

Between Two Worlds: Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto* and Anglo-Jewish Identity
Formation in Late-Victorian London

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Israel Zangwill's 1892 novel, *Children of the Ghetto: A Study of Peculiar People*, narrativizes a portrait of the Jewish immigrant community of East London during the fin de siècle. The novel became the "first Anglo-Jewish bestseller" at a moment when the navigation of this hyphenated identity was a core struggle for the Jewish community of London. In his vivid descriptions of urban space and its inhabitants, Zangwill develops a "fictional ethnography"¹ that describes the East End as a central space for an immigrant identity under threat, celebrates it as a site for the development of a diverse community, and presents it as a stage to display sharp inter-communal tensions—ultimately showcasing the role of the urban space in complex struggles of Anglo-Jewish identity formation of the late-Victorian period. From the perspective of a child of immigrants, intimately familiar with the streets he describes, Zangwill's vivid depictions of the spatial and social realities of the East-End ghetto and the people in it go beyond ethnographic study or fantastical fiction, producing an artifact that is both a product of and a lens into the dilemmas it describes.

Children of the Ghetto is broken into two parts. Part one, "Children of the Ghetto," is set around the 1880s and traces the experiences of a host of characters through their daily lives in the impoverished East End slum between Whitechapel and Spitalfields. The Ansell family, particularly the eldest daughter, Esther, and devout father, Moses, are the loose center for a series of sundry episodes, describing the lived experiences of immigrant Jews in the buildings and streets of the neighborhood.² Moses is a street peddler, and the family lives, impoverished, in the

¹ Nadia Valman, "Walking Victorian Spitalfields with Israel Zangwill," *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 2015, no. 21 (2015): 2.

² Meri-Jane Rochelson notes how the loose structure of the novel received mixed reviews from critics at publication time. Not all readers were fans of the highly descriptive, loosely related narrative— as one colorfully noted, "the wood of narrative was hidden by the leafage of information." See Meri-Jane Rochelson, "Israel Zangwill and *Children of the Ghetto*," *Teaching Jewish Studies* 48, no. 1 (1999): 85.

attic of a tenement building. The second and shorter part of the book, “Grandchildren of the Ghetto,” is set ten years later, after Esther has attended university at the behest of a wealthy Jewish benefactor, Mrs. Henry Goldsmith. This second part deals with the “spiritual crisis” of Esther and three young Jewish men as they navigate the world beyond the East End.³ For the purposes of my analysis, I will focus on the first portion of the book and its vivid description of the Jewish immigrant community in Whitechapel and Spitalfields. Specifically, I will home in on Zangwill’s depictions of the streets, community, and intracommunal tensions in the first chapter of the book, “The Bread of Affliction,” which follows Esther Ansell along her journey to collect her family’s rations at the soup kitchen on Fashion Street.

The East-End slums of Whitechapel and Spitalfields that Esther and her family traverse throughout the novel constitute an urban area that underwent a period of drastic change during the last decades of the nineteenth century.⁴ Throughout this period, the neighborhoods became a landing point for Jewish immigrants, one million of whom fled violent pogroms, persecution, and economic hardship in Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1905.⁵ By 1887, as many as 45,000 Jews resided, impoverished, in the urban slum, living in tenement buildings and working in sweatshops.⁶ As immigrants poured into England, antisemitic and anti-immigrant rhetoric abounded, blaming new arrivals for economic recession and rising unemployment rates, and eventually prompting the passage of the Aliens Act of 1905.⁷ Though the Act became the basis for widespread immigration restrictions, historian Diana Packer argues that the legislation was

³ Israel Zangwill and Meri-Jane Rochelson, *Children of the Ghetto: A Study of a Peculiar People* (Wayne State University Press, 1998), 11.

⁴ Zangwill and Rochelson, 18.

⁵ Diana Packer, “Refugee or Alien?: The Long-Term Influence of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants on the Reception of German Jews into Great Britain in the 1930s,” *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 50, no. 2 (2017): 17.

