

Cohen, Isaac

by Turlough O'Riordan

Cohen, Isaac (1914–2007), chief rabbi of the Republic of Ireland (1959–79), was born 26 July 1914 in Llanelli, Wales, one of three children born to shopkeeper parents of Lithuanian birth. Growing up amongst a community of fifty or so orthodox Jewish families, Cohen retained rich memories of the culture of communal vocal music in Welsh religious, working and sporting life. His deeply religious household's weekend relaxation consisted of Bible-orientated religious and historical study; he undertook at least two hours of Hebrew study after school each day, and from the age of six his desire to be a rabbi received parental approval.

After his bar mitzvah, Cohen won a scholarship to attend Aria College, the Jewish ecclesiastical preparatory boarding school in Portsmouth established to train suitable candidates for the Anglo-Jewish ministry. Parents of Aria pupils were required formally to avow their sons' intentions to pursue this path, as were their children in writing at the start of each year. Pupils underwent three years of instruction in Hebrew literature, Jewish history, theology and religious law. They concurrently attended Portsmouth Grammar School as full pupils, gaining a grounding in the classics and sciences. Passing the Cambridge school certificate (July 1930), Cohen proceeded (as intended by Aria College, supported by their trust) to rabbinic training at Jews' College, London, in 1931. Based in Tavistock Square close to University College, London, and concurrently studying at the latter, Cohen graduated BA with honours in European and Semitic languages (1935).

Cohen first ministered to Harrow and Kenton synagogue in Middlesex (1935–9), before moving to minister to the United Hebrew Congregation, Leeds. Deputising as a rabbi in place of the senior minister from 1940, Cohen established a citizens' advice bureau for Jewish evacuees from London, and served as a British army chaplain to Jewish servicemen stationed in Yorkshire. In 1945 he returned to London to complete his rabbinic studies at Jews' College. Called by the Edinburgh Jewish community to his first full rabbinic post in 1947, he assumed the role in 1948 upon receiving his *semicha*, which endowed rabbinic authority.

Cohen served as chief rabbi, led the Scottish *beth din* (religious court), and often represented Scottish Jewry at public and national events, including the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (1953). He spent over twelve years in Edinburgh, and was awarded a doctorate in philosophy by Edinburgh University in 1956 for his work on the philosophy of talmudic thought. That year he undertook his first lecture and study trips to Israel and the USA. Concerned by increasing anti-semitic repression in the USSR and other Warsaw Pact countries, he became active in associations representing European Jewry.

Cohen was unanimously called in November 1958 to succeed Dr Immanuel Jakobovits (1921–99) as chief rabbi of the Republic of Ireland by the Jewish Representative Council, chaired by Leonard Abrahamson (qv). He formally assumed leadership of Irish Jewry the following September, and became known for his religious and social conservatism. His strict orthodox observance, in private and public life, guided by intellectual rigour and a sense of social purpose, was warmly welcomed. Over 90 per cent of Jewish immigrants to Ireland who arrived from the 1880s were of Lithuanian origin; these 'Litvaks' continued to form the core of Irish Jewry at Cohen's arrival. In an interview four years into his role Cohen noted: 'I find Jewish people in Ireland in every way identical with non-Jewish Irish: I notice between Irish Jews and English Jews precisely the same differences that I notice between non-Jewish Irish and non-Jewish English' (*Ir. Times*, 4 January 1964).

Cohen commenced biannual broadcasts in 1962 on Irish television and radio marking the Jewish festivals of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, and the festival of Passover, commemorating the exodus from Egypt. Deploying his mellifluous Welsh accent in explaining Jewish thought and life to the predominantly Christian Irish public, Cohen commented on a wide range of contemporary political, spiritual and religious issues: the consolidation and tribulations of the nascent state of Israel, ongoing regional turmoil and conflict with Arab states, and the increase in terrorism in Ireland and the wider world through the 1970s.

Cohen represented his co-religionists in the public life of the Irish state, participating prominently in a myriad of national, official and state events as religious leader of the orthodox Jewish community. He consolidated the Jewish community's relationship with the Irish state, with governments and with other religious groups, especially the Roman catholic church after Vatican II. His invitation to a private audience with Pope John Paul II during the latter's visit to Ireland (1979) was indicative of this relationship; Cohen had offered personal and communal condolences on the deaths of his two predecessors. Denouncing anti-semitic remarks made by Stephen Coughlan (qv) (regarding the 1904 Jewish pogrom in Limerick led by John Creagh (qv)) in April 1970, Cohen also opposed a passion play presented in Dublin in March 1973 on the grounds of anti-semitism.

