

PART III

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Continuity and Change, 1920s–1940s

## REFLECTIONS: THE WORLD BETWEEN WARS

The fact of Hitler's advent to power in Germany in the spring of 1933 opens new chapters in the history of every European country. One such concerns the history of relations between Jews and non-Jews in British civil society. It is a chapter mired in controversy, anger, accusations and above all—the source, indeed, of all—grief. British antisemitism is alleged to have been increasing between the wars. This, it is implied, is the reason that governments did not do enough to help Jews flee destruction in Nazi Germany and Austria; and a timid and deferential Anglo-Jewry is accused of not doing enough for them either. Government policies restricted the number of Jews admitted as refugees both to Britain and to Palestine, which Britain administered under the League of Nations mandate; Anglo-Jewry's leading figures were unable to put sufficient pressure on the Home Office and the Foreign and Colonial Offices to modify these policies. Historians are castigated for congratulating Britain on its generosity to the pitifully few refugees who were allowed entry visas.<sup>1</sup>

There is truth in all of the above, but there are also other truths which deserve to be told, and other perceptions which are equally valid. Looking at the period prior to the 1933 watershed, it can plausibly be argued that antisemitism was not increasing: relations between Jews and non-Jews were following a trajectory of greater integration, with a progressive assimilation of the minority within the host community.<sup>2</sup> Netta Franklin was deeply wounded by the antisemitic prejudice manifested at the P.N.E.U. training school in 1927, but the majority of the organisation supported her position. Her sister Lily's perception of an increase in antisemitism by 1943 may have reflected a widening of her social experience rather than an intensification of feeling within the milieux with which she was familiar in the early years of the century. Formal anti-alien discrimination—for example, within the sphere of local authority allocations of housing and grants for education—was perforce declining as more Jews were born and educated in Britain and the generation disqualified through foreign birth passed away: it has been ascertained, indeed, that by 1930 fewer than 30 % of East End Jews were foreign-born.<sup>3</sup>

Moving wholly into the counterfactual realm, if the world had not been engulfed in economic depression—in particular, if the Great Crash of 1929 had not wrecked promising international efforts to stabilise the German economy—relative prosperity at home and the absence of external threats would have reinforced improvements in social relationships. Moreover, if

the monstrous calumnies and atrocious violence of the German National Socialists had not been so openly legitimated by the German sovereign state, British antisemitism might never have been emboldened to develop its organised, uniformed incarnation under the leadership of fascists such as Oswald Mosley. Germany's example suggested that it could be legal and indeed respectable to injure and libel neighbours and fellow citizens, just as Italy in the 1920s had encouraged many to think that modern societies could be run more efficiently without democratic political institutions.

Antisemitism was not, however, always the most important factor in fascism's appeal. Looking at one subset of recruits, the small number of former suffragettes active in interwar extreme-right groups, one can surmise that, like many of their male counterparts, they were reacting to a postwar world which for them had become unrecognisable.<sup>4</sup> It wasn't Jews but flappers that so upset Mary Allen, the pioneer of women police forces in Britain who became an admirer of Hitler and joined the British Union of Fascists (BUF). Her publications of the 1930s rail against youthful materialism, birth control, nudism, the cinema and Bolshevism, and hardly mention the Jews. Similarly, BUF member Yolande McShane thought Mosley's antisemitism not 'very important, compared with the promise of "equal opportunities for all"'.<sup>5</sup> Organisations like these offered a framework for broader anxieties, and their rhetoric was adopted without necessarily having been fundamental in these female recruits' personal formation. It is interesting to note that the suffragette Flora Drummond, whose unpleasant remarks about Herbert Samuel have been noted in Chap. 5, established the Women's Guild of Empire after World War I, but actually opposed the BUF in London County Council Elections in 1937.<sup>6</sup>

Any discussion of this topic returns us to the issue of the subjectivity which inflects our selection of evidence and our judgement of what we see and read. As the historian Laura Tabili has written, with reference to German and Scandinavian migrants to the north-east of Britain, 'Notorious episodes of conflict continue to capture scholars' imagination, to the neglect of community formation and internal dynamics, or even daily interactions between migrants and natives'.<sup>7</sup> Violent scenes and hateful remarks do not necessarily reveal the 'true' character of a society; they need not be considered more representative than periods of peaceful coexistence. The evidence available for making such assessments is, undoubtedly, perplexing and equivocal. The famous 'battle of Cable Street' of 1936 can be taken to represent a general East End solidarity in the face

of native fascism or, more exclusively, the principled stand of a significant minority who were politically organised on the left at that time; and it has, indeed, been ascertained that BUF membership actually increased in the East End following the affair.<sup>8</sup> In a retrospect of the decade 1920–30, the East End social worker Edith Ramsay saw her own cordial relationships with the councillor Ida Samuel and the doctor Hannah Billig mirrored in good feeling between Jewish and Catholic neighbours: ‘Never once did I hear ... a criticism on racial grounds’. But in 1940 she was writing that her job as principal of a women’s evening institute was ‘dominated by antagonisms between my Jewish and non-Jewish members, stirred up by Mosley propaganda’.<sup>9</sup> Her biography suggests that harsher times, and unemployment among the young, hardened at least some hearts over that decade.<sup>10</sup>

