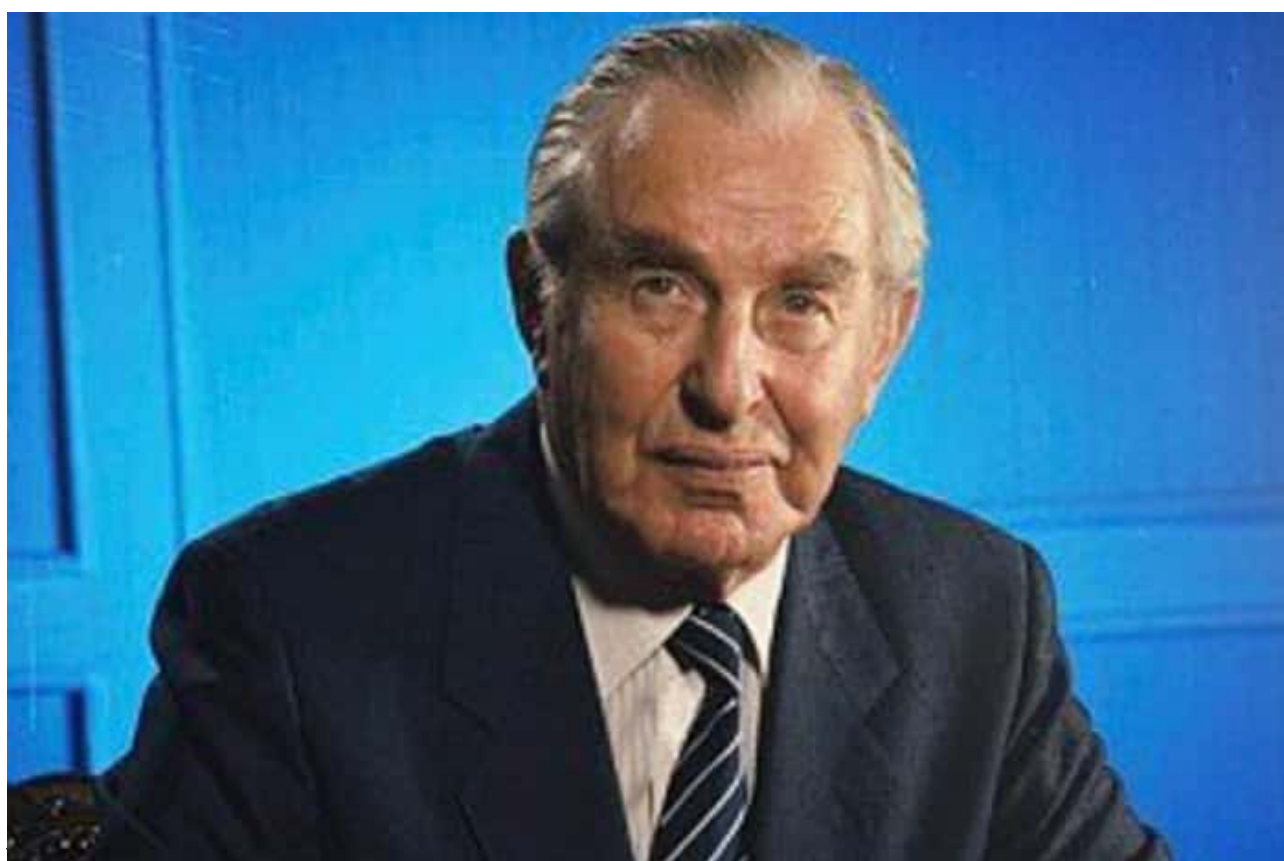




Centenary of the birth of a baby boy in Belfast who became future world leader

I leafed through an old Bar Mitzvah book yesterday, presented to boys of the Jewish faith at their coming of age ceremony.

Handwritten on one of the book's much-thumbed pages was a note and signature penned in 1917 by



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the then leader of one of Belfast's most historic communities – Rabbi Isaac Herzog.

For a city of its size, Belfast boasts more than its fair share of people who are remembered for their historic achievements at home and around the globe.

Some were from the city's Jewish community, such as the community's founder, Daniel Joseph Jaffe, commemorated by an ornate drinking fountain outside Belfast's Victoria shopping centre.

