THE SWANSEA JEWISH COMMUNITY — THE FIRST CENTURY

Harold Pollins

The town and port of Swansea (in Welsh, Abertawe) was the location of the first Jewish community in Wales, although its origins are a matter of tradition rather than of definite evidence. There is a general view that the origins of provincial Jewish communities in Britain start with pioneering visits by hawkers, travelling in the countryside. Some of them, it is said, would settle down to open fixed shops in favoured towns. It is possible that this might have been Swansea’s story. The first name available is said to be that of Solomon Lyons who had a business of some sort there in 1731. He may have been a pedlar earlier but nothing else is known of him. A second name, in the same decade, was that of Lazarus David, who was born in Swansea in 1734; he went to Canada and helped to found the Montreal community of Shearith Israel.2

But that is mere conjecture. More reliable evidence was contained in a manuscript of 1859, which was the basis of a newspaper article, published in 1933, ‘The Early Days of Jewry in Swansea’.3 To this can be added the researches of W. C. Rogers, published in a short reference in another newspaper article, ‘Business Men and Councillors of the Past; Old Families who Founded Swansea’.4 The newspaper articles were used by Cecil Roth in his The Rise of Provincial Jewry, 1950, p. 103. They state that the first Jews in Swansea were David Michael and Nathaniel Phillips, who arrived in 1741, followed soon by two men named Cohen (perhaps Jacob Cohen, died 1819) and Joseph (probably an ancestor of Benjamin Joseph, born in Swansea about 1791 — he died in 1877 aged 86). Descendants of the latter two were said still to be members, in 1933, of the then Swansea congregation. Another account speaks of David Michael being accompanied by his brother Moses, as well as Samuel Levi.6

Jacob and Levi Michael, the sons of David Michael, were born in the 1750s, probably the first Jewish children to be born in Swansea, and there must have been an increase in numbers since in 1768 a burial ground was established. The ground was leased from the town...
council, one of the lessees being David Michael, whose occupation was given as silversmith. He was also responsible for organising the first place of worship; according to the *Herald of Wales* article, he ‘built the first synagogue: it was part of his house, at the back of his usual sitting-room, and was capable of containing thirty or forty persons’. This was in Wind Street and was succeeded by a room in the Strand, which was used for some thirty years until 1818 when a 99-year lease was taken on a piece of land in Waterloo Road on which to build a synagogue.

One other name is usually recorded, that of Jacob A. Moseley, a watch and clock maker, who was ‘for many years in the cavalry corps’. He died in 1845 and was thought to be the father of Ephraim Moseley, one of the five men who founded the 1818 synagogue. The others involved in the 1818 synagogue were Levi and Jacob, the sons of David Michael; Jacob Cohen; and Ephraim Joseph (the father of Benjamin, a long-time resident). The Michaels were in business as silversmiths, jewellers, milliners, and general furnishers; that is the description in W. C. Rogers’s notes on the Michael family. However, advertisements in *The Cambrian* refer to a wholesale tea house, a tea and coffee house, a grocery business, and as insurance agents. Cohen was the father of Douglas Cohen, born 1807, who qualified in Edinburgh as a doctor, and served in Liverpool but in the 1830s was at the Swansea Infirmary. Ephraim Joseph is described in 1812 as a jeweller in a report of the death of his wife.

The 1859 manuscript described the synagogue building as having a ladies’ gallery and seating for about seventy people (it is not clear if that number included women). Presumably the writer had first-hand knowledge of it as it lasted until the new synagogue in Goat Street was built in 1859.

The published accounts of the history of Swansea Jewry have little more to say about the community in the years before more information becomes available in the 1830s and 1840s. Cecil Roth referred to the appointment of a shohet in 1829, the only officiant of which he had knowledge. But there must have been a sufficient number of Jews in the town to support a shohet and also a synagogue.

