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“ONLY IN AMERICA!”: THE JEWISH LORD
MAYOR OF DUBLIN ROBERT BRISCOE IN
THE UNITED STATES, 1956–1958

Rebecca Heilweil

Introduction: From Gun Runner to Lord Mayor

Upon his election as Lord Mayor of Dublin in 1956, Robert Briscoe pursued two key forms of Jewish advocacy. He participated in United Jewish Appeal fundraising tours in the U.S. to support Jewish refugees, and promoted his personal narrative of Irish-Jewish identity, primarily through American television appearances and his autobiography, *For the Life of Me* (1958), co-authored with journalist Alden Hatch.¹ Briscoe traversed significantly more complicated Irish-Jewish politics than either of his predecessors, Chief Rabbi of the Irish Free State Isaac Herzog and Chief Rabbi of the Republic of Ireland Immanuel Jakobovits.² Herzog had represented the Irish Jewish community while balancing the politics of the Irish Free State and Zionism. Jakobovits had balanced the politics of Irish nationalism, Zionism, as well as the establishment of new states, the Republic of Ireland (1949) and the State of Israel (1948). Briscoe, who had previously supported Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, Revisionist Zionism, the Republic of Ireland and the State of Israel, had to please two additional political constituencies: those of the Irish American and the Jewish American diasporas. Jakobovits also toured the U.S., though his trip was shorter than Briscoe’s and attracted significantly less publicity. Unlike the Chief Rabbis, as Lord Mayor of Dublin Briscoe was officially an Irish government official, not a representative of a Jewish organizations or movements.

Throughout his travel and media appearances in the United States, the Lord Mayor argued that the parallels in the

Irish and Jewish experiences afforded him a unique understanding of the two peoples. For Briscoe, this empathy meant that the Irish Republican was inherently an ideological ally to the Jewish Zionist. To support this contention, Briscoe argued that Ireland had never expressed bigotry towards the Jews, which both the 1937 Irish Constitution and his own election exemplified.³ He further insisted that his Jewishness was fundamental not only to his own Irish patriotism, but also to the collective patriotism of Catholic Ireland. Ireland, he argued, was exceptional *because* it was uniquely tolerant of the Jews. To Briscoe, this quality of Ireland also meant that his Irish identity would not conflict with his “other” obligation: Jewish Zionism. Through both his fundraising tour and his own media appearances, Briscoe emphasized the parallels in Irish and Jewish national experiences by promoting his own Republican-Zionist narrative and identity.

Briscoe was born to Lithuanian-Jewish immigrants in Ireland in 1894. As a young man, he was active in Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army (IRA). In 1919, for example, he traveled to Germany to help the IRA procure arms. During the Irish Civil War, Briscoe opposed the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, which established the Irish Free State as a Dominion of the British Commonwealth and maintained the partition of Ireland. In 1922, he was involved in the infamous battle between pro- and anti-Treaty factions at the Irish consulate in Manhattan.⁴ In 1927, he was elected to Dáil Éireann as a Fianna Fáil Deputy. Deputy Briscoe, along with Deputy Patrick Little, became known for authoring legislation to regulate money-lending.⁵

Unlike Herzog or Jakobovits, Briscoe was neither a religious official nor a completely observant Orthodox Jew. While he regularly attended services at the Dublin Hebrew Congregation and observed the Sabbath, he also ate non-Kosher food.⁶ In addition, in a 1964 ceremony attended by Éamon de Valera, one of his daughters became a Catholic nun.⁷

The Lord Mayor was also more politically militant than either Herzog or Jakobovits. When Revisionist Zionist leader

Ze'ev Jabotinsky visited Ireland in the late 1930s, Briscoe advised Jabotinsky on how best to fight the British in Palestine. In 1939, Briscoe traveled to Washington to lobby on behalf of Jabotinsky's New Zionist Organization. His plan was foiled, however, by the United Jewish Appeal (UJA), which was reluctant to exclusively tie itself to Jewish settlement in Palestine.⁸ Throughout World War II, Briscoe advocated for admission of Jewish refugees to Ireland in private correspondence with several Department of Justice officials. Within both nationalist causes, Briscoe remained steadfast in his opposition to partition.⁹ In 1956, he became the first Jewish Lord Mayor of Dublin. Though the Irish Jew Lewis Wormser Harris was elected to the position in 1876, he died before taking office. Following an electoral tie, the Dublin Councillors chose Briscoe as their honorary chairman (Lord Mayor) for a one-year term, during which he would be expected to represent Dublin and the country at public events.

While Briscoe achieved unique Irish-Jewish celebrity status in world affairs, other Jews with strong links to Ireland also became active in Israeli politics. From 1948 until 1957, Dublin-born Jacob Herzog, Rabbi Isaac Herzog's son, served as an Israeli Foreign service advisor.¹⁰ His other son, Belfast-born, Dublin-raised Chaim Herzog, served as head of the Israeli Defense Forces' Military Intelligence Branches in the early 1950s and re-assumed the position in 1959. He would eventually become the sixth president of Israel in 1983. Dublin Jew Max Nurock, meanwhile, became Israel's first ambassador to Australia, where he, like Briscoe, found a prominent Irish diaspora.¹¹ Leo Cohen, a respected intellectual in Ireland who spent the 1930s researching the Irish Free State's constitution, also served as an Israeli diplomat.¹²

Briscoe was aware that many Jewish leaders were concerned that public support for Zionism could reignite old accusations of Jewish dual-loyalties. Across Europe, Jewish leaders had been debating the Zionist-assimilationist dichotomy.¹³ Comfortable Jews were afraid that Zionism could undermine their perceived

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allegiance to their home countries in Europe. Briscoe, however, knowingly flouted these concerns. In the U.S., the Lord Mayor used himself as the primary example of Irish-Jewish solidarity, forwarding that he could simultaneously be a Zionist-Republican Jewish citizen of Catholic Ireland while satisfying the demands of both the Irish and Jewish diasporas.

Robert Briscoe's Diaspora Tours

Upon his election as Lord Mayor on June 25, 1956, Briscoe framed his new office as proof to the international community of Ireland's exceptional tolerance. He proclaimed: “I think this a magnificent gesture that will go forth from this room to the world - that at least in Ireland there is absolute tolerance and that in this Catholic Ireland a man of any Faith can have the goodwill of his co-citizens.”¹⁴ Briscoe argued that despite attempts to smear Ireland as anti-Semitic, the 1937 Irish Constitution proved that Irish citizens of all religions possessed equal rights.¹⁵ He also leveraged his election as an opportunity to critique British rule in Northern Ireland; for example, he condemned the defeat of Catholic Hugh McAteer, an Irish Republican Mayoral candidate who had just lost an election in Derry, Northern Ireland. While Derry had a Catholic majority, the city had been gerrymandered to favor Protestant control.¹⁶ “I feel for him as I know he would feel for me with all true Irishmen had I been debarred from the most honored position in my native city simply because I was a Jew,” Briscoe said.¹⁷ Throughout the continuing celebratory press coverage, Briscoe frequently emphasized Ireland's “absolute tolerance.”¹⁸ His election, meanwhile, earned international headlines.¹⁹

In cities like New York, Boston, Los Angeles, and Cincinnati, Irish and Jewish Americans, both ethnoreligious diasporas, were excited to meet the New Lord Mayor. By the 1950s, Irish Americans and Jewish Americans had built two of the most impressive diaspora infrastructures of American immigrant

groups and were eager to insert themselves into their respective homelands’ politics.²⁰ Zionist Jews were particularly excited that Briscoe, who had been publicly supportive of a Jewish state in Palestine for over a decade, had become so prominent in the Irish and global news. “Not since Dr. Isaac Herzog was called from Dublin to become Chief Rabbi in the Holy Land had the Eire Jewish community featured so prominently in the world’s press,” proclaimed Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits.²¹ Similarly, in a note to Briscoe, Henry Hurwitz, the head of the South African United Zionist Revisionist Party, expressed his pride that a “disciple” of Jabotinsky had been elected to such an influential position.²²

In August 1956, Briscoe announced that he would be touring the United States twice in the following eight months on a plane piloted by his son, Captain Bill Briscoe, with stops in Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, and Cleveland. The tour would officially be conducted on behalf of the United Jewish Appeal and the Irish Societies of America.²³ Consequently, the two American diasporas quickly began clamoring for his time.²⁴ Over the course of his trip, Briscoe would meet with various archbishops and Irish diaspora organizations to promote tourism and business in Ireland. He had also been officially invited to New York for St. Patrick’s Day by Mayor Wagner in honor of the second-half of his American tour.²⁵ By participating in the parade, he would be following in the steps of Éamon de Valera, who in 1948 had traveled to America as part of his worldwide campaign to unify the remaining six counties of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland.²⁶ While the tour was diplomatically unsuccessful, de Valera catalyzed Irish-American interest in Irish politics.

Coincidentally, the UJA’s fundraising plan had been in part modeled on the Irish diaspora bond drive, a nation-building experiment of the 1920s led by Michael Collins. Unlike traditional charity, bonds were more suited towards gift-giving, and nurtured long-term investment in the homeland. American Jewish Zionists, however, were likely more primed to welcome

Briscoe's dual-identity than were Irish American supporters of Republicanism. Over the late 1800s and early 1900s, American Zionists had looked specifically to Irish Americans as a model community of diaspora homeland nationalists. Irish Americans had created a prominent nationalist network throughout the United States that promoted Home Rule and Irish independence from Britain; included were the United Irish League of America, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and the Friends of Irish Freedom.²⁷ While Briscoe maintained his Zionist fervor when speaking to the Jewish American public, he would have to discourage the nationalist fervor of Irish Americans who had been raising funds to support militants in Northern Ireland.²⁸

On the day of his departure, Briscoe emphasized that he was visiting the United States to demonstrate the accepting liberalism of Irish society. “In going to the United States,” he said, “my wife and I will be evidence of the wonderful tolerance that exists in Ireland. Despite what has been said in many places nearby, there is no bigotry in this country and there is full respect for the private conscience for the individual.”²⁹ What he made less known in Ireland, however, was that he was also scheduled to attend several World Zionist and United Jewish Appeal fundraising events.³⁰ Briscoe's “Irish-Jewish” trip was complicated by a history of intra-ethnic politics within the United States. American Jews had come to resent what they saw as aggression from disproportionately Irish police departments, while Jewish communities at times promoted ugly stereotypes that Irish Americans were drunk and violent.³¹ Irish American communities, moreover, were not immune to broader anti-Semitic movements.³²

During Briscoe's first tour of the United States, he helped the UJA raise \$75 million dollars.³³ There is strong evidence, however, that he was highly concerned about balancing his position as the Dublin Mayor with his support for Jewish causes. In January 1957, Joshua Glasser, a Jew born in Dublin living in Chicago (and Briscoe's cousin), wrote to Briscoe about Briscoe's

assistant: “I was tremendously impressed with his apparent ability and appreciation of your position and the need above all else to keep your engagement on the highest possible plane so that, in no case, will you be subject to any embarrassment or charged with exploitation of your office.”³⁴

Still, following Briscoe’s return from the U.S., the Dublin Commission of the Jewish National Fund purchased a forest to honor the Lord Mayor’s historic election. At the ceremony attended by Gershon Agnon, the Mayor of Jerusalem, Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits, and Briscoe himself, the Lord Mayor conveyed a fervent notion of Irish-Israeli solidarity. “While Jews throughout the world who rose to eminence all too often tended to discard their Jewish identity,” Jakobovits explained, “Councillor Briscoe had remained a loyal, proud, and uncompromising Jew.” He then complimented Briscoe’s efforts in both “Ireland’s national struggle” and the Zionist cause. The Chief Rabbi said it was “especially notable” how eager Briscoe had been to defend Jewish nationalism, “[u]nlike so many prominent Jewish public figures elsewhere.”³⁵ Through his election to Lord Mayor as an open Zionist, Briscoe had managed to overcome the concerns of many Jewish politicians who feared accusations of disloyalty, or were simply uninterested in Zionism or Israel.

On March 16, 1957, Robert Briscoe returned to the United States to lead New York’s famed St. Patrick’s Day parade down Fifth Avenue. In anticipation of his trip, Briscoe authored several articles for the *Washington Post* and *Times Herald* explaining the story of his life, which eventually led to the publication of his autobiography in 1958.^{36,37} At a press conference following the parade, Briscoe told a reporter that in the United States, he was focused on advancing “good will between our two countries” and on promoting tourism to Ireland.³⁸ His rhetoric consistently emphasized that supporting both Israel and Ireland was natural.

When meeting with the press and politicians, Briscoe used his ethnic humor in New York to emphasize both of his identities. A day before the parade, the Lord Mayor had visited

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New York’s Mayor Robert Wagner, together with the Irish Ambassador to the United States, Frederick Boland.³⁹ “Lord Mayor and my good friend- Bob Briscoe, I am glad to welcome you from the second largest Irish city in the world to the largest Irish city in the world,” Wagner joked. Briscoe responded, “Dublin is the most ancient Irish capital, so we break around even.” “Ireland has lovely food, lovely scenery, lovely people and especially lovely colleens,” Briscoe quipped to another reporter.⁴⁰ When one interviewer asked Wagner how he thought an Irish-Jewish politician would do in New York, the New York Mayor said, “I’m glad Bob Briscoe isn’t running against me,” referencing the large Jewish and Irish diaspora communities living in New York.

The Lord Mayor also encouraged the press to cover his Jewish identity, as St. Patrick’s Day Parade fell on Shabbat. *The New York Times* interviewed Orthodox rabbis about Briscoe’s



Robert Briscoe, Lord Mayor of Dublin, presents Boston Mayor, John F. Collins with Waterford Crystal Vase

participation in the event; the rabbis explained that “reviewing a parade, even waving and cheering is not work” (Orthodox Jews generally do not participate in work-related activities during the Sabbath). At Congregation Zichron Ephraim, Rabbi Zev Zahavy remarked that Briscoe was “an inspiration to all Jews in America and throughout the world.”⁴¹ *The New York Times* reported that “an ardent Irishman, Mr. Briscoe is also an ardent Jew” and “was among the first to take up Israel’s cause.”⁴²

Throughout his tour, Briscoe was insistent that there was no contradiction in his Irish and Jewish advocacy. In Boston on Sunday, March 17, Briscoe again headlined a St. Patrick’s Day Parade. Briscoe was joined on the four-mile parade route by Boston Mayor John B. Hynes, and 10,000 followers, and attended by 300,000 people.⁴³⁴⁴ In Massachusetts, the Irish American Catholic leaders’ approach to Briscoe mirrored that of their Irish citizen counterparts. The Archbishop of Boston, Dr. Cushing, used Briscoe’s visit as an opportunity to defend the Catholic position on Jews. Ireland had yet again benevolently chosen an outsider as its leader, he said. The Irish, he explained, had “chose[n] for the National Saint a stranger who first stepped on their shores as a slave, for one of their incomparable leaders the Protestant Parnell, for the first President of their Republic, a gentle Protestant poet, Douglas Hyde, and Robert Briscoe, proud and devoted Jew, proud and devoted Irishman, for the office of Lord Mayor of Dublin.”⁴⁵ “Spiritually we are all Semites,” Cushing further remarked.⁴⁶

Some Boston Catholics were not pleased that their St. Patrick’s Day Parade had been rescheduled from Saturday to Sunday for a Jewish mayor’s schedule. Jesuit Father Leonard Freney, a known anti-Semite, lamented Dublin’s misguided choice of Briscoe as Lord Mayor. Freney believed that the Irish had elected a Jewish Lord Mayor because, “[a]lthough instructed by their Faith that the Jews are a perfidious and deicide race, the Irish never had the lesson driven home for them the same way the Poles and the Frenchs and the Italians and the Germans

and the Spaniards have.” He explained that Briscoe’s entire trip was actually orchestrated by “local Jews” to construct a “Judaean-Christian hoax” that would mislead the public that Judaism was just as acceptable as Christianity. There is no evidence as to whether Briscoe directly responded to Freeney.⁴⁷

Throughout March 1957, the media, fascinated with Briscoe’s identity and familiar with Irish-Jewish ethnic conflict in the U.S., was quick to ask the Lord Mayor about anti-Semitism in Ireland. Briscoe denied its existence. At a New York luncheon, Briscoe said “there is no country in the world so free from anti-Semitism as Ireland, and that is why I, a member of the smallest minority- we are less than 1 per cent- hold the Office I do in a city more than 93 percent Catholic.”⁴⁸ Briscoe’s denial of anti-Semitism in Ireland was incessant and clearly one of his main talking points. In Los Angeles, he was asked the same question, to which he responded: “I am the live evidence there is absolutely no bigotry in Ireland.”⁴⁹ In Cincinnati, Briscoe declared that Ireland was “without blemish in regard to the persecution of minorities.”⁵⁰

Briscoe regularly emphasized that the Irish and the Jews shared a natural understanding through similar national experiences. To one newspaper, Briscoe explained his Zionist advocacy by arguing that it proved his allegiance to Ireland. “The people of Dublin would expect him to be loyal to the Jewish community of the world; for if ‘I am not loyal to my own, they can’t expect me to [be] loyal to them,’ he said. On April 1, at a Los Angeles United Jewish Welfare Fund fundraising rally, Briscoe noted that “in 1919 Irish patriots sent a mission to the United States to borrow \$6,000,000 for the new nation. Many Jews subscribed to that loan.” He said that it “isn’t so strange that a Jew should become mayor of Dublin,” and that “the history of the Irish is similar to that of the Jews—rich in heroism and sacrifice. Both people have withstood every method of persecution designed to extinguish their way of life, heritage and faith.” Briscoe publicly assured his audiences that there was

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Plaque Outside the Irish Jewish Museum in Dublin, 2017.

no challenge of “dual loyalty” and that his efforts represented solidarity.⁵¹

In Chicago on April 11, 1957, Briscoe campaigned for both the refugees in Israel and for the promotion of American business in Ireland. At the UJA fundraising meetings, he argued that the “the vast majority of Jewish refugees must be transported to Israel and permanently settled, and the responsibility is ours.” At a press conference on the same day, Briscoe advertised, “come spend some of your dollars in Ireland—and try some of our Irish whiskey.”⁵² However Briscoe was certainly aware of the “dual-loyalty” problem that other Jews had encountered. “He said that some people of Jewish faith ‘refuse to support Jewish causes’ because they feel such causes are in conflict with their patriotic obligations,” reported the *Evening Herald*.⁵³ Briscoe’s sentiments echoed those of Jakobovits’, who in his celebratory speech maligned Jewish politicians who did not publicly support Zionism. Briscoe’s response was to double-down on both his Republicanism and Zionism, openly rejecting the idea that a Jew could not honestly pursue two national causes simultaneously.

Briscoe's trips to the U.S. were largely successful. The *American Israelite* proudly reported that in one dinner in Cincinnati, Briscoe had managed to raise \$25,000 for Jewish causes.⁵⁴ Cincinnati's Mayor Charles Taft proclaimed a “Robert Briscoe Day”(The *American Israelite*, Cincinnati's Jewish weekly newspaper, had once despised Irish nationalism, as well as Zionism. In the early 1900s, the editorial staff had consistently argued that both diaspora Irish Republicanism and diaspora Zionism were anti-American.)⁵⁵⁵⁶ In another letter, Briscoe was told that he had drawn “by far the largest crowd in the history of Jewish Welfare Fund Campaign.”⁵⁷

The Irish Jewish community was also happily following Briscoe's trips through media reports, according to an April 9, 1957 letter from Chief Rabbi Jakobovits.⁵⁸ Inspired by Briscoe, Jakobovits, took a short trip to the States to promote Jewish causes, and empathized with the immense emotional labor such a trip required.⁵⁹ A Melvin Goldstein even inquired as to whether Briscoe was being considered for Ireland's ambassador to the United States.⁶⁰ Inevitably, Briscoe also made an impression on the American Jewish community, who in Briscoe had found a link to their Dublin co-religionists. Following the trip, letters flowed in from Jewish organizations thanking him for his visit and fundraising, and promising to visit Dublin. Americans even tried to visit Briscoe at the Dáil every day.⁶¹

Briscoe would lose his Lord Mayor re-election campaign in 1957, though he would win back the position in 1961. By achieving the position of “Lord Mayor” once, Briscoe had amassed enough name-recognition to return to the U.S. following his loss. In February, 1958, Briscoe returned to New York to help ameliorate Ireland's “chronic” unemployment. “[The] economic situation is bad, to put it mildly,” Briscoe told the *New York Times*.⁶² In the U.S., he hoped to attract American companies to do business in Ireland.

By the end of his tours of the United States, Robert Briscoe had visited over fifty cities. Thanks to Briscoe, Irish

tourism had reportedly begun to boom. New York’s Irish Tourist office reported that June 1957 requests for travel had jumped 20 percent since the month before.⁶³ In Ireland, the press eagerly reported that Briscoe was promoting American spending in Ireland.⁶⁴ In one May 4, 1957 *Donegal News* feature titled, “Good work, Mr. Briscoe!,” the paper remarked that “[British] *Newsletter* and the *Telegraph* cannot conceal their chagrin that the Jewish Lord Mayor of Dublin has been received at the White House.”⁶⁵ The author applauded the massive attention that Briscoe had received in the United States, and gladly complimented Briscoe’s defense of Irish neutrality during World War 2.

While speaking on his fundraising tour, Briscoe emphasized the Irish and the Jews’ parallel diaspora experiences in the United States. By vigorously defending Ireland and Zionism, Briscoe also satisfied both Catholics and Jews back in Ireland. Through his statements to the Press, Briscoe promoted an image that presented Irish and Jewish advocacy in concert. Briscoe did not actively discuss “balancing” his Irish and Jewish identities; he maintained that the Irish and the Jews were fundamentally separate national groups, though he happened to be a member of both. Briscoe minimized Irish anti-Semitism, denying any contradiction between his two identities, and referenced examples of Irish Jewish national solidarity. Throughout his tour, Briscoe maintained Zionism was a natural corollary to his Irish patriotism.

Robert Briscoe: Published and on Television

Beyond his lecture tour, Robert Briscoe also took steps to advertise his own story on American media. Throughout 1957, he made several appearances on popular television shows, including a tense debate on *Meet the Press* and an hour-and-a-half long autobiographical drama on the CBS show *Playhouse 90*.⁶⁶ In 1958, Briscoe published his memoir, *For the Life of Me*, co-authored with Alden Hatch. In these medium, Briscoe

provided longer-form narratives outlining how his Zionism and Irish Republicanism interacted. The Lord Mayor invoked himself as the primary example of Irish-Jewish solidarity, recounting his life story to highlight the Irish and Jews’ shared feelings of national persecution and aspirations for self-determination.