⁶ Zangwill and Rochelson, 18.

⁷ Packer, 17.

primarily motivated by the blatant antisemitism of the British officials who advocated for it.⁸ New Jewish immigrants, thus, were far from welcome in the metropolis.

Antisemitism was felt by Jews throughout England, native and immigrant alike. A minority Jewish community already resided in London before the massive influx at the turn of the century, and though English Jews gained civil and political rights as a result of emancipation campaigns from 1830 to 1860, antisemitic prejudice was maintained by the larger British public.⁹ According to Todd Endelman, an expert on Anglo-Jewish history, British public discourse often portrayed Jews as “aliens and outsiders, sharpers and cheats, [and] the traditional blaspheming enemies of Christianity.”¹⁰ A particular kind of antisemitism took hold in England at the time, referred to by scholars as an “antisemitism of tolerance,” an attitude under which Jewish people were accepted into English society, so long as they successfully assimilated to British cultural values.¹¹ This rhetoric put high levels of pressure on Anglo-Jewish communities, both native and immigrant, to acculturate—ultimately, to be regarded as “English people of the Jewish persuasion,” prompting intense struggles over the definition of Anglo-Jewish identity.¹²

The larger Anglo-Jewish community of Victorian London thus found itself between two worlds, struggling to define a hyphenated identity between Britishness and Jewishness. David Itzkowitz notes, “the question of whether it was possible for Jews to have multiple identities both as Jews and as members of the larger national community is the key question of Jewish history in the nineteenth century.”¹³ Well-to-do Jewish families took cues from Anglican upper-middle-class society in terms of display, dress, and entertainment, and the development of

⁸ Packer, 17.

⁹ Todd M. Endelman, “Communal Solidarity among the Jewish Elite of Victorian London,” *Victorian Studies* 28, no. 3 (1985): 514.

¹⁰ Endelman, 518.

¹¹ Zangwill and Rochelson, 21.

¹² Steven Bayme, “Jewry and Judaism,” in *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia* (Routledge, 2011), 411.

¹³ David Itzkowitz, “‘The Jew’ in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Culture: Between the East End and East Africa/a Jew in the Public Arena: The Career of Israel Zangwill,” *Victorian Studies* 52, no. 4 (2010): 678.

a "latitudinarian 'Anglican' Judaism."¹⁴ They also acknowledged the British public's tendency to regard all Jews as a monolith. As pressures toward acculturation raged, Jewish families of the West End became anxious to preserve their status in the respectable English society whose values they adhered to, and began to see the development of an unacculturated "foreign ghetto" as a threat to such a status.¹⁵ This trepidation towards the ghetto felt by more acculturated Jews reflected beyond the London metropolis—Theodor Herzl, the Viennese father of modern political Zionism, grew up in an established, culturally assimilated family, and saw Jews "as physically and mentally malformed by the ghetto."¹⁶ By advocating for the acculturation of Jewish immigrant identity in the slums, the established Jewish population sought to promote a vision of a respectable Anglo-Jewish identity that would improve the societal status of the entire group, an objective that became a source of intracommunal tension during the fin de siècle.¹⁷

This intracommunal tension between assimilated Anglo-Jewish identity and unacculturated immigrant Jewish identity had specific manifestations in the urban space of the East End. From the mid-nineteenth century into the 1870s, a wealthy contingent of Jewish families, referred to as "the Cousinhood," oversaw the formation of new Jewish community institutions, such as the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Jewish Board of Guardians, the

¹⁴ Todd Endelman explains this concept, under which Jewish religious tradition came to be viewed as "being a necessary part of respectability." West End Jews did not give up their faith as a result of anglicization, rather, they found room to practice their faith within the larger norms of English middle-class society. See Endelman, 494.

