

Jews and Europe in the Twenty-First Century- Thinking Jewish by Nick Lambert.
Foreword by David Cesarani.
Vallentine Mitchell 2007.

Jews and Europe in the Twenty-First Century is the fruit of a meticulous, painstaking investigation into the thought and attitudes of Jews in three European countries, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Italy, carried out and further refined over a period of some five years at the start of the century.

Dr Nick Lambert, through his interviews with Rabbis and lay leaders, academics and artists, journalists and novelists, amassed a huge volume of material that offers a keen insight into the mood among the communities from which these individuals are drawn, and within which many of them work. Most of the correspondents agreed to be named in the book, though some insisted on anonymity or pseudonyms; Lambert also notes that some of his interviewees, when re-sent the transcripts of their interviews prior to publication, insisted on changing what they had previously said. Jews and Europe is thus the most up to date representation of European Jewish thinking on all the key aspects of modern Jewish existence in print and a source of much information for consideration by scholars and lay people alike.

Nick Lambert divides his study into nine main chapters, considering Jewish tradition, the precise nature of what Jews are, the Jewish community, and Jews in Europe; he considers the latter in several ways, including the role played by Jews in post-war Europe, the Jewish sense of belonging, or not, to the countries in which we reside, and the relationship between Europe-aculturated Jews and the State of Israel.

I salute Nick Lambert for his work with a modicum of diffidence because I was one of his interviewees, but wholeheartedly because it is a superb and telling snapshot of where European Jews in his three chosen countries are, and much may be extrapolated from it with regard to the future and how we will shape it. Lambert frames his chapters and the comments of his interviewees with just the right amount of analysis and explanation, and his light touch is enhanced both by his erudition and sense of humour. Jews and Europe is a book for anyone with an interest in or concern for the future of European Jewry, and you don't have to be a sociologist or a Jewish monomaniac to enjoy it and be stimulated by it.

Some of the material comes as no surprise: the tensions between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, writ much smaller in Europe than in Israel, the gulf between traditional and non-traditional Jews, and the animosity and lack of empathy with the other that so often defines their non-relationship; the huge challenge presented by any attempts to define precisely what Jews are, the negative impact of the alien graft of ultra-Orthodox rabbis on communities that have no historical experience of them and for whose traditions the rabbis in question have complete disregard; the dysfunctional nature of Jewish communal leadership, its lack of intellect and bovine stubbornness.

In his summary of this material, Lambert notes that the situation is far from hopeless. (p.113)

Today, Jews who are secular, female, dissenting, peripheral intellectuals, patrilineals, homosexual or mamzer cannot be subjected to the punitive measures of incarceration, excommunication or execution by Jewish authorities to which they once could. Inter-denominational in-fighting, low levels of intellectual rigour, high levels of intra-communal strife, materialism, argumentativeness, theatrics, arrogance, authoritarianism, crony-ism, prestige-seeking, political playground-making, questionable 'chief' rabbimates, dubious themes through which communal leaders manipulate their members' identity (let us hear no more the words 'adversity', 'anti-Semitism', 'out-marriage', 'continuity' and 'authentic Jewish life') together with intractable arguments over theology and a tendency to feather their own nests appear to characterise Jewish communal management and preclude the creation of that mythic universal diasporic Jewish council. A glance at the mismanagement, propensity to corruption, and the worldly ignorance of past Jewish authorities should be enough to convince us that dystopia is sometimes better than its alternative.

The chapter on the relationship between European Jews and the State of Israel also holds little that is surprising, though in the year of Israel's 60th anniversary the material that it contains is a powerful indication of the degree of 21st century disconnect between so many Jews and the Jewish state, the shame and embarrassment felt by many European Jews over the actions of successive Israeli governments and their often brutal occupation of Palestinian lands, and the fact that many interviewees stated that if the chips were ever down in the countries of their birth Israel would be absolutely the last country in which they would wish to live.

