: Australia, New Zealand and British North America. In 1887, some two hundred and fifty thousand British workers left for a chance to remake their lives in the “classless” societies of the new worlds. In the same year over eighty thousand former emigrants came home again, disgruntled with the hardships of colonial life or having

given in to the nostalgic reminiscence of England's "green and verdant shores."

For those farm labourers who put down their spade and hoe and remained in Britain, the vast majority - over 40,000 a year - made their way to London where they found themselves competing for accommodation and jobs with the other immigrant force which, for the last decade, had surged in ever swelling waves onto the quays of Britain's great harbours. This "foreign element" - mostly Eastern European Jews who had been impoverished by Czarist dictates limiting their occupations and rights of abode - had been swept up in the great economic tide to be deposited, like flotsam, in places as diverse as Cape Town, Buenos Aires and New York. Some tens of thousands ended up climbing, stiffly, from the holds of cross-channel ships, into water taxis that left them hungry and homeless on the East End Docks of London.

The East End was quite a different London than the one illuminated brightly for the Jubilee. Bleak and dour, to the outsider at least, it was considered by the professional and artistic elites - who never stepped foot beyond Aldgate if they could help it - to be nothing short of a "human dustbin overflowing with the dregs of society." A series of dull, squalid narrow streets and alleys branching off the main business arteries of Whitechapel and Commercial Roads and running south to the docklands of Wapping, it was looked upon with a mixture of fascination, fear and loathing by the middle classes whose visions of the area were influenced by the lurid and somewhat grotesque journalistic sketches of Mayhew and the mawkish paintings by Gustave Dore.

In reality, the East End was a vital economic appendage of the other London and just as much a product, participator and shaper of the times. Certainly one of the most densely populated areas in Europe, these streets were anything but

the great receptacle of rogues, knaves, wastrels and tramps that the received wisdom of the “better classes” tried to make out. Contrary to the image of dereliction and disease, the communities of the East End were a multitude of small beehive industries which competed successfully with the sluggish factory shops still closely tied to the patronage system. Largely populated by an “alien element” which put its own cultural identity before the “English” notions of order and cleanliness (articulated in intricately demanding rules of social conduct), the belief persisted that life in the East End was barely civilized.

What made the East End “alien” territory wasn’t so much the dirt but the Jews. By 1887 they had taken over a number of the streets completely. Cramming as many as twenty people into a small, three-room house, an estimated 50,000 refugees from the Czarist pale squeezed into an area no larger than a village. But while this ghetto was certainly no more or less a world apart than many that had existed throughout Europe over the centuries, what was so extraordinary is that it seemed to have sprung up overnight.

In fact, a small, stable Jewish community had been in London for hundreds of years, though the difference between the new immigrants and their religious brethren was as great as the distance they had travelled to get there. Steeped in the culture of Spain before the inquisition, these early Jews had come to England by a different route. Well educated and proud as any high-strung aristocrat, they had for the most part arrived from their refuge in Amsterdam soon after Cromwell’s desperate invitation to the independent financiers of Europe, giving them rights of abode and certain privileges if not complete and equal freedom. These Sephardic Jews, who soon assimilated into the higher strata of British life had little in common with the new immigrants

except, perhaps, a shared history of persecution and aspects of an ancient religion.

Hard on their heels came a scattering of German and Eastern European Jewish merchants, aware of the new opportunities that had opened for them in this northern outpost of capitalist enterprise and tired of the anti-Semitic hostilities which swung according to the cycles of economic growth and contraction like the hand of a pendulum - one day giving them honours, taking them away the next.

By 1887 these older Jewish settlements had become the basis of the established Anglo-Jewish community: well-settled and affluent - though, like most communities of Jews, slightly apprehensive at what the future might hold for them. This deep seated and basic insecurity echoed through the pages of the Jewish Chronicle, the leading voice of their community, which stated in its editorial celebrating the Queen's Jubilee, "Happily we have shown that we are not unworthy of the liberties which we have claimed as our right." Few other Englishmen felt the need to prove themselves worthy of liberty as did the Anglicised Jew.

Yet, by Jubilee Summer, the list of their successes was endless. Besides Disraeli, a lapsed Jew but well aware of his heritage, there was Sir Moses Montefiore, who represented the Queen in the mid-east, Michael Josephs, well respected in the halls of science, David Solomons, the first Jewish Sheriff of Middlesex; as well as the famous names in finance - the Rothchilds, the Goldsmids, the Mocattas. "The future Jewish historian," wrote the Chronicle, "will have to describe the Victorian age as the most marvellous era in Anglo-Jewish annals. For it is impossible to imagine another space of fifty years working a revolution equally vast in the condition of the Jews of this country, and more truly causing a people that walked in darkness to see a great light."

It was left to the Jewish Board of Guardians to make sure that light continued to shine. For dark clouds were hovering over the eastern horizon; smoke from the Russian crucible brought to the boil and now spilling over the borders of the pale. Five million poverty stricken co-religionists compressed in an area which was fast becoming an economic wasteland, looked anxiously to the west for salvation. The Ashkenazi, throwing what little they had into muslin sacks by ones and twos, by the hundreds, by the thousands, were on the move. One of the greatest mass migrations in human history had begun.

The image of this great wave of destitute refugees sweeping across Britain was received by those aware of the situation with dire foreboding, if not barely restrained panic. For those governmental advisors who had long feared a workers' rising - the kind that had shaken the halls of class and privilege on the continent - the thought of a new army of impoverished gypsies helping to sew the seeds of revolution and anarchy in the fertile soil of England's working classes by taking jobs from the already hard-pressed native labouring men was enough for them to start questioning the historic policy of free and open refuge to all. For the Jewish Board of Guardians, the question was posed differently. Could England, which had paved the way toward full economic, social and political assimilation afford to take the chance of unleashing the genie of anti-Semitism and the threat of dreaded pogroms which were then spreading through Europe like a syphilitic plague?

The Guardians, who were elected from the various Jewish synagogues and organizations, set to work on a strategy of stemming the tide. The first line of defence consisted of spreading the word as best they could through whatever established networks reached inside the Russian Pale. This

consisted mainly of a letter-writing campaign, where the correspondent would confirm what was probably known - that British streets were not paved with gold, and occasional advertisements in the local Jewish press trying to explain the serious unemployment situation. The second, and more costly, plan was to help refugees continue their journey by subsidising their passage to other locations, such as North America, Argentina and South Africa, where economic opportunities, they argued, were far more optimistic for them.

Such efforts, as King Canute had proved centuries before, were doomed from the start. Tides, whether from the sea or from the land, can never be stopped. Given the choice, nearly all of the immigrants would have gone to America. But, for most, it was a matter of funds. If they had the money to pay the fare, they could choose where they wanted to go. If they only had a few gold coins, they piled into the steerage section of the vessels bound for England.

For the poorest of the poor Polish and Russian Jews, it was often necessary for families to send their most likely breadwinner – usually the father or the eldest son – on that perilous crossing to some strange and lonely shore (a destination sometimes unknown to them). The hope being, if he were lucky, he might, by scrimping and saving every penny earned, quickly send for the rest. Carrying a change of clothes a loaf of black bread, a few precious coins, a scribbled address of a distant relative or a friend of a friend, crudely forged documents or some money set aside to bribe the Russian border guards, the hapless family emissary made his way as best he could to one of the North Sea ports - usually Hamburg.

There, if he wasn't robbed bedding down for the night in a park or, if the weather was inclement, on a hard wooden

bench in the railway terminus, he would be approached by an agent perhaps representing a steamship company, or maybe one of the many sharks who made their living feeding on the innocent fish who swam their way. Purchasing a ticket, however, was no guarantee the refugee would get to where he wanted to go. Often illiterate and knowing only the limited world of the Eastern European ghetto, they were always at the mercy of those whose business it was to prey on the homeless and the weak. Many a voyager stepped on shore at London, Liverpool or Glasgow thinking he had made it to the streets of New York.