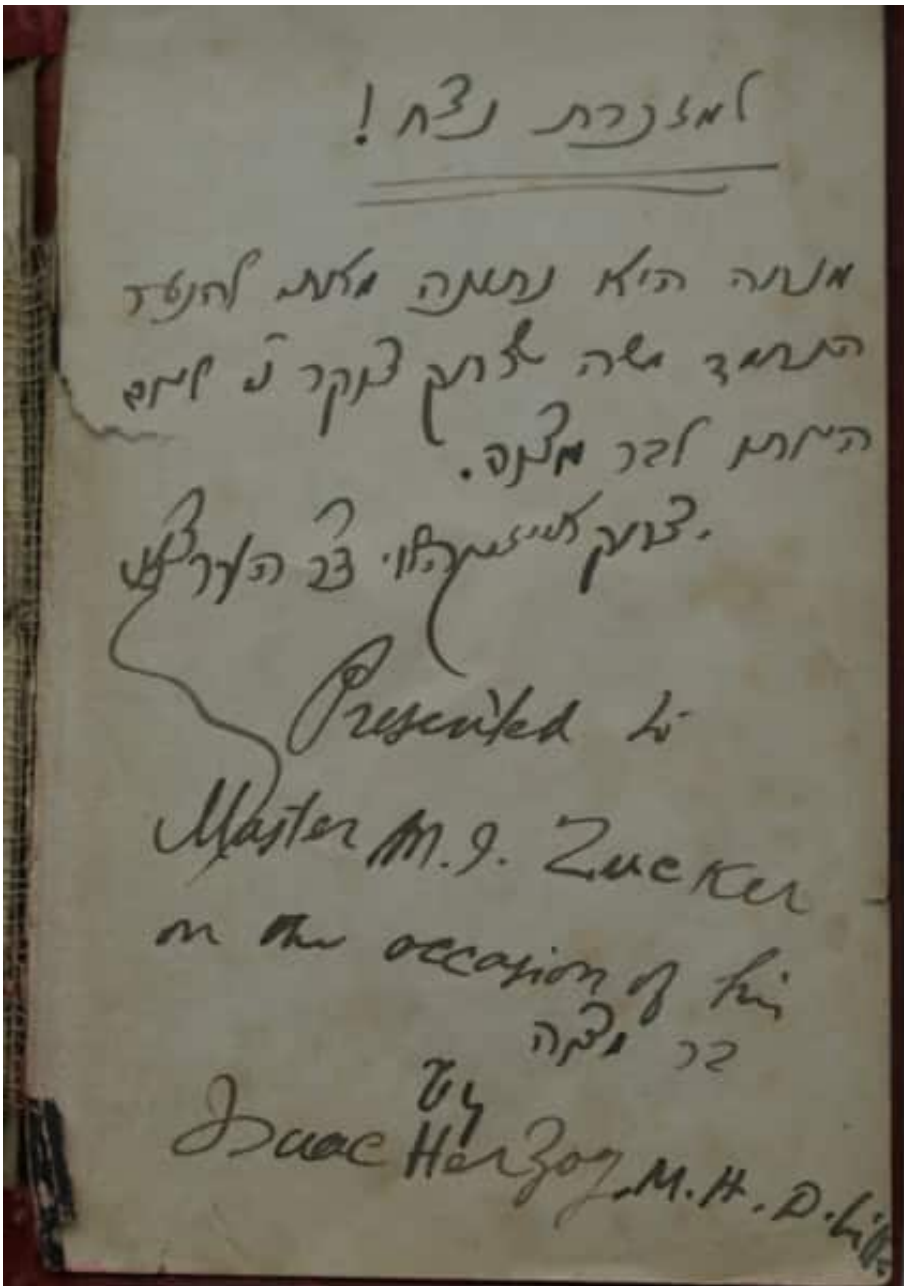
Daniel's son, Sir Otto Jaffe, was Lord Mayor of the city in 1899 and 1904, and Gustav Wolff, of Harland and Wolff shipbuilding fame, was also born into a German-Jewish family though they converted to Christianity prior to his birth.



Baby Chaim Herzog and mum Sarah, Belfast 1919

I perused the book bearing Rabbi Isaac Herzog's signature at the opening of a small exhibition yesterday in Belfast's Linen Hall Library.

At the hub of our cultural and creative life, the Linen Hall was an appropriate venue to commemorate the birth, 100 years ago this September, of one of the city's most gifted world leaders – Rabbi Isaac Herzog's son Chaim Herzog, a former President of Israel amongst at least half a dozen other notable accomplishments.



Rabbi Isaac signed the Bar Mitzvah book the year before Chaim was born.

Bar Mitzvah Book signed by Belfast's Rabbi Hertzog

The Linen Hall's commemorative exhibition of books, articles, artefacts and photographs will be displayed in the library until 13th April – part of a year-long calendar of centenary events

and initiatives organised by the Northern Ireland Friends of Israel.

The organisation's co-chair, Steven Jaffe, lives in London but remains "a Belfast Jew to the core, thanks to my Antrim Road upbringing", he told Roamer.

The Antrim Road district was also home to two other historical figures closely connected to Chaim Herzog.

"It is truly remarkable," said Steven "that Belfast can lay claim to a future president, a Chief Rabbi and a Foreign Minister of Israel

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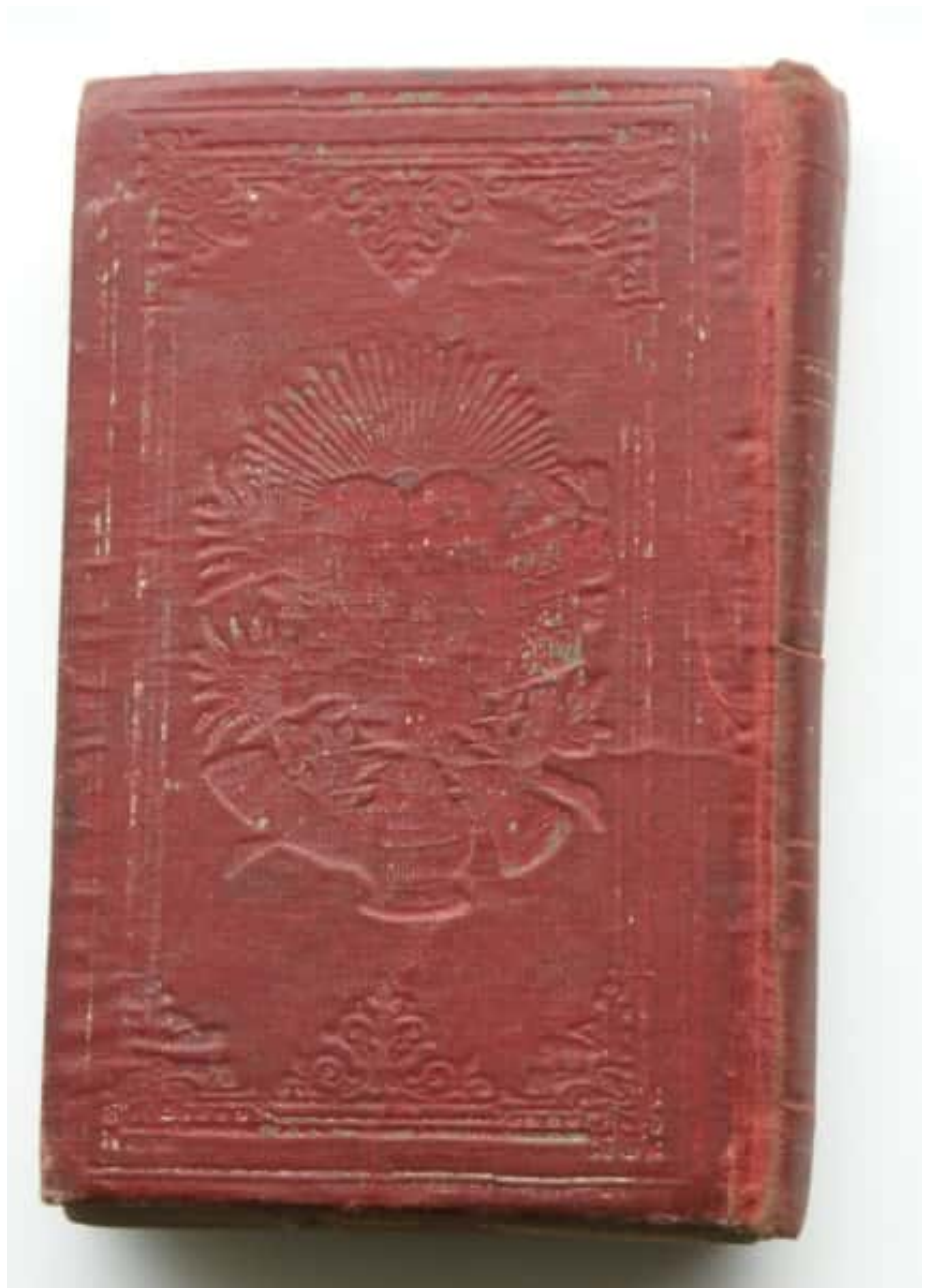
living here a century ago. It's not a boast that London or New York can make.”