For me the most powerful part of the book, and the most thought-provoking, is that concerning the Shoah and its continuing, malevolent influence and impact. Much may be drawn from this material, not least the profound difference of the psychological impact of the Shoah on Jewish communities such as those of Italy and Holland, where the Nazis' influence in all its horrible breadth was felt, and that of Great Britain, which remained safe and free.

The impact of the Shoah continues to be felt in many areas: in his fifth chapter, In Hiding: The Jews of Europe, Lambert details an extraordinary degree of ambivalence towards the European Union, based, inter alia, on the Christian internationalist conservatism that underlay its foundation and the concept of European supranationalism that was a key plank of German National Socialism.

According to his findings, Jews in Britain and Europe fear greater EU integration because it might lead to a fortress Europe dominated by extremists from which Jews would be unable to escape, and still harbour dark opinions about Austria and Germany, which define their broader view of Europe as a whole and inform their suspicion of many actions taken by the EU Commission in Brussels. In addition, there is a further divide between Jews within the EU, in that those who survived and continue to live in Continental Europe find it hard to identify and empathise with a British Jewry that managed to avoid their defining experience between 1933 and 1945.

Further ramifications of the Shoah may be found in the following chapter, Don't Tug the Loose Thread: Jews and National Belonging which considers the Jewish connection to our lands of birth or domicile and the ways that Jewish history, particularly in continental Europe, unavoidably removes the Jew from certain cultural and societal interaction, as if many Jewish lives carry a specific shadow unknown to non-Jews from the darkness of which the Jew can never totally emerge; and sometimes the size and scope of the shadow is increased by actions that have an enormous impact to which those who instigate them are completely oblivious, such as the Vatican's intention to beatify Pope Pius XII and the Jewish convert to Catholicism, Edith Stein, who was murdered at Auschwitz because she was a Jew by birth.

In his penultimate chapter, Nick Lambert considers the ways in which Jews knowingly and unknowingly take steps to protect themselves within the societies in which they live, not least by achieving positions of prominence and influence and/or by making the powerful their friends, as if, should their situation deteriorate, their importance will protect them from a fate that might consume lesser mortals. This is a vivid counterpoint to the equally strong Jewish tradition of maintaining anonymity in the - often misguided - hope that if things go wrong they will somehow be ignored, or maybe even missed.

Jews and Europe is a fascinating and intriguing assessment of the state of Jews in the 21st century, in a Europe that has changed beyond all recognition over the last 100 years. Nick Lambert brings meticulous scholarship to his study, yet manages to present his findings with just the right blend of seriousness and humour; in addition he manages that all too rare feat of the interviewer, allowing his interviewees to speak their minds with minimum interruption, his extrapolations complementing the statements to which they relate.

On concluding Jews and Europe the dispassionate reader is left with some unavoidable conclusions: first and foremost, that it will be decades, possibly centuries, before the Shoah ceases to dominate the thinking of modern Jews, and that the baggage inherited from it will still be carried long after the last survivors have died.

Second, that the events of the Shoah will continue to exert a profound influence on how European Jews relate not just to their own countries but to the greater Europe of which they are a part. Third, that the Jewish communities of the 21st century are as bitterly divided as ever, on the whole poorly led, unreasonably dominated by an outmoded, irrelevant and unrepresentative orthodoxy, and failing to find any means by which greater coherence and purpose may be brought into effect. Fourth, that, barring miracles, the Jewish communities of many European countries will continue to shrink, through death, assimilation and a low birth rate, and fifth, that as the decades go by it is more than likely that Israel and Diaspora Jewry will become ever more estranged, the latter not just disturbed and distressed by the actions of successive Israeli governments but turned off and away from Israelis who epitomise for many cultured European Jews everything that they despise.

You may not conclude Jews and Europe feeling uplifted, or hopeful, or energised, but you should feel informed, educated and enlightened by a fine piece of research that holds up a mirror in which, with crystal clarity, we may look and see ourselves as we truly are.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh

Charles Middleburgh is rabbi to the Jewish Celts of Ireland and Wales, Senior Lecturer in Rabbinics at Leo Baeck College and a lecturer at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin.