

# **Around the Jewish World 90 Years Later, Life of One Irish Jew Symbolic of Today's Ethnic Changes**

From the website "Jews Around the World"

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At a time when Ireland is trying to fashion a national history that accommodates its contemporary demographic changes, the story of Abraham Weeks, a Jew killed in the country's seminal 1916 Easter Rising, could prove emblematic. When the Easter Rising began in Dublin in April 1916, the city's small but burgeoning Jewish community was busy marking the foundation of a new, unified synagogue at the edge of "Little Jerusalem," a tightly packed enclave of red-brick artisan's dwellings.

Less than two miles away, hundreds of rebels from Irish nationalist militias assembled at key points around the capital, facing off against the British garrison in an attempt to loosen the crown's grip on the country.

The hundreds of Jews congregating at the site of the Greenville Hall synagogue might have been a world away from the storm gathering that day. As Ireland was taking one of its last steps in a long, bloody march toward independence from Britain, Irish Jews were shedding the shtetl mentality that had kept them worshipping in a dozen different tiny shuls divided by profession, class and hometown, coming together to build a prominent building that affirmed their unity.

For Weeks, however, the forces of Jewish integration and Irish self-determination intersected. In the record of the hundreds who died in the Easter Rising, Weeks stood out enough to warrant an extended citation in a "Roll of Honour" published in 1924 by the Irish Worker newspaper, a prominent organ of the socialist trade union movement: "A. Weeks, a Jewish comrade who joined on Easter Monday and died in action."

Much can be deduced about Weeks from that small notice. For one, his inclusion in the "Roll of Honour" shows that he belonged to the Irish Citizen Army, the socialist militia founded after the 1913 Dublin lockout by the famous union organizer James Larkin, also the newspaper's editor, as a force to protect strikers from attack.

After Larkin moved to the United States in 1914, the militia adopted a more nationalistic stance under the leadership of James Connolly, a founder of the Wobblies in the United States and one of the architects of the Easter Rising.

As a union man, Weeks almost certainly would have been among the craftsmen who had assembled to lay the synagogue's foundation stone as the fighting started, which could explain why he reported to the battle on Monday, a day after his Christian comrades.

On Monday, the main 200-member detachment of the Irish Citizen Army marched from Liberty Hall, the spiritual home of the country's labor movement, to join the main force at the post office. Liberty Hall and the post office were in the thick of the fighting, located near the River Liffey, from which British gunships shelled Irish positions later that week.

But arriving a day late and from the direction of Greenville Hall on the other side of the river, Weeks probably joined the smaller group of fighters who held positions on the south side in St. Stephen's Green, one of the city's elegant Georgian squares not far from the Jewish quarter.

That unit was quickly outmaneuvered by British troops, who occupied the roof of a hotel on the square and fired down on the exposed Irish. Cut off from their comrades on the north side by a group of loyalist students, the militiamen in St. Stephen's Green were forced to withdraw to the nearby College of Surgeons, where they surrendered along with the rest of the rebels at the end of the week.

Weeks' participation and death in the Easter Rising are exceptional in light of the dominant narrative of the event as a collective act of Christian martyrdom. Whether the rebel leaders chose to rise up on Easter because of this powerful association or whether the date just turned out to be a coincidence of myth and history, the story of the Rising has come to be dominated by the theme of Christian blood sacrifice.

Padraig Pearse, poet of the insurrection, famously conceived of the battle as a redemption in blood of centuries of colonial dishonor. A Jewish volunteer among the Christians certainly complicates such an understanding of Irish nationalism — and, indeed, helps reanimate the spirit in which the Rising began.

Last month, for the 90th anniversary of the Easter Rising, the Irish government tried to take back some of the rebellion's original meaning from its interpreters. To that end, the first military parade since 1966 was held on the streets of Dublin, and a public reaffirmation of the 1916 Proclamation, first read from the steps of the post office in 1916 by Pearse himself, sounded surprisingly prescient for a newly multicultural Ireland:

“The republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and all of its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.”

It's easy to see how a Jewish socialist in 1916 could see his future in such an Ireland, even if today it can be difficult to cut through Ireland's Catholic nationalist folklore to see the country that could have been.

As it happened, Weeks' participation in the Easter Rising prefigured Jewish backing for the War of Independence in 1920, when the dreamers of Zionism and Irish autonomy stood together in mutual support.

The resulting high esteem for Jews in Ireland helped cement the status of the small community in a country that, over the years, would elect three Jewish lord mayors — one in Cork and two in Dublin — and several Jewish parliamentary representatives.

As immigrants and natives seek a path to integration in Ireland today, the contribution of a single Jew along the road to nationhood could help show the way forward.

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