On March 24, 1957, Briscoe appeared on Meet the Press, a weekly American political television show with an expansive audience. When Briscoe invoked his Jewish identity to support the Irish position, host Ernest Lindley pointed to the uncomfortable contradictions between Irish neutrality and Briscoe’s World War II Zionist advocacy. The show introduced Briscoe’s “two-fold mission, both as a goodwill ambassador of Ireland and as a fundraiser for the United Jewish Appeal.” Briscoe was asked directly about Northern Ireland, Israel, and Ireland’s policy of military neutrality, including its reluctance to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Briscoe explained that he believed that “we regard the people of the northern six countries as Irishmen, as we are in the 26 southern counties.” Lindley rebutted Briscoe’s position, countering that many residents of Northern Ireland are not “Irish” ethnically. Briscoe shrewdly invoked his own identity, quipping “I don’t regard them as Scotch-Irish anymore than I would expect anybody to regard me as Lithuanian-Irish.”⁶⁷

When questioned about Israel, Briscoe remained ardent that young Jews should continue to make *aliyah* to Israel, to help defend the young country from hostile neighbors and to assist the “small number... [of] active people apart from the old chronics that were brought in as refugees.” Briscoe’s belief that young Jews were obligated to consistently train to fight on behalf of Israel had not changed since 1939.⁶⁸ But Briscoe had just justified Irish neutrality. Lindley believed he had caught Briscoe in an inherent contradiction:

Mr. Lindley: “I don’t want to rake over old coals. I notice that in the autobiography, a part of which

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was distributed through International News Service just before you came here, you point out that you pressed for the creation of a Jewish Army to fight the Axis, and a few paragraphs later you defend Irish neutrality. Now if the Axis was something that ought to be fought by the Jews, why wasn't it something that ought to be fought by the Irish[?]"⁶⁹

On national television, Lindley believed he had located a clear contradiction in Briscoe's otherwise happy Irish Jewish tour. Why were the Irish less obligated to fight the Germans than the Jews? Briscoe answered defensively, emphasizing that the Irish had, in fact, fought against the Nazis.

Mr. Briscoe: “Nothing inconsistent in that attitude, nothing inconsistent. The Germans, the Nazis, were decimating, destroying our people as if they weren't human beings, and my advocacy over many years when I was in the States in 1938-9, and when many people thought war was not inevitable, and I knew it was inevitable, I then urged the training of Jewish people to defend themselves wherever they might be attacked. I want to say this, there's no comparison. We did not stop Irish citizens freely joining any British force, and, in fact, southern Ireland's contribution, without conscription, in volunteers in all the services in Great Britain was proportionately in excess of what is supposed to be the loyalist part of Ireland, northern Ireland.”

Briscoe rebutted Lindley, arguing that the Jews, unlike the Irish, faced an existential risk. Still, he defended Ireland's reputation, arguing that Irish citizens were allowed, and that many had,

fought against Nazi Germany on behalf of the British.⁷⁰ While the Irish government remained neutral, he implied that the Irish people fought in solidarity with the Jews. Briscoe maintained there was “[n]othing inconsistent in that attitude, nothing inconsistent.” However, Briscoe’s comment reveals the challenge of representing two ethnic groups as in solidarity similar through shared experiences. Similar national histories in no way guarantees that two States (or national movements) pursue the same foreign (or domestic) policies. So while Briscoe successfully forwarded that the Irish and the Jews were similar, he also had to address Ireland’s lack of concrete action regarding Jewish issues.

On June 17, 1957, the CBS show *Playhouse 90* featured Briscoe in an anthology drama that better catered to the Lord Mayor’s preferred telling of his story.⁷¹ The film portrayed a dramatized version of Briscoe’s life, likely based on early drafts of his autobiography. The movie, which starred the Irish-American Art Carney as “Robert Briscoe,” emphasized the optimistic and campy version of Briscoe’s Irish-Jewish identity. Host Eddie Cantor introduced the *Playhouse* autobiography with the inherent question of Briscoe’s life, “a Jewish leprechaun, and in Dublin’s city hall?”⁷² The film does not portray any of Briscoe’s peer IRA members as anti-Semitic.

Any internal conflict within Robert’s, the film’s protagonist, Irish and Jewish identities are resolved early in the film. The hour-long drama begins in 1919, on a dual-holiday of Shabbat and Passover. Robert’s family has returned from Friday night services. But Robert is missing, and is subsequently shown escaping the heartless, British Black and Tans with his IRA friends. Though his fellow IRA member Jamie offers Briscoe bread to calm his stomach, he declines. “Is that the [holiday] where you eat cardboard as a penance?” his friend Jamie Farrow retorts. Briscoe eventually makes it home, only to meet his looming and frustrated Lithuanian father. He warns Robert to keep his head down and to avoid causing trouble; he should not risk the haven Ireland had provided from the persecution of Eastern Europe.

But Robert is unconvinced. When the family leaves the door ajar, a symbol to welcome in the prophet Elijah, as Passover tradition requires, an IRA messenger arrives at the doorway to tell Briscoe that he has been given another assignment. Despite his father's hope that he will remain at the Passover service, Briscoe heads to an IRA hideout. He learns that he has been promoted to help procure arms in Germany.

While Robert's father worries that his son has chosen the IRA over his Judaism, by the end of the film's first scene, Robert's father makes clear that the Irish and the Jews share parallel experience of facing national persecution. When Robert returns home, he finds that the Passover service has been interrupted. The Black and Tans had raided the neighborhood, killing a young Irish boy from the Donovan family next door. As a result, Robert's father suffered a heart attack and has been left recovering in bed. When Briscoe attempts to apologize to his father, his father makes clear that Briscoe was right to join the IRA, despite father's previous concerns. Briscoe's father declares that his son has no knowledge of “what it was like in Lithuania,” where, “A Jew couldn't go to school, couldn't own property, every few years, a pogrom.” Ireland, in comparison, has been a “haven.” “[In Ireland] [n]ot once in all the years did anyone say *Jude* to me, with anger or contempt. And tonight, this boy shot down in the streets like a criminal, it tore my heart open. Like it was you. . . . Robert, they're our neighbors, the Donovans,” Robert's father explains. He gives Robert his blessing, declaring: “We are Irish, the Briscoes, we're an Irish family. It's not merely a piece of paper that was handed to us. I'm proud you realised, Ireland's fight was our fight.” The movie purports that the Irish and Jewish fights are, fundamentally, the same fight, resolving any earlier conflict between Robert's Irish and Jewish allegiances.