Relations between Ireland and Israel were delimited by Ireland initially granting *de facto* recognition (in 1949) of the establishment of Israel (although Ireland remained somewhat deferential to the Vatican on issues surrounding the status of the Holy Lands in the Middle East; Cohen urged the Vatican to recognise Israel in January 1975). After Ireland recognised *de jure* the state of Israel in 1963, and formally exchanged ambassadors in 1974 (with the Israeli ambassador to the UK sharing representation in Dublin), Cohen was accorded semi-diplomatic status alongside prominent secular Jewish community and political leaders, such as the TD Ben Briscoe, Judge Hubert Wine and Abrahamson.

Cohen was instrumental in spurring agricultural exports to Israel over his tenure, monitoring kosher methods that enabled the fulfilling of a £2 million contract for meat exports in January 1971. For a Bord Bainne-mediated butter export contract, Cohen selected Nenagh Creamery in November 1979, sanctioning the cleanliness of their equipment and kosher methods. Active in the European and world councils of synagogues, he proudly expounded during his frequent international travels the formal recognition accorded to Judaism in the 1937 constitution, unique to Ireland and running expressly against contemporary inter-war European trends. Thus, he was greatly disheartened by the negation of clauses 2 and 3 within article 44 section 1 (under the fifth amendment, voted 2 December 1972, and enacted 5 January 1973), thereby removing the undefined 'special position' of the Roman Catholic church and explicit recognition of other named Christian denominations and Judaism (although article 44 section 2 preserved freedom of worship and protection from religious discrimination). Any reformulation of the constitution must, Cohen asserted, retain an acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God, 'to whom all laws and governments owe allegiance' (*Ir. Press*, 7 September 1972). In June 1978, Cohen and Herbert Wine lobbied Charles Haughey (qv), the minister for health, on contraception legislation, proposing the limited availability of oral female contraception, acceptable under certain circumstances in Jewish religious law.

Cohen developed a significant relationship with President Éamon de Valera (qv), and regularly attended *Áras an Uachtaráin*. A forest was planted (6 February 1966) in de Valera's honour in Cana, Israel, by Irish Jewish emigrants to Israel, and Cohen presented a photographic record of the occasion to the president (26 February 1972). Cohen, in a 2005 letter to the *Irish Times*, reported on his discussions with de Valera regarding Ireland's wartime neutrality and his conveying of formal condolences to the German ambassador Eduard Hempel (qv) upon Adolf Hitler's death. Cohen accepted that de Valera's public condolences were dictated by formal diplomatic protocol and argued his wartime policy was actuated by the needs of a small nation to maintain neutrality, the distinct Irish historical experience, and a justifiable unwillingness to join the allied war efforts. Cohen noted: 'I understood his "troublesome" diplomatic situation, and I accepted it' (*Ir. Times*, 25 March 2005).

The non-political and communal role of the Irish presidency proved fertile ground on which to develop relations. On the evening of the investiture of President Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh (qv), Cohen led a Jewish service and read prayers in Irish and Hebrew (19 December 1974). The first public engagement of President Patrick Hillery (qv), on the day of his investiture (5 December 1976), was to attend a special Jewish service at Adelaide Road synagogue; Cohen officiated, offering blessings in Irish, Hebrew and English. A symbolically proud moment for the Jewish community, it marked the extent of their integration into the formal and spiritual life of the republic. At the funerals of de Valera (1975) and Ó Dálaigh (1978), Cohen remained outside respectively the Dublin pro-cathedral and St Michael's church, Sneem, Co. Kerry, his status as a rabbi forbidding him from entering any room containing a dead body, a scene poignantly captured by press photographers. The Jewish community was

represented on such occasions by secular leaders (such as Briscoe and Gerald Goldberg (qv)), while some liberal and progressive Jews decried Cohen's religious formalism (Keogh, 234).

A self-described Zionist, Cohen campaigned prominently against Soviet restrictions on Jewish worship and emigration to Israel (the latter relaxed only in the late 1970s). Having campaigned against the civil and religious repression of Jews behind the Iron Curtain since the mid 1950s, in 1976 he was refused a visa to attend a symposium on Jewish culture in Moscow which aimed to highlight their plight and sufferings.

