

Fascist Downfall at the Gates of London's Jewish Quarter



- Shimon Rosenberg

**75 Years Since a
Pogrom by British
Fascists was
Averted through
the Timely
Intervention of
London's Gentiles**

When thousands of British Fascists descended on the Jewish Quarter in London's East End to demonstrate for their party and attack Jewish residents, they naturally assumed they would find support among the local non-Jewish residents—as had been the case throughout Europe. They were in for a shock when they found themselves facing a crowd of many thousands who were determined to keep them out.

*This past Chol Hamoed Succos marked the 75th anniversary of the event. In honor of it, **Zman** traveled to London's East End to speak to historians and descendants of the East End's former Jewish residents to uncover the fascinating story.*



The Jews of London's East End had spent weeks preparing for this day, October 4, 1936, when England's Fascists who had attacked Jews and Jewish property for the past several years would celebrate the fourth anniversary of their group's founding. The British Union of Fascists had decided to celebrate by staging a demonstration right through the city's Jewish district where they could shout their anti-Semitic slogans and intimidate, incite and terrorize the residents.

Knowing well what awaited them, Jews were recommended to stay home from *shul* that year and avoid the usual *Chol Hamoed* outings, opting for the relative safety of their homes until the danger had passed. They locked their doors and shutters, boarded up the windows and waited nervously indoors to see what the day would bring.

Sure enough, in the early afternoon, wild shouts began to pour forth from the entrance to the neighborhood. "No More Jewish Corruption!" "Death to the Jews!" The Jews who had barricaded themselves in their homes cowered in terror as the bloodcurdling shrieks rent the peaceful air.

Jewish East End

The East End is a uniquely historical section of London, formed by the juncture of East London with the original City of London, a walled square mile along the Thames River. When the City's population outgrew its medieval boundaries, the first section to be populated outside of its walls was to the east, thus giving rise to its popular name, East End.

"The East End looked like New York's East Side," explains Shmuel Berger, an influential philanthropist whose fortune began in the East End. "It was the part of London where the 'greenhorns,' the immigrants who arrived looking for a better life, settled, and just like in New York the East Side begins where downtown Manhattan ends, so does the East End share its border with the City."

The history of the East End is not all

pretty. As far back as the 13th Century it was the home of immigrants and refugees. Its slums were inhabited by the most desperately poor of the city's residents, and as a result crime and diseases were common there.

Starting in 1881, the East End saw an influx of Jewish immigrants who sought refuge from the violent pogroms that had swept through Czarist Russia at the prodding and open encouragement of the leaders of the Russian government. By 1905, when a near revolution in Russia was forestalled by converting public dissatisfaction with Czar Nicholas II into anti-Semitic fervor, some 150,000 Jews inhabited the East End, all of them desperately poor. Many of these were people who were hoping to find their way to America and were looking for a temporary home until they could earn enough to pay the fare to cross the ocean. In truth, they had no chance of ever affording the trip, and they were doomed to remain in the London slums forever.

Living conditions in the East End were miserable. Overcrowding forced people to live together in tiny apartments, and long work hours afforded just a bit of bread with which to still the family's ever-present hunger. Many of these immigrants plied the traditional Eastern European crafts of tailors, shoemakers and carpenters.

According to Eliezer Glazias, an expert on the East End and all aspects of the history of London's Jewish community, the Jews of London's East End struggled with the same problem that plagued New York's Jewry at that time: it was virtually impossible to survive at a job if one was adamant about keeping *Shabbos*. A Jew had only two choices. He could either work on *Shabbos* or be certain that if he ever landed a job, it would be over after the first Friday.

The East End was composed of a mix of Jews, says David Rosenberg, a Jewish historian who has published a book about the East End riots in honor of its 75th anniversary. There were the strictly religious Jews who sported beards and *payos*, those less fiercely devoted to their

religion as well as some who were totally irreligious. London even had its share of anti-religious Jews, a problem that it shared with the rest of the pre-World War II world. The religious often faced attacks and insults from their irreligious brothers.

Anti-Semitism on the Rise in England

The end of the "Great War," as World War I was then known, found a shattered world trying to rebuild a tenuous existence out of the ashes. The widespread suffering caused by the war and the shakiness of the new climate it created was felt strongly in the winds of anti-Semitism that swept over the entire European continent, and the island kingdom of England was no exception.

Another of the strong sentiments that swept across Europe in the wake of the war that left 10 million dead was Fascism, the belief in a strong military-based central government controlled by a dictator who would lead the country according to what was best for the greater public, even at the expense of the rights of the individual. This extreme right-wing political belief was as a result of the nationalistic tendencies that arose during World War I, and it was touted in some form in every country in Europe.

Fascism is most widely associated with the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, who made it his national program as he swept into power in the years immediately after World War I. Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan were also based on this political system, and Spain's General Francisco Franco won a hard-fought and bloody battle in the 1930s that brought his Fascist regime to power. Although these were the only countries where Fascism ruled, groups of Fascists fought for control in many other European lands as well.



Birds-eye view of historical London in the center of town.



Typical scene of a Jewish tailor before his East End storefront.



Newspaper kiosk in the East End selling Jewish periodicals.