One can get some idea of who those Jews were, despite the absence of membership lists, and before the days of civil registration, by a number of devices. First, from 1804 *The Cambrian* newspaper was published in Swansea and it contained some news of Swansea Jews. Second, from the 1831 and later Censuses, which gave people’s place of birth, one can establish who was said to have been born in Swansea before 1837, when civil registration of births, marriages, and deaths began. Later Censuses can also be used, particularly useful when people had moved away from Swansea. Notices of deaths in the *Jewish Chronicle* sometimes mention Swansea as a place of birth or residence. One has
to be aware of the fact that the place of birth recorded in the Census was not always accurate: a person might be recorded as born in Swansea in one Census, and in Merthyr Tydfil in the next.

One of the earliest names in the newspaper was that of Hyam Barnett, Silversmith of Gloucester, who opened a ‘room in Swansea’. In the *London Gazette* we read of the bankruptcy of Benjamin Joseph, ‘Jeweller, Dealer and Chapman’. In 1826 Michael Marks, watchmaker, silversmith, ‘&c. late of Cardiff,’ opened a business at 4 Castle Street. There are references in *The Cambrian* to several officiants; in 1813 Joseph Cohen, clerk to the synagogue, died (21.8.1813); nine years later it recorded the marriage of Rev. Moses Moses, ‘Hebrew Teacher’. In the early 1830s the newspaper noted the marriage of Mr Miers, ‘Minister of the Synagogue’ and of the marriage of Harris Joseph, ‘of the Jews’ Synagogue’: an official of some kind? In 1841 he was a ‘Taylor’ and in 1851 a Hawker. In 1838 there was a reference to Samuel Frankel who gave lessons in Hebrew and German.

Another officiant was Barnett Abrahams, who appears in the 1841 Census. His son, Louis, was to become Headmaster of the Jews’ Free School in London.

In 1859, when the first appeal for funds was made, for the building of a new synagogue, the Warden of the synagogue, Simon Goldberg, explained its need through the increase of population. He said that when the existing synagogue was built in 1818, there were four Jewish families in Swansea. Perhaps he meant to refer to the five men who founded it and there may have been others; several women, whose married names we have, were (according to the Census) born in Swansea. They may, or may not, have been part of the families of the five founders. They were Mrs Ann Marks (born c. 1803), wife of Mark Marks; her maiden name was Michael, but neither she nor the other Michael women mentioned below appear to have belonged to the original Michael families. Their names are not on the extensive Michael family tree prepared by W. C. Rogers. Another wife was Mrs Rosetta Marks, but her maiden name was Cohen and she may have been a daughter of Jacob. Mrs Hannah Walter (wife of Leon D. Walter, woollen draper) whose maiden name was Michael, as was that of Martha Polak, born about 1806, the wife of Samuel Polak whose family lived in Pontypool and in Newport, Monmouthshire. There was also Sarah Michael, who married Benjamin Joseph. She was possibly his first wife; his wife’s name in Censuses from 1841 was Matilda.

In addition to these possible families there might have been some transient residents. From the Censuses of 1851 onwards (which give birthplaces) one can find families, some of whose members were recorded as being born in Swansea but had moved to other locations. Before civil registration from 1837 the following (along with some
long-term residents) lived in Swansea. From *The Cambrian* we read of M. Rosenberg and D. Cohen, who had been partners, as well as of Rev. Moses Moses, already mentioned, as has been the shohet Meir ben Judah. They were temporary residents; two families became long-term residents, those of Moses Moses (from Lissa); and Greenbone Jacobs. In the 1830s, before civil registration began in 1837 — judging by the birth of their children in the town, or Swansea was the place of birth of single men — there were Abraham Lyons (Clothier); Emanuel Levi (Painter); Jacob Levy (Watchmaker); Moss Isaacs (Tailor); Moses Moses (from Bedford, Pawnbroker); Mordecai Harris (Jeweller); and Charles Jacobs (a Hawker). Joseph Barnett lived mostly in Merthyr Tydfil but was in Swansea in the 1830s where three of his children were born. One, Henry Barnett (Pawnbroker), became a long-term resident. His parents settled there later in the century. There was Mrs Rebecca Levy, a Librarian, and Mrs Catherine Cohen and their children. Most of this information comes from the 1851 Census, by which time many had moved to other places. The occupations are those of 1851 and may have changed since the 1830s.