Describing a typical scene at the London docks, Beatrice Potter wrote, "There are a few relations and friends awaiting the arrival of the small boats filled with immigrants: but the crowd gathered in and about the gin-shop overlooking the narrow entrance of the landing-stage are dock loungers of the lowest type and professional 'runners.' These latter individuals, usually of the Hebrew race, are among the most repulsive of East London parasites; boat after boat touches the landing stage, they push forward, seize hold of the bundles or baskets of the new-comers, offer bogus tickets to those who wish to travel forward to America, promise guidance and free lodging to those who hold in their hands addresses of acquaintances in Whitechapel, or who are absolutely friendless. A little man with an official badge (Hebrew Ladies' Protective Society) fights vainly in their midst for the conduit of unprotected females, and shouts or whispers to the others to go to the Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter in Lemen Street. For a few moments it is a scene of indescribable confusion: cries and counter cries; the hoarse laughter of the dock loungers at the strange garb and broken accent of the poverty-stricken foreigners; the rough swearing of the boatmen at passengers unable to pay the fee

for landing. In another ten minutes eighty of the hundred new-comers are dispersed in the back slums of Whitechapel; in another few days, the majority of these, robbed of the little they possess, are turned out of the 'free lodgings' destitute and friendless."

Of those who did arrive with little more than a farthing to their name, a few of the more fortunate were approached by "legitimate" agents who ventured to place them - for a commission - with a man who needed a "greener" for his trade and a family that needed another lodger to pay the rent. This informal network of poverty-stricken immigrants and struggling entrepreneurs who depended on a pool of dirt-cheap labour to produce saleable goods at the lowest possible price was the basis of the East End sweat shop system. It was a system of employment both dehumanising in its slavish demands and grotesque in the brutality of its do-or-die approach to life. But for the huddled masses of refugees who had few skills, it was often the only chance they had to survive.

1887 was the year Charles Booth published the first part of his monumental work on the inhabitants of the East End. Summing up his section on the Jewish immigrants, he wrote: "These foreign Jews are straight from the pressure of grinding despotism; some may add nihilism and the bitterest kind of socialistic theories to very filthy habits; but the meek and patient endurance with which they live their hard lives, and their ready obedience to the law, do not suggest any immediate fear of violent revolutionary activity on their part. They seem capable of improvement, and so far have improved. It may take them 'several years to get washed,' but if we compare the new comers with those of the same race who have been settled here some time, the change is very marked. The streets in which the former herd on arrival

become more foul than ever before, but those occupied by the latter are quiet and orderly.”

This kind of naive paternalism from the liberal reformers was considered quite tolerant for its day. The notion that it was the duty of those more privileged and educated to teach the less fortunate the error of their ways so they could live a proper, clean and wholesome life was part and parcel of the imperial mentality which saw England as the guardian of morality for half the earth.

Booth's functional sociology at least showed that poverty wasn't a disease or a chromosomal defect of laggards and layabouts but a structural fault of the economic system. He had no analysis, but his massive tables of statistical information spoke for itself. The fact that dockers were paid 4 pence an hour, when they could get work, or that a seamstress slaving through a twelve hour day might make two shillings if she were lucky, made for figures that didn't add up - especially if medical care, school fees and rates were taken into account.

The recession had pushed the British workers further up against the wall making their desperate situation even more untenable. And into this morass had dropped the Jew, creating their own survival economy based on minimal profit and maximum self-exploitation. It was a situation rife with danger, like a powder keg placed in the middle of Hell's Kitchen.

Everyone knew it could blow up. And that was something nobody wanted. Certainly not the Jewish Board of Guardians. Certainly not the Queen or the rest of her establishment. And they all knew that it would only take a spark. Then, one day, it happened. Just four days after London's great Jubilee celebration for Queen Victoria. In the heart of the East End an Angel had been killed. And a Jew, they said, had murdered her. The summer had been hot. It was to grow hotter.