The NI Friends of Israel's year-long Herzog commemorations include a symposium, a concert and a series of community-based events, organised in partnership with a number of Belfast's academic and cultural institutions.

In 1916 Polish-born Rabbi Isaac Herzog became spiritual leader of the Belfast Jewish community – his first appointment as a rabbi.

He was a bachelor, but the Belfast Jewish community soon got to work and found him a wife, Sarah Hillman, who proved to be a strong personality in her own right.

She was several times offered the opportunity to run for the Knesset – the Israeli parliament – and she devoted her life to Israel, starting schools, helping immigrants and setting up the largest mental and geriatric hospital in the Middle East.



Intricately decorated cover of Bar Mitzvah Book



“Sarah Herzog’s remarkable record of communal activism flourished in later life in Israel,”

Chaim Herzog, British Army intelligence officer during the Second World War

Steven Jaffe explained, “but the seeds were sown as a young rabbi’s wife in north Belfast.”

On 17th September 1918

the Herzog’s first child was born – Chaim, which means ‘life’ in Hebrew. They lived on Cliftonpark Avenue, a short walk from the synagogue in Annesley Street, off Carlisle Circus.

At that time Belfast’s Jewish community numbered about 800 people, mostly refugees from poverty and persecution in Czarist Russia. Many were tailors, glaziers and cabinet makers and Cliftonpark Avenue became the hub of the community.

At the time of Chaim’s birth there was another young child living in Belfast called Aubrey Solomon. Aubrey became more famous as Abba Eban, Israel’s Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister.

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Aubrey was brought to Belfast as a toddler during Second World War and lived at Kinnaird Street off the Antrim Road.

In 1919 the Herzog family left Belfast when Isaac was appointed Rabbi of the Dublin Jewish community. He then became Chief Rabbi of the Irish Free State, a fluent Irish speaker and a close friend of Eamon De Valera.

He became Chief Rabbi of the land of Israel in 1936, perhaps the most senior religious position in the Jewish world, and the Belfast community was incredibly proud that their former Rabbi had achieved such a high rank.

His son Chaim became an intelligence officer in the British Army during Second World War and served in Lisburn before taking part in the liberation of Europe from Nazi tyranny.

The former Belfast neighbours, Abba Eban and Chaim Herzog, went on to become senior Israeli diplomats, journalists and politicians. Both served the state of Israel as ambassadors to the United Nations and in 1983 Chaim Herzog was elected Israel's sixth president.

“Despite the remarkable career of Chaim Herzog, rising to be head of state, a distinguished orator, broadcaster, writer and successful lawyer,” Steven Jaffe told Roamer “there is sadly no public commemoration to him - or to his remarkable family – in his native city.”

Steven and the NI Friends of Israel are determined that “the unique history of the Jewish community in Belfast should be cherished and properly commemorated in the city – including the story of the community's pre-eminent family, the Herzogs”.

Look out for the educational programmes, lectures and events highlighting the Herzog centenary and take a look at the organisation's website at www.chaimherzoginbelfast.org and their Facebook page.

Article courtesy of Roamer, The Belfast Newsletter

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