¹⁵ An excerpt from the *Jewish Chronicle*, a London-based Jewish newspaper showcases this sentiment well. An article covering Eastern European immigrants from August 12, 1881 states, "our fair fame is bound up with theirs; the outside world is not capable of making discrimination between Jew and Jew, and forms its opinions of Jews in general as much if not more, from them than from the Anglicized portion of the Community." See Endelman, 494.

¹⁶ Carl E. Schorske, "III: Politics in a New Key: An Austrian Trio," in *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 151.

¹⁷ My intention is not to present the entirety of the wealthy Anglo-Jewish community as entirely critical to the Eastern European arrivals. They also held true humanitarian concern and compassion for new migrants, and saw assimilation as a method through which to enhance the status of a group facing intense hostility at the behest of antisemitic rhetoric. See Endelman 518.

United Synagogue, and the Anglo-Jewish Organization.¹⁸ Following an accelerating pattern of social reform in the Victorian period, these organizations sought at once to centralize the larger English Jewish community and to systemize philanthropy locally in the London metropolis.¹⁹ This secondary goal of the communal elite served a greater purpose than humanitarian aid. Through new communal institutions, including charities and schools, “communal leaders also sought to promote the acculturation of recent arrivals.”²⁰ The East End became a site of reform through the establishment of philanthropic institutions, reforms rooted in the assimilationist pressures felt within the larger Anglo-Jewish community as it struggled to define its identity within the metropolis.

Into this broader context of a complex and divided Anglo-Jewish community comes Israel Zangwill. Born in 1864 in the East End of London, Zangwill had an intimate connection to the spaces and characters of *Children of the Ghetto*.²¹ A self-proclaimed “cockney-Jew,” Zangwill personally experienced the struggle to define an identity that was both British and Jewish, immigrant and acculturated.²² As a child of Jewish immigrants from Latvia and Poland, Zangwill grew up walking the same streets that Esther traverses throughout the book, and saw the East End as a key source for Jewish identity.²³ However, after receiving a Rothschild Prize for Scholastic Achievement²⁴ and earning a degree from the University of London, Zangwill rose from the East End and into a journalistic and literary career that integrated him into the respectable culture of middle-class English society.²⁵ He served time as a pupil-teacher at the

¹⁸ Endelman, 495.

¹⁹ Endelman, 495.

²⁰ Endelman, 507.

²¹ Rochelson, “Israel Zangwill and Children of the Ghetto,” 85.

²² Bryan Cheyette, “Israel Zangwill Past, Present and Future – an Introduction,” *European Judaism* 57, no. 2 (2024): 7.

²³ Zangwill and Rochelson, 28.

²⁴ The Rothschilds were one of the wealthy families of the “Cousinhood,” the leaders of the Anglo-Jewish communal organization efforts of the Victorian era. See Endelman, 495.

²⁵ Rochelson, “Israel Zangwill and Children of the Ghetto,” 85.

Jews' Free School, an institution established by the Jewish communal elite to educate Jewish children of the East End.²⁶ As much as Zangwill seems to have risen away from the East End, he found himself returning to topics of immigrant Jewish identity throughout his literary career.

Zangwill's biography proves him a unique and ambiguous character, nevertheless committed to the accurate representation of Jewish life in the metropolis. Zangwill was at once a witness to, product and agent of, and, as historian Nadia Valman suggests, a critic of assimilation.²⁷ Whether or not his opinions were always clear, the struggle over Anglo-Jewish identity was a key theme in his literary work. Zangwill was also "repelled by what he saw as an ignorant, unsympathetic and biased representation of Jewish life" in English society.²⁸ *Children of the Ghetto* seeks to correct these misconceptions by capturing an accurate and sympathetic view of the Jewish immigrant community of the East End for an audience of middle- and upper-class English Jews and non-Jews. Pushing back against what he viewed as "popular ignorance of the fact that Jews are as diverse as Protestants,"²⁹ Zangwill does not shy away from the presentation of intracommunal tensions and sympathetic displays of a diverse immigrant Jewish community in his work. *Children of the Ghetto* develops a picture of a specific urban place where immigrant Jewish identity is displayed, community is formed, and intracommunal tensions play out, from the perspective of an author intimately familiar with the physical streets of the East End and the struggles of identity formation playing out within them.