The rest of the film follows Robert's life up through the Irish Civil War.⁷³ In the remaining scenes, Robert's faith is portrayed without conflict with his Irish identity, and at times even becomes a source of humor. When the German Herr

Jurgens tells Robert that he cannot make weapons transfers so easily, saying “We cannot use broad highways of ordinary commerce. Unfortunately, there are certain Jews involved in this business. You know how these people are,” Robert responds shrewdly: “Yes, yes, we have a few in our organisation.” “I didn’t think Jews are interested in making revolutions, only in making money,” the German retorts. It is implied that the viewer will recognize both the irony in the German’s statement, as well as the challenges Robert faced as an Irish Jew.

By the end of the film, there is no hint that Ireland might suffer from anti-Semitism. The film makes no discussion of Charles Bewley, who was known to have made anti-Semitic comments about Briscoe during their tenure in the IRA.⁷⁴ Briscoe’s courting of Liliane, who must choose between Robert and a “Belfast Jew”, is also used to illuminate Briscoe’s allegiance to Ireland. In reality, Robert’s father was never anti-Republican, and had named Robert’s brother Wolfe Tone after Theobald Wolfe Tone, a leader of the 1798 Rising. Any remaining references to Robert’s Jewish identity are merely funny ethnic juxtapositions meant to entertain an American audience. Ultimately, the film was well-received. The *New York Times* commented that, “It was a splendid tribute to a colorful patriot devoted to his Irish birthright and his Jewish faith.”⁷⁵

That same year, Briscoe’s memoir was published, which offered a long-form description of many of the commentaries that Briscoe had repeatedly offered on his tour. Published by the Boston-based Little, Brown and Company, the book was intended for American audiences.⁷⁶ Chapter 24 was defiantly titled, “I Remain an Irishman,” but the following chapter title amended, “And a Jew.”⁷⁷ The book traversed his times in the IRA, in the Dáil, and his encounters with famous Irish and Jewish politicians. He recalls his meetings with Justice Louis Brandeis, the first Jewish Supreme Court Justice, while recounting that he “taught Jabotinsky how we had secretly trained our Fianna Eireann boys in the time of peace, and the methods we had

found most effective in the guerrilla war.”⁷⁸ As in his *Meet the Press* interview, Briscoe again defended Irish neutrality by arguing that the country “was so benevolent toward England as hardly to be neutral at all” and that more Irish citizens had volunteered to fight for the British, proportionately, than British citizens from Northern Ireland.⁷⁹ Importantly, this book was intended for sale primarily in the United States, and aimed to create a cohesive story of Briscoe life. Through long-form narrative, Briscoe was able to construct, in detail, his ideal representation of his Irish-Jewish identity.

Throughout the late 1950s, Briscoe remained in the American consciousness. In March 1958, Briscoe made an appearance on “What’s My Line,” where the show’s hosts humorously learned that the Lord Mayor of was also Dublin’s leading provider of kosher meat.⁸⁰ In 1962, in a well-publicized meeting with President John F. Kennedy, Briscoe invited the President to Ireland: Briscoe told reporters that: “We’re all hoping that he’ll make up his mind to come to see us soon because we’d very happy to be able to cheer your President, in our country, the country of his descent.”⁸¹ Ultimately, Briscoe did not promote a compound Irish Jewish identity and spent very little time, beyond his own family, discussing the Irish Jewish community in Dublin. Instead, he self-described his politics as having simply taken on the arduous work of both a Jewish and Irish nationalist, avoiding any discussion of inter-identity conflict.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Briscoe’s tours to the United States forwarded the notion that in Ireland, one could be a Zionist and an Irish Republican, two complementary identities that shared a history of religious persecution, diaspora, and national aspirations. While fundraising for the UJA and promoting his own media appearances, Briscoe publicly maintained that Ireland was unique in its tolerance of its small, unassimilated Jewish community. He

also cited history to prove that the Irish and the Jews supported each other: American Jews had purchased Irish bonds in the 1920s, and the Irish had volunteered to fight the Axis powers during World War II. By denying anti-Semitism in Ireland, Briscoe dismissed the possibility of any Irish-Jewish conflict that might jeopardize his ability to simultaneously campaign for both Ireland and Israel. Moreover, his active promotion of Irish tolerance made his Jewish identity, and Zionism, part of Ireland's nationalist identity. With Briscoe, Ireland could be an independent, Catholic nation without charge of religious persecution or discrimination. While other Jewish politicians worried that Zionism might jeopardize their perceived patriotism to their home countries, Briscoe invoked himself, both as Lord Mayor and his history in the I.R.A., as evidence of Irish-Jewish national solidarity. Neither newspapers nor television coverage challenged Briscoe's combination of his two nationalisms.

Home to the world's largest Jewish and Irish populations at the time, America presented Briscoe with newfound challenges to his dual-identity. Among Americans, Irish identity was ethnoreligious and not fundamentally connected to citizenship. Unlike the Irish press, American reporters were aware of tensions between Irish and Jewish immigrant communities and were predisposed to asking about Irish anti-Semitism. The Lord Mayor came to America declaring that he “remain[ed] an Irishman... and a Jew.” Though Israel and Ireland had nascent contradictory interests, Briscoe continued to argue that the mutual experiences of persecution and self-determination made Zionism and Irish republicanism parallel themes. Briscoe's argument could only ring true if he denied anti-Semitism, proving the rare empathy he purported was shared by the Irish and Jewish nations.

Briscoe's strategy also distracted from the fact that Ireland had still not recognized the State of Israel, and was still relatively unhelpful in matters related to Jewish refugees. When in the spring of 1953, Briscoe personally requested that Ireland provide asylum for ten Jewish families, which would be funded by the

Joint Distribution Committee, the Department of Justice took more than a month to respond that only five families had met the necessary criteria of good character and health. That same year, a Department of the Taoiseach file reported:

[i]n the administration of the alien laws it always has been recognised in the departments of Justice, Industry & Commerce and External Affairs that the question of the admission of aliens of Jewish blood present a special problem and the alien laws have been administered less liberally in their case.⁸²

Still, while American reporters inquired about anti-Semitism in Ireland, they never investigated its extent. Meet the Press came the closest to challenging Briscoe’s two identities, but the Lord Mayor maintained that Irish and Jewish nationalism were complementary.