Not the least of the benefits of exploring this period through the prism of some women’s organisations and friendships is that of gaining the perspective of ‘ordinary’ citizens, or at least those not striving to follow any particular ‘party line’, on the events of the times. It enables us to escape some of the historical traps set for us by hindsight. Our own retrospect, inevitably dominated by personal, familial or national memories of World War II, can make it hard to understand why everyone did not see the threat posed by Nazism to Jews, Christians and the peace of Europe. The minutes of voluntary organisations remind us that public-spirited adults were faced with wholly new dilemmas; could war really be averted by supporting disarmament under the aegis of the League of Nations? Would it strengthen or weaken the cause of peace if the Communist Party were to play a leading role in arousing public opinion? Was it more important to boycott Germany or Japan, to succour the children of German Jews or the children of Spanish Republicans? Opinion within many organised feminist groups ranged widely, from seeing Nazism principally as a defeat for the German women’s movement, to a continuing commitment to pacifism which overrode all other considerations in world politics.<sup>11</sup> And as women’s committees up and down the land pondered these questions, there was always someone insisting on keeping the possible cruelty to imported tortoises on the monthly agenda.<sup>12</sup>

The way Jewish and Christian women dealt, together and separately, with the growing crisis is approached here through narratives illustrating the continuities and discontinuities between their pre- and post-1914 concerns. The 1930s are not treated as an entirely distinct era of national life. Tabili’s claim for the study of ‘even daily interactions’ is validated by an approach which is chronological as well as thematic: we are able to see

individuals reacting to events as they unfold, and it is my hope that this will help us to avoid prejudging their motives. Some patterns of action can of course be distinguished and traced through these decades. It was inevitable that, with the historical exception of members of the Society of Friends, women in the Jewish community would react more immediately to the rise of Nazism than their Christian colleagues, and that their energies would begin to be channelled into organisations set up to deal with the new emergency. But even as some forms of cooperation decayed, new bridges and new identities were being built. One historian, indeed, concludes that ‘by late 1939, the Jewish identity of the refugee organisations had become diluted and Anglicized’ and that ‘through its work for the refugees the Jewish community also contributed to its own assimilation’.<sup>13</sup> These are not conclusions supported by the following chapters, from which a more nuanced picture of ‘living with difference’ emerges.

## NOTES

1. For a recent restatement of some of these views see Geoffrey Alderman, *British Jewry since Emancipation* (Buckingham, University of Buckingham Press, 2014), pp. 273–80, 284–7. Further bibliographical references are to be found in Chap. 10.
2. The difficulty of characterising social relations in this period is evidenced in a recent major work, Anthony Julius’s *Trials of the Diaspora: a History of Anti-Semitism in England* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010). It is stated, p. 305: ‘By the mid-1920s, the purchase that the notion of an international Jewish conspiracy had on the public mind weakened, and these committed, preoccupied anti-Semites were forced to resume their practice of talking mostly to themselves and to each other’; but he then adds that because of ‘the open channels between the fascist and Conservative Right ... “the everyday kind” [of anti-Semitism] ... was also somewhat sharper, and more menacing in its implications, than in previous decades’.
3. Tony Kushner, ‘Jew and Non-Jew in the East End of London: Towards an Anthropology of “Everyday” Relations’ in Geoffrey Alderman and Colin Holmes, eds, *Outsiders and Outcasts: Essays in Honour of William J. Fishman* (London, Duckworth, 1993), p. 51, reference 52.
4. Julie V. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain’s Fascist Movement 1923–1945* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2000). See also the following essays in Tony Kushner and Kenneth Lunn, eds, *The Politics of Marginality: Race, the Radical Right And Minorities In Twentieth Century Britain* (London, Cass, 1990): Martin Durham, ‘Women and the British Union of Fascists, 1932–1940’; Julie Wheelwright, ‘“Colonel” Barker: a Case Study in the

- Contradictions of Fascism'; Tony Kushner, 'Politics and Race, Gender and Class: Refugees, Fascists and Domestic Service in Britain, 1933–1940'.
5. Mary Sophia Allen and Julie Helen Heyneman, *Woman at the Crossroads* (London, Unicorn Press, 1934); Mary S. Allen, *Lady in Blue* (London, Stanley Paul, 1936). Yolande McShane is quoted by Julie V. Gottlieb, 'Women and Fascism in the East End' in Kushner and Valman, eds, *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-fascism in British Society* (London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2000) p. 39. Gottlieb's essay does, however, cite many overt expressions of antisemitism by female fascists.
  6. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, pp. 169–70.
  7. Laura Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture: Natives and Newcomers in Provincial England, 1841–1939* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 6.
  8. Thomas P. Linehan, 'Fascist Perceptions of Cable Street' in Kushner and Valman, *Remembering Cable Street*, p. 23.
  9. Tower Hamlets Archives, Edith Ramsay papers, P/RAM/5/9, 'Life in Stepney 1920–1930' (typescript, 1980), pp. 1, 4, 5; University of Southampton Library (henceforth USL) MS 60, 18/1/9, Edith Ramsay to James Parkes, 8 March 1940. Edith Ramsay was the daughter of the Revd Alexander Ramsay of the Presbyterian Church of England; he was a member of the Society of Jews and Christians, discussed in the next chapter.
  10. Bertha Sokoloff, *Edith and Stepney: The Life of Edith Ramsay* (London, Stepney Books, 1987), pp. 79–80. For a discussion of differing memories of the East End in the 1920s and subsequently, see Kushner, 'Jew and Non-Jew', pp. 42–4.
  11. Julie V. Gottlieb, 'Varieties of Feminist Responses to Fascism in inter-war Britain' in N. Copsey, and A. Olechnowicz, eds, *Varieties of Anti-fascism: Britain in the Inter-war Period* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
  12. See, e.g. London Metropolitan Archives (henceforth LMA) ACC/3613/01/012, Minutes of the National Council of Women Executive Committee, 1938–40 *passim*.
  13. Louise London, 'Jewish Refugees, Anglo-Jewry and British Government Policy 1930–40' in David Cesarani, ed., *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1990) pp. 189–90.