

ADDRESS BY TREVOR LYTTLETON MBE

IN "THE HISTORY OF THE JEWS IN 100 OBJECTS" SERIES

AT WEST LONDON SYNAGOGUE 25 MAY 2012

There is no connection between:

- this Silver Teapot, my chosen object in '*The History of the Jews in 100 Objects*' series and
- this Silver Teapot on my lapel.

but they do provide a link between two Royal Diamond Jubilees as you will shortly hear.

9 days after Queen Victoria celebrated the last and only previous Royal Diamond Jubilee on 20th June 1897, a Leeds Tailor, my late Great-Grandfather, David Lubelski received a magnificent Silver Tea Service of which this splendid Silver Teapot forms part.

It bears the intriguing inscription:

"Presented to David Lubelski on 29th June 1897 'on the occasion of his Silver Wedding by his employees'"

which begs the question why David Lubelski's employees honoured him so generously.

David Lubelski was:

- born in 1851, migrated from Warsaw in 1866 to become one of the first Jewish immigrants to Leeds
- Initially employed as a machinist in the tailoring trade, in 1873 he set up on his own in what became a successful wholesale tailoring business,

None of the family including my Great Aunt Millie who gave me the Silver Tea Service 40 years ago, appeared to know why David Lubelski's employees gave him such a substantial gift.

It took a long time to find the answer.

Indeed it was only a few years ago that I learnt from a distant cousin that David Lubelski had campaigned on the steps of Leeds Town Hall on behalf of his own employees. Later researches revealed his significant role in campaigning against corruption and the exploitation of workers.

Professor Katrina Honeyman, the eminent Industrial historian, described David Lubelski as 'a not entirely unsung hero in the history of late 19th century industrialised Britain'.

[Honeyman, K., 2000: {it Well Suited, a History of the Leeds Clothing Industry 1850--1900}. Pasold Research Fund, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 336pp.](#)

The Leeds Express in 1888 set the scene in these words:

... no class of worker in Leeds needs protection more than the Jews. A great number come to Leeds with no knowledge of customs and wages and work the hours and accept the wages they have been accustomed to on the continent, it is a sign of the times that people are willing to organize to get rid of the evil".

Dr A J Kershen, the migration historian (who also wrote a history of Reform Judaism) describes how:

"On 5th May 1888, 3000 Jewish tailors downed tools, calling for a general strike by all.. employed in the ..workshops. Four days later, at a rally held in Victoria Square, attended by over 5000...- and I quote – "the lonely voice of a compassionate employer, that of David Lubelski, made an emotional appeal on behalf of the workers" Other master tailors were neither as sympathetic nor as forthright"

[\("Organizing the Tailors of Leeds"](#)

[Kershen, A. J., 1995: Uniting the Tailors: Trade Unionism Amongst the tailoring Workers of London and Leeds, 1870--1939}. Routledge, London, 247pp.\)](#)

I am sure you won't be surprised to learn that his campaign for workers' rights didn't go down too well with his fellow employers!

David Lubelski was far ahead of his time in championing the rights of women in 1888, as Dr Kershen makes clear in continuing her account of the strike:

"In a move to destroy the strikers' credibility they circulated a rumour that the tailors intended to 'throw the women out of the workshops'...David Lubelski explained that, in truth, the strikers wanted a 58 hour week for the tailoresses.. In confirmation of this the three tailoring societies passed a resolution to open a branch for all females, Jewish and Gentile, employed in Jewish workshops"

Dr Kershen concludes:

"The accusation (of corruption)was well founded. Lubelski, in his evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on sweating the following year explained that, in order to ensure work master tailors (middlemen –so called - as they obtained work from the large firms for their own employees) were forced to bribe the foremen of the wholesale warehouses. The practice of 'greasing the palm' of those with the power to provide work and profit for labour and capital is one which, even towards the end of the twentieth century, has not been totally eradicated"

My Eureka moment came only three years ago on discovering the transcript of David Lubelski's revelations before the House of Lords Select Committee on the Sweating System, 1888-1890 on 11 July 1889. His actual voice shines through the text in expressing his deep concern at the abuse and exploitation of workers. It was an eye-opener (such as I need right now) and at last I understood why David Lubelski's employees honoured him with such a generous gift for his commitment to their cause and for forthrightly exposing their hardship and exploitation before the House of Lords in words such as these:

"The workers live very wretchedly and are very poor. I know they often enough come to me.. for help. I must say they have not sufficient work always to keep themselves right. You know there was a strike in Leeds. I helped the workmen as much as I could, and I was sorry to say they could not gain the day on account of being so poor..., because they were obliged to give in to the middlemen, because" they couldn't afford to lose pay for the time taken off to go on strike.

He told their Lordships that: *"men who have no practical knowledge of the trade whatever, are enabled to get work because they bribe the foremen to give it to them and that the real practical tailors were denied work.*

"The long hours are abominable that they work in Leeds; from seven to eight, I think, is too long hours for any man to work".

WOMEN

He complained even more bitterly about the exploitation of women.

"The women... work from eight to eight, but after eight the middlemen give them work to do in their own houses...I see them frequently carrying the work home, as many as six or eight coats to each girl or one woman; and it is rather too heavy, according to my idea, for any woman to carry so many coats home at night after a day's work.

He concluded:

"...At the time of the strike of the men, the middlemen actually went round to the provision shops ... and stopped the strikers getting their food by telling the shopkeepers:

'Now, you must not give any of these people credit because we shall not employ them; we shall let them all starve.'

This has been done by the middlemen of Leeds".

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David Lubelski, an acknowledged hero of his times, risked his livelihood and the welfare of his 10 children to give that evidence to the House of Lords to protect his employees and others from exploitation. Although in later years two of his grandchildren married Labour peers, his singular contribution as employer champion of the working class does not appear to have received the posthumous recognition it deserves.

Although inspired by my grandparent's good works and my Father's significant work in setting up Jewish Day Schools, having only recently learnt the true meaning of the Silver Teapot inscription, I cannot claim inspiration from David Lubelski.

I hope however that his towering example will act as a spur to the next generation, as the Silver Teapot badge on my lapel that, as I have said, was not inspired by David Lubelski's Silver Teapot, has by coincidence been the Long Service Award badge presented annually for many years to volunteers of Contact the Elderly, the national charity I founded 47 years ago and still chair.

At our last AGM Silver Teapot Awards were presented to driver and host volunteers, from our 5000 plus volunteers nationwide, who take out lonely elderly guests to monthly tea parties in hosts' homes, who had given more than 10, 20, 30 and even 40 plus years, making a total of more than 3500 years of long-term dedicated service in reaching out to the old and lonely throughout the UK

Thanks to Rabbi Julia's inspirational book "*IS THAT ALL THERE IS?*" I launched at Contact the Elderly' last AGM an IF NOT NOW, WHEN? campaign to encourage more Contact the Elderly volunteers to reach out to more old and isolated friends nationwide on the Ethics of the Fathers principle that David Lubelski so nobly embodied:

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

But if I am only for myself, what am I?

And IF NOT NOW, WHEN?"

The message behind David Lubelski's Silver Teapot now lives on to the next generation, via our special link to this year's Royal Diamond Jubilee, next weekend, when we attend David Cameron's 10 Downing Street party, with Silver Teapot badges on display, to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee with our Contact the Elderly volunteers and elderly guests.

We hope this will encourage new volunteer drivers and hosts to help us reach out to more isolated elderly across the UK under the timeless banner 'IF NOT NOW, WHEN'?

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