By 1964, Briscoe was still insistent that he had “no conflict of loyalties.”⁸³ “As a citizen of the Irish Republic of the Jewish faith I recognise fully my responsibilities and loyalties. Anyone, like me, living in a country where there is full democracy can fulfill his obligations to his country and retain his right of private conscience without embarrassment of conflict of loyalties,” he wrote in the Jewish Chronicle’s 1964 supplement on Ireland. “So it is therefore that I can work with my fellow-countrymen for the welfare and progress of Ireland and at the same time, and with the same extent of enthusiasm, strive with my coreligionists for the welfare and progress of Israel. Both the Jewish people and the Irish people are now re-established nations. Each in newborn freedom can now shape their own destinies and at the same time strive again to contribute to the world messages as of old for greater and better understanding among all peoples.”⁸⁴

“Only in America!”

Notes

¹ For a biography of Robert Briscoe, see Kevin McCarthy, *Robert Briscoe: Sinn Féin Revolutionary, Fianna Fáil Nationalist and Revisionist Zionist* (Dublin: Peter Lange, 2015).

² This chapter was part of a broader thesis exploring the leaders of the Irish Jewish community.

³ “Dublin’s New Jewish Lord Mayor Hails Tolerance,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 27, 1956.

⁴ Catherine Burns, “The Battle for the Irish Consulate,” The Gotham Center, <https://www.gothamcenter.org/blog/the-battle-for-the-irish-consulate> (accessed December 8, 2017).

⁵ “Moneylenders’ Bill,” *Irish Press*, June 30, 1932.

⁶ “Dublin Hebrew Congregation Yearbook,” the Robert Briscoe Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁷ “Briscoe Daughter Now A Nun,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1964.

⁸ McCarthy, *Robert Briscoe*, 239. “Mr. Briscoe to Visit U.S. in Aid of Eastern Jewry,” *Irish Press*, January 3, 1939.

⁹ Briscoe recounts in his memoir that he was kicked out Temple Emanu-El, a famous synagogue in New York, for interrupting a Rabbi’s speaking in favor of partitioning Palestine. (*For the Life of Me*) He discussed eating non-Kosher food in his memoir.

¹⁰ Eliash, *The Harp and the Shield of David*, 8.

¹¹ Ibid. For discussion of Max Nurock’s meeting with Frank Aiken, see: Eds. Jones, Clive and Tore. Petersen. *Israel’s Clandestine Diplomacies* (London: Hurst, 2013). In 1962, Nurock secretly Dublin to convince Frank Aiken to recognize Israel *de jure*.

¹² Eliash, 8.

¹³ Robert Wistrich, “Zionism and Its Jewish “Assimilationist” Critics (1897-1948), *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, Vol. 4, No 2 (Winter, 1999), 59.

¹⁴ “Deputy Briscoe is Lord Mayor: Name Drawn from Hat After Tie,” *Irish Press*, June 26, 1956.

¹⁵ Peadar O’Curry, “Jewish Mayor Hails Irish Equality,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 28, 1956.

¹⁶ Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (London, The Athlone Press, 1996), 112.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Peter E. Kilroy, “Dublin’s Jewish Mayor Fought For Irish Freedom,” *The Chicago Defender*, June 28, 1956.

¹⁹ Kevin McCarthy, *Robert Briscoe: Sinn Féin Revolutionary, Fianna Fáil Nationalist and Revisionist Zionist* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2016), 237.

- ²⁰ Dan Lainer-Vos, “Manufacturing National Attachments: Gift-giving, market Exchange, and the construction of Irish and Zionist diaspora bonds,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (January 2012), 75.: Avi Picard, “Funding Aliyah,” in Ed. Uzi Rebhun, *The Social Scientific Study of Jewry: Sources, Approaches, Debates* (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2014), 242. “Jewish Population in the United States, 1956,” *American Jewish Yearbook*, 1957.
- ²¹ “Dublin’s New Lord Mayor: Civic Service Held” *The Jewish Chronicle*, July 13, 1956.
- ²² “Letter from Harry Hurwitz, United Zionist Revisionist Party of South Africa on July 17 1956,” Robert Briscoe Papers, National Library of Ireland (MS 26, 555/3/76-104).
- ²³ “Irish and Jews Set Joint Meetings To Hear Dublin’s Orthodox Mayor,” *The American Israelite*, March 7, 1957. “Lord Mayor to Visit U.S.A.” *The Jewish Chronicle*, August 31, 1956.
- ²⁴ “Lord Mayor of Dublin to Visit America,” *Irish Independent*, July 18, 1956.
- ²⁵ “Wagners Invites Briscoe: Sends St. Patrick’s Day Bid to Jewish Mayor of Dublin,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1956.
- ²⁶ Stephen Kelly, “A Policy of Futility: Eamon de Valera’s Anti-Partition Campaign, 1948-51,” *Etudes Irlandaises*, 36-2, (2011) <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/2348#text> (accessed December 15, 2017).
- ²⁷ Judah Bernstein, “‘Two Two Finest Nations in the World’: American Zionists and Irish Nationalism, 1897-1922,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Spring 2017), 8-9.
- ²⁸ “ALD Briscoe Attacks I.R.A. Sympathisers,” *Donegal News*, April 27, 1957.
- ²⁹ “Briscoe of Dublin Is Due Here Today,” *New York Times*, March 14, 1957.
- ³⁰ “Lord Mayor in United States,” *Jewish Chronicle*, March 15, 1957.
- ³¹ Bernstein, 11.
- ³² See Stephen Norwood, “Marauding Youth and the Christian Front: Anti-semitic Violence in Boston and New York During World War II,” *American Jewish History*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (June 2003): 233-267.
- ³³ “\$50,000,000 TO AID REFUGEES Emergency Campaign,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, May 3, 1957.
- ³⁴ For evidence that Glasser is Briscoe’s cousin, see “Dublin’s New Jewish Lord Mayor Hails Tolerance,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 27, 1956. “Letter from Joshua Glasser to Robert Briscoe, January, 1957,” the Robert Briscoe Papers, the National Library of Ireland.
- ³⁵ “Robert Briscoe Forest: Honoring Dublin’s Lord Mayor,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, November 16, 1956.
- ³⁶ “Meeting With De Valera Is ‘Turning’ For Briscoe,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, March 11, 1957.
- ³⁷ John Healy, “Ambassador of Goodwill: Lord Mayor’s Trump,” *Irish Press*,

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³⁸ The Fabulous Irishman. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4->

³⁹ Philip Benjamin, “Bob of New York Meets Dublin Bob,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1957.