In *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, Judith Walkowitz focuses on the streets of London as an "enigmatic and contested site for class and gender encounters," opening new opportunities for the movement of marginalized groups,

²⁶ Rochelson, "Israel Zangwill and *Children of the Ghetto*," 85.

²⁷ Valman, 7.

²⁸ Bernard Winehouse, "Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto*: A Literary History of the First Anglo-Jewish Best-Seller." *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 16, no. 2 (1973): 103.

²⁹ Winehouse, 103.

like middle-class women and working-class men, throughout the city.³⁰ Walkowitz does not touch on the movement of Jewish or immigrant communities throughout London during the late Victorian period. However, I argue that this group was itself undergoing complex struggles to define its own urban identity on the streets of London. My analysis of Israel Zangwill's vivid description of the urban space of the Jewish ghetto, specifically in his first chapter, "The Bread of Affliction," will draw on Walkowitz's ideas about the city as a site for identity development to explore a new argument about the role of urban space in the struggles of Anglo-Jewish identity formation during the fin de siècle.

The novel opens with a vivid description of an urban space, as we follow young Esther Ansell on her journey to the "Institution in Fashion Street."³¹ This is a fictional representation of the Soup Kitchen for the Jewish Poor, an institution operated by wealthy Jewish philanthropists to provide welfare to impoverished East-Enders. As Esther walks to the soup kitchen, Zangwill paints a portrait of Fashion Street, the central thoroughfare that connects the neighborhoods of Whitechapel and Spitalfields. In what follows, I will analyze Zangwill's literary presentation of the urban space of the East End slum as a vestige of immigrant identity under threat, as a site for the development of a diverse immigrant Jewish community, and as a stage to display sharp intracommunal tensions within an Anglo-Jewish community seeking to navigate identity formation in the metropolis.

The language Zangwill employs to describe Fashion Street affirms the ghetto as a space of urban squalor and destitution. Zangwill describes the street Esther walks down as "dull, squalid, and narrow," with "unclean pavements."³² The scene is populated by a "female

³⁰ Judith Walkowitz, "Contested Terrain: New Social Actors," in *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 41.

³¹ Zangwill and Rochelson, 74.

³² Zangwill and Rochelson, 73.

streetsinger with a trail of infants of dubious maternity, ” “a drunkard lurch[ing] along,” and some “ragged children jigging under the watery rays of a street lamp.”³³ Zangwill upholds these characters as “the conventional touches about the London street-picture.”³⁴ By describing Fashion Street as “narrow,” “dull,” “squalid,” and “unclean,” Zangwill paints a vivid image of the destitution of the ghetto. The characters he places along the scene– the drunk, the streetsinger and her illegitimate children, and the “ragged children”-- further imbue the street with a potent sense of vice. To Zangwill, these characters are also “conventional”-- to be expected as part of the urban space he describes. Squalor and vice– traits overwhelmingly opposed to middle-class respectability culture– are conveyed as part and parcel of the urban space of the East End.

Zangwill’s non-ideal, yet realistic, description of Fashion Street is complicated by a sense of nostalgia for the East End undergoing great change at the behest of social reform driven by assimilationist pressures. Despite the clear dirtiness and squalor of the street, Zangwill’s description also captures a sense of romanticism in the urban scene. He states, “a dead and gone wag called the street ‘Fashion Street,’”³⁵ lamenting the death of the person who coined the name of the thoroughfare. When describing the crowd of Jewish immigrants gathered on the street outside the soup kitchen to await their rations, Zangwill notes the “indefinable touch of romance and pathos about the tawdriness and witch-like ugliness” of the people. Zangwill’s lament toward the passing of the originators of the ghetto (those who named the streets) and his romantic framing of the hungry, impoverished people, gives a window into what scholars like Nadia Valman have referred to as Zangwill’s sense of “ghetto nostalgia.”³⁶ Zangwill’s dual treatment of the urban scene in the East End ghetto showcases a harsh, dirty reality of the urban space

³³ Zangwill and Rochelson, 73.