The gradual radiation of Dublin's Jewish community from its historic core centred around the South Circular Road and Dolphin's Barn to the suburbs of Kimmage, Terenure and Rathfarnham mirrored its overall gradual decline owing to intermarriage and emigration. The Irish Jewish population, which numbered almost seven thousand (with two thousand resident in Dublin) at Cohen's arrival, declined by half over the next two decades. Disenchanted, Cohen almost accepted a position as a rabbinic judge in the Jewish ecclesiastical court in London United Synagogue in 1975. However, dispute concerning his retirement age contributed to his remaining in Dublin until his retirement. Cohen welcomed the public role afforded him and his co-religionists, leading services of remembrance marking such national occasions as the re-interment of Roger Casement (qv) in 1965 and the golden jubilee of the 1916 Irish rising.

Indicative of the extent to which his co-religionists were welcomed in Irish public life, Cohen's dense schedule of services, and social and communal responsibilities (not least settling intra-communal disagreements in business, family and social spheres, and editing the annual *Irish-Jewish year book* for two decades) left him little room for much beyond occasional walks in the Dublin and Wicklow mountains, listening to classical musical (especially Bach and Beethoven), and the occasional detective novel. Cohen's ministry marked the apogee of the Irish Jewish community.

For his orthodox co-religionists he was the embodiment of rabbinic life, evoking gentle dignity, leading daily prayers in top hat and formal attire, a product of a lamented generation of Anglo-Jewish ministers. Upon his retirement in 1979 he thanked the Irish people for their warmth and kindness, grateful for the close relations he enjoyed with his fellow religious leaders and with Irish governments. Cohen's only sadness was the continuing violence in Ulster: increasingly shocked by the tribal nature of violence and upheaval in Northern Ireland after 'bloody Sunday' (1972), he raised funds for inter-communal holidays for children.

Retiring to Jerusalem, he accepted a research position at the Hebrew University and served as joint president of the Union of Immigrant Western Rabbis for a time. In denouncing Irish academic signatories to a letter (2006) calling for a moratorium of EU funding to Israeli research and academic institutions as a protest against Israel's continued violations of international law and support for illegal settlements, Cohen

asserted that the signatories were 'adopting current academic views in Europe, where anti-semitism is growing at a rapid pace'. Two weeks before his death in Israel on 30 November 2007, and ten months after the death of his wife Fanny (née Weisfogel; whom he married in London in 1939), he published *Acts of the mind in Jewish ritual law: an insight into rabbinic psychology*. This authoritative account of Jewish law explored will, motivation and intentions in the philosophy of rabbinical Judaism. Cohen's obituary in the British *Jewish Chronicle* noted that 'for both, the book was their child' (their marriage was childless). It was the culmination of Cohen's lifetime of rabbinical and philosophical research in which he considered Fanny his equal partner.

Ir. Times, 4 Jan. 1964 (interview); 9 Mar. 1967; 20–21 Apr. 1970; 16 Aug. 1975 (profile); 26 Feb. 1972; 6 Dec. 1976; 22 Dec. 2007; *Ir. Independent*, 1 Jan. 1971; *Ir. Press*, 7 Sept. 1972; *Guardian*, 19 Dec. 1976; *Nenagh Guardian*, 10 Nov. 1979; Arthur Flynn, *Echoes* (1980); Brian Walsh, 'The constitution and constitutional rights', in Frank Litton (ed.), *The constitution of Ireland 1937–87* (1988); Dermot Keogh, *Jews in twentieth-century Ireland* (1998); R. A. Peel, *The Portsmouth Grammar School and Aria College* (1999); Ray Rivlin, *Shalom Ireland: a social history of Jews in modern Ireland* (2003); Daphna Berman, 'Irish call to ban Israeli academia condemned', *Haaretz*, 29 Sept. 2006, www.haaretz.com/irish-call-to-ban-israeli-academia-condemned-1.198162; Asher Benson, *Jewish Dublin: portraits of life by the Liffey* (2007); Manus O'Riordan, 'Citizens of the republic: Jewish history in Ireland', *Dublin Review of Books* (summer 2007), online at www.drb.ie; *Scotsman*, 27 Dec. 2007; *Times*, 29 Dec. 2007; *Jewish Chronicle*, 24 Jan. 2008; Raymond Apple, 'Chief Rabbi Isaac Cohen', 16 Dec. 2008, www.oztorah.com/2008/12/chief-rabbi-isaac-cohen; information (Jan. 2014) from John Sadden, archivist, Portsmouth Grammar School, and from Dr Kenneth Collins, Scotland; internet material accessed Jan. 2014