⁴⁰ Robert Alden, “City Hails Dublin’s Jewish Lord Mayor,” *New York Times*, March 15, 1957.

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⁴² “Dublin’s Jewish Mayor: Robert Briscoe Was Born in Dublin Is A Business Leader,” *New York Times*, March 15, 1957.

⁴³ “Boston’s Big,” *Evening Herald*, March 19, 1957.

⁴⁴ John Healy, “Mr. Briscoe’s busy round in Boston,” March 20, 1957.

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⁴⁶ Robert Segal, “The Lord Mayor Visits: And Boston Gets Mellow,” *The American Israelite*, April 5, 1957.

⁴⁷ Leonard Freney, “Jewish Invasion of Our Country,” *The Point Magazine*, March 1957. http://www.archive.org/stream/ThePoint1957/ThePoint1957_djvu.txt (accessed October 15, 2017).

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⁴⁹ “Dublin’s Jewish Mayor Pays Visit to Southland,” *Los Angeles*, March 30, 1957.

⁵⁰ “No Persecution of Minorities in Republic,” *Evening Herald*, May 6, 1957.

⁵¹ “Dublin Mayor Honored at Jewish Fund Rally,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 1957.

⁵² Nancy McGill, “Jewish, Irish Pleas Made By Dublin Mayor,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 11, 1957.

⁵³ “No Persecution of Minorities in Republic,” *Evening Herald*, May 6, 1957.

⁵⁴ Jame Feldman, “Briscoe Wins Heart and Key of the City,” *The American Israelite*, May 9, 1957.

⁵⁵ “Mayor Taft Proclaims ‘Robert Briscoe Day’” *The American Israelite*, May 2, 1957.

⁵⁶ Bernstein, 21.

⁵⁷ “Letter to Robert Briscoe, April 9, 1957,” Robert Briscoe Papers, National Library of Ireland

⁵⁸ “Letter from Jakobovits to Briscoe, May 19, 1957” Robert Briscoe Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁵⁹ “Jewish Refugees,” *Irish Examiner*, March 2, 1957. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of Jakobovits’ trip.

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⁶² “Briscoe Here to Promote Irish Tourism and Industry,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1957.

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⁶⁵ “Good work, Mr. Briscoe!,” *Donegal News*, May 4, 1957.

⁶⁶ “Kosher Meat Manufacturer on What’s My Line,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgTbrLcN_C8. [An account named “Alex the Kosherologist” uploaded this video].

⁶⁷ The National Broadcasting Company, “Meet the Press, Produced by Lawrence E. Spivak, Guest, Lord Mayor of Dublin, Vol. 1, No. 12), Sunday, March 24, 1957,” *National Publishing Company*. Robert Briscoe Papers, the National Library of Ireland. MS, 26, 555/5/1-26.

⁶⁸ Henry Gabbett, “Aaron Go Bragh, Greet Briscoe,” *The Washington Post*, March 27, 1957.

⁶⁹ NBC.

⁷⁰ See: “The Forgotten Volunteers of World War II,” *History Ireland*, <http://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/the-forgotten-volunteers-of-world-war-ii/> (accessed March 15, 2017).

⁷¹ “Playhouse 90: U.S. Anthology Drama,” Museum of Broadcast Communications, <http://www.museum.tv/index.htm> (accessed March 15, 2017). “The Fabulous Irishman,” IMDb, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0675626/> (accessed March 15, 2017).

⁷² *The Fabulous Irishman*.

⁷³ There is a remaining 30 minutes of the film, but it is not available on Youtube.

⁷⁴ See: Mervyn O’Driscoll, *Ireland, Germany and the Nazis, Politics and Diplomacy, 1919-1939*, and Robert Briscoe with Alden Hatch, *For the Life of Me* (1958), 359.

⁷⁵ “Robert Briscoe, ‘The Fabulous Irishman’” *The New York Times*, June 28, 1957. “Leonard Fisher to Robert Briscoe, July 1, 1957,” Robert Briscoe Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁷⁶ *For the Life of Me*, inside cover.

⁷⁷ *For the Life of Me*, 283, 290.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 264.

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⁷⁹ Ibid, 286.

⁸⁰ “Kosher Meat Manufacturer on What’s My Line,” Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgTbrLcN_C8 (accessed December 15, 2017).

⁸¹ “President John F. Kennedy Meets With Lord Mayor of Dublin Robert Briscoe, March 26, 1962,” Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGCNMwb7e5I> (accessed December 15, 2017).

⁸² McCarthy, *Robert Briscoe*, 233.

⁸³ Robert Briscoe, “No Conflict of Loyalties,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, May 8, 1964.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Images

Page 17: *Robert Briscoe, Lord Mayor of Dublin, presents Mayor John F. Collins with a Waterford Crystal vase Creator* (Boston, Mayrch 20, 1962), originally uploaded to Flickr by City of Boston Archives, accessed May 6, 2018 via Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robert_Briscoe,_Lord_Mayor_of_Dublin,_presents_Mayor_John_F._Collins_with_a_Waterford_Crystal_vase_\(13560860243\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robert_Briscoe,_Lord_Mayor_of_Dublin,_presents_Mayor_John_F._Collins_with_a_Waterford_Crystal_vase_(13560860243).jpg).

Page 20: “Plaque Outside the Irish Jewish Museum in Dublin,” photographed by Rebecca Heilwell, (Summer 2017).