³⁴ Zangwill and Rochelson, 73.

³⁵ Zangwill and Rochelson, 73.

³⁶ Valman, 3.

alongside a sense of sentimentality, a certain nostalgia, for the imperfections of the scene. Jewish immigrant identity did not conform to the values of respectable, middle-class English culture that community leaders and philanthropists idealized, and was thus threatened under intense pressures towards anglicization. In this passage, through the narrative lens of the street, we are given a sense of the East End slum as a physical vestige of an unpolished yet valuable Jewish immigrant identity under threat by larger societal forces seeking to suppress it.

We follow Esther through the dirty, yet romanticized streets of the ghetto, arriving outside the doors of the Institution in Fashion Street, a central hub of neighborhood life to which hungry immigrants flocked “thrice a week” for soup and bread.³⁷ A continued analysis of Zangwill’s description of the crowd of people gathered outside this central neighborhood locale conveys both the pure destitution of the Jewish immigrants and the complex beauty of the community that has been developed within the neighborhood. He describes the crowd as a mix of men “with muddy complexions,” and a collection of “prematurely aged” women “with weird, wan, old-world features,”³⁸ who join together to await the receipt of rations for their families. He highlights varying levels of destitution amongst the poor: “a few with well-lined stomachs, perhaps, but the majority famished and shivering.”³⁹ He points to an “underlying identity about the crowd of Polish, Russian, German, and Dutch Jewesses,” who share a mutual apathy towards their plight.⁴⁰ Together in the space outside the building, there rose a “universal jabber” amongst the group, and under the light of a gas lamp, they embodied a “grotesque picturesqueness.”⁴¹ In the space outside the soup kitchen, Zangwill describes a community at once diverse, destitute, and idealized.

³⁷ Zangwill and Rochelson, 74.

³⁸ Zangwill and Rochelson, 74.

³⁹ Zangwill and Rochelson, 74.

⁴⁰ Zangwill and Rochelson, 75.

⁴¹ Zangwill and Rochelson, 75.

This passage combines realistic descriptions of the destitution of the impoverished crowd outside the soup kitchen with romantic descriptions of a diverse, “picturesque” community.⁴² No doubt, the people that Zangwill describes are hungry, dirty, ugly, and apathetic. Despite this verifiable sense of struggle, Zangwill refuses to portray the group as uniform. He emphasizes the differing levels of hunger and disparate national backgrounds of individuals as they come together in the ritual of ration collection. His romantic portrayal of the group, in their “grotesque picturesqueness,” further emphasizes the value of such a community. As societal forces toward assimilation sought to flatten the residents of the East End, and the Anglo-Jewish community as a whole, into a single dimension, Zangwill’s description of the community pushes back. The passage, instead, celebrates a diverse community of individuals gathered in the space outside the soup kitchen. Zangwill’s celebration of the sense of community amongst the immigrant inhabitants reflects a larger goal of the novel— to counteract ignorant and unsympathetic views of Jewish life within British public discourse.⁴³ In this passage, Zangwill emphasizes the diversity and value of an East End immigrant Jewish community often portrayed as homogenous and inferior. As assimilationist pressures pushed for the integration of East End Jews into respectable society, Zangwill’s narrative appreciates the diverse community that formed on the streets of the East End.

Finally, at “half-past five,” Esther and her compatriots in ration collection are allowed to enter the building of the soup kitchen.⁴⁴ The interior of the institution becomes a stage upon which to observe the complex intracommunal tensions playing out within the broader Anglo-Jewish community. Zangwill emphasizes the spatial segregation between the hungry East-End immigrants and the wealthy West-End Jewish philanthropists within the kitchen. While

⁴² Zangwill and Rochelson, 75.