Another way of observing the pre-1837 community is through the number of births. Again, one can do this from the Censuses of 1851 and later, either from the returns of families resident in Swansea or from those which had now moved on, although it is more difficult to locate Swansea births in families which were only resident there for short periods between Censuses. One might come across them purely by chance.

These are the figures of the decennial births of Jews in Swansea.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1791–1799</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800–1809</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810–1819</td>
<td>6*</td>
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<tr>
<td>1820–1829</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>1830–1837</td>
<td>28</td>
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* This includes a son of Catherine Cohen named Esdaile P. Cohen, who died in 1856 in America. No date of birth is given. I have arbitrarily allocated him to the decade in the Table as his three siblings were born between about 1805 and 1815.

They are the ones I have been able to find and the numbers should be regarded as minimal. They may illustrate a growing community, or merely reflect the increasing availability of information — that is, the people whose place of birth is recorded in the Censuses from 1851 will not include many from the early years of the century, given the comparatively short span of life at that time.

One piece of information indicates the acculturation of at least two residents. The list of founder members of the Swansea Philosophical
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& Literary Institution (later the Royal Institution of South Wales) included Douglas Cohen MD and Mr Mosely. The former was the son of Catherine Cohen who, as mentioned, had graduated in medicine at Edinburgh University and in the 1830s was at the Swansea Infirmary. I take it that Mosely was Jacob A. Moseley.20

NOTES

1 I am grateful to David Morris of the West Glamorgan Archive Service for the provision of much material.
3 *Herald of Wales*, 12 August 1933, p. 1.
4 *South Wales Evening Post*, 14 January 1947. This can be supplemented by W. C. Rogers’s detailed notes in West Glamorgan Archive Service, D/D WCR Genealogies 113–135.
5 *The Cambrian*, 27 March 1819; his wife Catherine lasted until 1865 — death notice *Jewish Chronicle* (henceforth *JC*) 24 March, p. 1. She was aged over 90.
7 *JC*, 25 June 1858, p. 222. In some accounts he was said to have been a Sergeant in the Glamorgan Yeomanry at the time of the invasion scare of 1804.
8 Roth, in Note 2. Since the known children of Jacob were born from 1804–1821, this is unlikely, unless Jacob was married twice, and Ephraim was the issue from his first marriage.
9 *Herald of Wales* in Note 3.
10 Wholesale tea, *The Cambrian*, 27 July 1805; wholesale tea and coffee, ibid., 7 May 1814; grocery, ibid., 30 May 1807; insurance, ibid., 20 December 1806.
11 *The Cambrian*, 23 May 1812.
12 Ibid., 21 July 1804; he died in 1815; ibid., 11 February 1815.
13 *London Gazette*, 10 August 1813, p. 1593; ibid., 10 May 1814, p. 995.
14 *The Cambrian*, 28 January 1826. Perhaps he was the M. L. Marks who married Ann Michael of Swansea later that year: ibid., 22 July 1826.
15 Cohen, *The Cambrian*, 21 August 1813; Moses, ibid., 2 March 1822. Was he the Moses Moses from Lissa, Poland, who continued to reside in Swansea, although in the Censuses was first a silversmith, then an outfitter, then a pawnbroker? It was not unusual, however, for these low-paid officiants to have a secular occupation.
17 *Jewish Chronicle*, 1 April 1859, p. 1.
18 Wife of a Michael Marks — marriage notice in *The Cambrian*, 22 June 1822.
19 *The Cambrian*, 3 May 1828.
20 West Glamorgan Archive Service, RISW Council Minutes, RISW SOC 1/1a.