⁴³ Winehouse, 105.

⁴⁴ Zangwill and Rochelson, 75.

Esther and the rest of the group are uncomfortably crushed into a “cattle-pen” to await their rations, the wealthy gather in “a galaxy of splendor” in their “reserved standing places.”⁴⁵ Even with the representatives of East End and the West End standing in the same building, the distance between the groups is made clear. With this physical distance, Zangwill showcases how the complex intracommunal tensions between acculturated and immigrant Jews played out in the spatial organization of the soup kitchen. These tensions are rooted in the broader struggle to define Anglo-Jewish identity in the context of assimilationist pressures that sought to change immigrant identity within the East End.

Zangwill further emphasizes the difference between the East-End Jewish immigrants and the West-End Jewish philanthropists by exaggerating the superiority of the West-Enders, referring to them throughout the passage as “semi-divine,” “semi-celestial,” and “radiating an indefinable aroma of superhumanity.”⁴⁶ Zangwill’s exaggeration of the class’s opulence is continued in his description of their dress— their “rustling silks or impressive broad cloths,”⁴⁷ striking contrast with the simple “mud-colored shawls” of the poor Jewish women in the cattle pen.⁴⁸ These aggrandizing descriptors take on a tone of social satire, as they overemphasize the West-End Jews as superior figures in comparison to the impoverished East-End immigrants that Zangwill seeks to represent in a sympathetic light. Zangwill’s satirical tone suggests a critique of the wealthy, assimilated Jews who eagerly sought the acculturation of poor, immigrant Jews in an effort to preserve their identity as members of respectable English society.

Zangwill continues his criticism in his description of the process of welfare distribution in the soup kitchen. He depicts a hungry crowd of East-Enders, “surging cruelly to and fro,”

⁴⁵ Zangwill and Rochelson, 74-75.

⁴⁶ Zangwill and Rochelson, 75-76.

⁴⁷ Zangwill and Rochelson, 75.

⁴⁸ Zangwill and Rochelson, 74.

desperate for their rations.⁴⁹ The people were made to wait to accept their provisions, as the President of the Institution “addressed the meeting at considerable length,” followed by the Rabbinate, who spoke “at not less length, eloquently seconding the proposition that charity was a virtue.”⁵⁰ The lengthy, self-laudatory speeches of the philanthropic leaders acquire a sense of callousness and disregard when presented alongside the clear desperation of a hungry crowd waiting simply to receive rations for their families. Zangwill’s writing serves to criticize the patronizing nature of the charitable acts of West-End Jewish philanthropists, who are also the purveyors of the assimilationist pressures that challenge the unassimilated Jewish identity of immigrant slum-dwellers. Within the urban interior of the Institution in Fashion Street, Zangwill captures the East End as a stage for classed interactions that demonstrate larger intracommunal tensions within the Anglo-Jewish community— tensions ultimately rooted in the struggles of modern Jewish identity formation that wracked English Jews throughout the fin de siècle.

Around the turn of the century, the Anglo-Jewish community of London experienced intense intracommunal struggles to define a modern sense of identity between Britishness and Jewishness. With the influx of Eastern European Jewish migrants into the city in the 1880s serving to heighten middle-class and elite anxieties over their status in respectable British society, intense pressures of anglicization pressed onto immigrant Jewish identity and manifested themselves in the streets of the East End slum that they called home. Here, unacculturated immigrant Jews retained their own identities, formed diverse communities, and interacted with the assimilationist pressures of social reform. In *Children of the Ghetto*, Israel Zangwill paints a realistic, diverse portrait of immigrant Jewish experiences within the East End at a time when immigrant Jewish identity was under fierce pressure to assimilate to British cultural values.

⁴⁹ Zangwill and Rochelson, 76.

⁵⁰ Zangwill and Rochelson, 76.

Through his description of London streets, inhabitants, and interiors, Zangwill's novel locates the city as a site for the navigation of a complex identity, caught between two worlds.

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